Phoenix of Minrathous

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Phoenix of Minrathous

by kawakaeguri

Summary

An eleven year old child somehow ends up in Thedas after an accident, about 10 years before the Blight. And is immediately captured by Tevinter slavers, who also manage to capture a 5 year old Ellana Lavellan. Thrown together into the cruel world of the Imperium,
tormented by blood magic, they make a promise to be sisters and protect each other always. They cling to each other as the two face horrors they could never have imagined until one day, years later, they finally escape to the Dalish. But Asha'bellanar has plans for them...

This is their epic quest to gain freedom, find themselves, and fulfill their destiny in life.

Notes

I decided to start writing for the first time in at least a decade, so instead of being logical and sensible and starting out with a short story, I'm jumping headfirst into the world of fanfic and a complete retelling of all the DA games from Origins to Inquisition, with plenty of canon divergence. I'm ambitious like that. *gulp* I welcome all comments and criticisms. Please let me know if additional tags or trigger warnings should be added. I don't have a set update schedule, but I'm aiming for 1-2 times a week.

Warning: This story deals with child slavery, and the mental trauma that stems from it. If this is something that bothers you, please don't read.
Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*SLAM*

Muffled shouts could be heard from behind the door, the frustrated screams of an older woman ringing. The young girl gave no indication that she could hear them at all as she tore through the neatly trimmed front yard and down the street. Identical houses, painted in twenty shades of beige, lined the road, with manicured lawns and perfectly painted white fences. It looked like something out of a small town American postcard. She hated it. Despised how her parents tried to make themselves the same as everyone else in this tiny, stupid town. Make her the same as everyone else when it was clear from the looks she got from everyone else that she was clearly “other”.

“Jia, you must behave! You draw too much attention to yourself and our family! What will the neighbors think?!” the girl muttered to herself in a falsetto imitation of her mother.

Who cares. I hate them all, she thought angrily. She paused at the main road, checking for cars, then quickly scampered across the asphalt until she reached the park across the street where a playground and pond lay. Thinking for a minute, she decided against the swings and continued on the path to the woods that surrounded the pond. Viciously kicking pinecones as she trudged through the trees, she continued muttering under her breath. “I’m so tired of having to be perfect. Can’t ever do anything right. I don’t want to blend in. Don’t wanna spend all my free time studying. I want friends. It’s not fair.”

Nothing is ever fair in life, kamo-chan, her father’s voice echoed in her mind. Little duck, that’s what he called her. Jia sighed and sat with her back against a tall pine tree, the bark scratchy through her thin tank top. The humid, Carolina late August heat was stifling. She could hear the drone of mosquitoes and chirp of crickets around her. Stupid everything. She wished she could run away, somewhere new and far off. Some place she could be herself and have everyone accept her and love her as she was. Not the person they wanted her to be. She tried, she really did. She tried to be the quiet, meek daughter they wanted her to be. Or rather, that her mother wanted her to be. But Jia Iseri was anything but quiet. She had her mother’s Korean temper, sharp, and violent, along with her father’s stoic patience. She could take a lot of criticism, but when it exploded, it was rather destructive. Like today.

Jia sighed again, louder this time, and closed her eyes. She wished they could move somewhere else, where they wouldn’t stand out as much. Here in this small, rural town, there weren’t many Asians. She stuck out like a sore thumb everywhere she went. People who made fun of her eyes, her parents’ accent, the lunches she brought to school, who asked her to speak Chinese and then got confused when she haughtily informed them she was not Chinese. That one store clerk who asked her where in China was Korea. Ignorance, all around. She was so tired of it.

A few hours passed as Jia imagined herself roundhouse kicking everyone she was mad at into the ground. The idea pleased her 11 year old self more than a little bit. She stood up, stretched, and moved through a few of the forms from her red belt test the other week.


The taekwondo movements were familiar and comforting to her, helping to center and ground herself back to the present. The rest of her anger and frustration slowly dissipated as she moved
through the breathing and forms. Finally lowering her arms when she felt her breathing return to normal, Jia started as she realized that the sun had almost completely set. Her parents would be worried if she didn’t go home soon.

_Ugh._

Dusting off her neon blue shorts, she began to stroll out of the woods. Mosquitoes assaulted her as she came around the pond, so she began running through the park, full on sprinting through the parking lot towards the road and her subdivision on the other side. She briefly heard her mother’s admonishment echo through her head, *Always look both ways before you cross the street Jia, Jia, are you listening to me?*

_Oops._

She saw the headlights first. The high pitched shriek of tires screeching, rubber burning against the asphalt. She threw her hands up, frozen in shock. The white headlights didn’t stop advancing. It was getting closer, too close, it was… turning green? Jia’s last conscious thought ran through her head.

*What kind of car has green headlights?*

Chapter End Notes

My OC is half Korean and half Japanese like me. It bothers me that there are no eastern Asian types in Thedas, so I'm putting one in. COME ON BIOWARE.
The cool, salty sea air swept over the barren valley where his men rested, their newest acquisitions safely secured behind heavy iron bars. Caladrius stretched out his sore muscles, absentmindedly patting his horse on its neck. Rubbing his bearded jaw, he contemplated this new shipment. Only one with spirit it seemed. The rest huddled together, like terrified rabbits. He leaned over, an amused smile on his face.

“A real spitfire we’ve got here, hmm? And what might your name be, my dear?” he grinned.

The tiny elf child imperiously rose to her full height, her 5 year old figure easily fitting upright in the cramped cage. An infant, really. “I am Ellana, of Clan Lavellan, and I demand you return me,” she declared. Caladrius chuckled to himself.

Whoever gets her will have a time, he thought to himself. But sometimes the breaking is half the fun. A shout interrupted his thoughts.

“Dominus! Master Caladrius, we found something rather interesting, if you care to take a look.” One of his men waved a hand in greeting to him from the next hilltop over. Kneeing his horse in the flanks, Caladrius gave the reins a slight flick, riding up to where the man waited, his slate blue robes steadily flapping in the breeze. Something shifted on the ground. Caladrius looked down and realized it was a girl.

“Viggo, where did you find her?” Viggo scratched his head and ran his fingers through lank, greasy dirt brown hair. “That’s the thing, Dominus, I don’t rightly know. One minute I’m walking back to camp and I hear a thump, and I turn and she’s suddenly laying there to my right. I suppose I missed her? Don’t see how though. Those clothes are bright enough to make my eyes bleed. What do you make of her?”

Caladrius examined the girl, turning her head this way and that. Young, perhaps 10 years old. Long, shiny, jet black hair. Fair skin that hinted of the sun. Straight, even white teeth. High, rounded cheekbones, delicate features. Smooth, soft hands and feet. No ribs showing, healthy amount of fat and lean muscle. Her eyes were shut, but they were unusually shaped. Like a cat, perhaps. He grinned to himself. She was going to make them a fortune. “Put her with the others.”

“But sir! She’s probably noble. Could get a hefty ransom out of her.” Caladrius scoffed.

“We’d get ten times whatever ransom these Southerners could come up back in Minrathous. Look at her. So exotic. Some magister will pay dearly for a pet such as her. The sum shall be glorious!” he clapped his hands in glee and anticipation.

“Yes, dominus,” Viggo sketched a bow, lifted up the girl, and carried her down the hill to the waiting cage.

***

The first thing Jia was aware of was the sunlight. Bright, blinding light coming from all directions. The second thing that assaulted her senses was the smell. The stench of sweat, urine, and vomit flooded her nostrils and she immediately lurched forward, her hands scrambling against the grimy wood as she began gagging. Her eyes squeezed shut, she flinched as a cool hand gently touched her brow. “Shhh, shhh, it will be alright, child. Can you sit up?” Jia groggily turned her head towards
the melodic voice, blinking slowly as a pale face slowly came into focus. Someone small, with huge eyes and… pointed ears. Jia shot up, wincing as the throbbing in her head threatened to overwhelm her.

“Wha- where? What the… is going on? Who are you?” she gasped. The woman with the pointed ears gave her a sad smile. Jia looked around at the rest of her surroundings. They were in a cage, on a cart, pulled by horses, the kind she saw in her history books. The cage was a rough, dark metal, probably iron, she thought. There were others in the cage with her, all with the same slender features, impossibly big eyes, and pointed ears. Like elves. Jia thought. Lord of the Rings was one of her favorite books. But the elves from the stories were graceful and clean and bright. These elves were anything but, covered in bodily fluids and terrified as they were. Pulling her limbs closer to her shivering body, she wrapped her arms around her legs. It was much colder here, wherever she was, than it was when she left home. With a small wail, she let her head flop between her knees.

The elf prodded gently. “My name is Adara, child. What is yours?”

A harsh voiced snapped her from the back. “Leave her, Adara. She’s just some shem's noble brat.”

Adara frowned. “She’s a child, Pelorn. And she’s just as scared as us.” Pelron grunted and continued staring out the cage.

Jia shook her head. “I’m not a noble. I’m Jia. Where are we? Why are we in a cage? Please, what’s going on?” Jia could feel tears burning her eyes and her shoulders starting to shake.

Grabbing her hands, Adara began rubbing comforting circles into her palms. “We’re in the Free Marches, near Hercinia. These men are from Tevinter. They’ve... captured us all and are taking us back to the Imperium.” Jia stared in wild-eyed confusion, her mind turning over the unfamiliar words.

“What do you mean Tevinter? Where is that? I need to escape. I need to get out! The police are probably looking for me already. I need to get a signal out! My parents are going to kill me. I need to go home. Let me out! LET ME OUT!” Jia screamed, turning and throwing herself at the cage. Pounding her fists against the barrier, she frantically began shaking the bars, shrieking all the while. One of the men on horseback glanced over at the ruckus and sighed, pulling a long, wooden walking staff from behind his back and raised it towards the hysterical girl, shooting a small stream of lightning straight at her chest.

Jia felt the electricity overwhelm her body and she fell to the cage floor, ramrod straight, limbs locked, her eyes wide in panic. No. NONONONO. Magic isn't real. It's not real. None of this can be real! Nonononononooooo! The tears she was struggling so valiantly to hold back broke loose. Jia sobbed in silence to herself, slowly bringing her limbs into her chest when she regained control. With silent sobs, terrified of attracting the guard's attention again, she held herself and cried and cried until she had nothing left. What is going on?

***

Over the next several days as the wagon rolled through the rolling countryside, Adara explained this strange, new place. This land was called Thedas, Free Marches was the country they were in, and the Tevinter Imperium, the place to which they were headed, lay to the northwest. Ferelden and Orlais were to the south, Nevarra was to the west, and Antiva and Rivain were to the north. The year was 9:21 Dragon, whatever that meant. Adara tried multiple times to coax Jia’s origins out of her, baffled at how this child knew nothing about the world, but Jia stubbornly refused to divulge anything. She realized this was not America. Wasn’t planet Earth even. None of the names rang a bell from her history lessons. It was like the Middle Ages in Europe. Armor and swords and horses and no electricity or cars or airplanes. Or soap apparently. Everyone was gross here. All she
wanted was a toothbrush and her parents. Jia hiccuped another sob. Was this a dream? Afterlife? What had happened? Jia tried to remember the days before waking up here but all she could see was a bright, sickly green light enveloping her surroundings before the shadows took her. Jia couldn’t make sense of it. Her dad’s voice echoed in her head, and a memory came to her.

“Jia, what do you do if you’re ever taken?” Jia’s dad had drilled multiple plans for every contingency he could imagine. The man was nothing if not firm in his belief that his little girl would be able to survive anything. Jia thought for a minute, and then replied, “Remain calm. Observe my surroundings. Look for an opening. If others are around, make noise, fight, scream.” Jia’s dad smiled, eyes wrinkling. “Good girl.”

Bet Dad never planned for me waking up in Middle Earth. Jia took a deep breath. She hadn’t been very calm recently. She needed to focus. Observe. She remembered an exercise from a book she read once and closed her eyes. 

_Picture a flame in your mind. Now, feed all your emotions into the flame. Empty your heart and mind. Breathe in with the flame, exhale your emotions._ She opened her eyes, already feeling calmer. She thought to herself. The guards never let them out of the cage. When they passed through populated areas, they threw a blanket over the cage, making it hard to breathe. Jia briefly considered screaming once, when she heard different voices and horses passing them, but one of the other elves shouted instead. And shouted. Nothing. The next time they stopped, and the blanket was removed, one of the guards dragged him out and beat him. “Scream all you like,” the wizard guy sneered, “No one will ever hear you.”

One of the other elves to Jia’s side muttered, “They’ve cast a soundproof barrier over us.” Jia shuddered as they threw the bleeding man back into the cage with the rest.

“Anyone else want to try something smart? Maybe you little rabbit?” he shook the bars, leering at the small girl. Ellana, Jia thought. The small child stared at the man, then opened her mouth. Adara’s arms shot out and grabbed Ellana, clamping her hand over the girl’s mouth. Ellana struggled against the older woman’s grip.

The wizard laughed at her and let go of the bars. “Smart elf. Never thought I’d see the day,” he chortled to himself, and strode away.

Ellans shoved Adara’s arm off of her head and hissed, “I wanted to say stuff!”

Adara gazed at the child sadly. “I know da’len. But did you see his arms? The scars? He’s not just a mage. He’s a blood mage.” Ellana’s eyes grew wide, and she squeaked a tiny “Oh.”

Jia cocked her head to the side. “What’s a blood mage?” A few of the other elves snorted and gaped at her.

Adara glanced at Jia in a sideways look. “They’re mages who use the power of blood to increase their magic. Sometimes their own blood, sometimes others. It makes them extremely dangerous.” A shiver ran through Jia. This place is horrible. I want to go home.

Chapter End Notes

The idea is of feeding emotions into a flame is courtesy of Tam Al Thor. :)


Hercinia was loud. And dirty. Just like everything else in this world. This place was less like the Middle Ages though, and more… pirate-y. Wooden shacks lined the street, drunken men stumbled through the muck, and more than a few people lay in the mud. Dead? Or sleeping? Jia didn’t know. It was all so overwhelming. The guards led them into a dilapidated shack that looked like the rest of the shanties on the docks. They’re going to put us on the ship. No. NO. A violent trembled wracked her small frame as memories rose to the surface, unbidden and unwelcome.

She was 6 years old, on vacation in Myrtle Beach with her parents and some friends. Lydia and her were splashing in the shallows, wearing arm floaties as their moms relaxed in the pool chairs, chatting. It was so hot that day, even the pool water was warm. But still fun to play. As the two little girls giggled and paddled around, another pair of older girls sauntered up to them. “You two are such baaaabies. Wearing swimmies still! What losers.” They giggled behind their hands. Lydia pouted. “Our mommies said we hafta! Otherwise we can’t swim anymore.” The older girls rolled their eyes. “Such babies, still doing everything that mommy says. I bet you’re just wearing them cause you can’t swim like a big girl.” Jia stomped her foot underwater. “Can too swim!” she shouted, now furious. “Oh yeah?” one of the girls said. She raised her eyebrow. “Prove it.” Jia glared at the older girls as she ripped off her floaties. Lydia gasped, “Jia, you can’t! Don’t listen to them. You’re gonna get in trouble!” Jia smiled at her friend, “Don’t worry! I’ll be ok. Swimming’s easy anyhow.” And with that, Jia began walking along the pool bottom until she was standing on her tip toes. With one final glare at the smirking older girls, Jia pushed away from the floor and into the deep end. She paddled once, twice, and then a small wave pushed water into her face and panic set in. Jia slipped under the surface, trying to push back up to the surface but nothing was happening. Her arms and legs were flailing but she wasn’t moving to the light. She could see the sun above her head. Or was it below? The light was everywhere in the water. If she could just break the surface, she could scream. Her lungs burned. She couldn’t breathe. Nonononononojustswimstrokestroke. Upupupupothelight. Ican’tbreathecan’tbreathe. Her lungs finally gave out and Jia gasped a deep breath of chlorinated water. That burned even more. Jia could feel her arms getting heavier. “Mommy, help!” she thought. “Someone. Anyone!” Just when she thought she couldn’t move anymore, a strong arm reached around her arm and pulled her up, out of the water and onto the pool deck. Jia coughed and threw up water almost immediately. “JIA!” her mother shrieked. The man who had hauled her out gave her a small smile. “You ok there?” Jia coughed more as she nodded weakly. She looked up at her mom and burst into tears. “I’m so sorry Mommy! I didn’t mean to, I’m so sorry,” she sobbed into her mother’s chest.

Jia gulped. The near drowning accident had left her with a crippling fear of being in large bodies of water. She could barely wash her face without having a slight panic attack. The idea of being in an old rickety ship, out on the ocean, made a bubble of hysteria rise in her chest. A blow landed on the back of her head, jerking her forward a few steps, her neck rubbing harshly against the metal cuff chained to there. “Keep moving,” the guard hissed, as he pushed her into the dimly lit shack. Jia looked back towards the street. No one paid the elves that were bound together any attention here. She doubted anyone cared. Closing her eyes, she shuffled forward into the dusty room, empty of any furnishings, and huddled down on the dirt floor next to Ellana. The tiny child wrapped her hands around Jia’s and gave her a smile. Jia started. How is this little kid still smiling? I don’t get it. The rest of the guards filed into the room, as well as an unknown man. He had a thick gray beard on darkly tanned skin, an old scar that slashed across the upper edge of his forehead, along with a multitude of other smaller scars splattered across his neck, arms, and hands. His pants were
made out of what looked like canvas, a forest green linen shirt tucked into the pants, tied at the hips with a black leather belt, a light, fitted black coat draped over his shoulders. A wickedly curved sword hung at his side. Jia eyed the newcomer. The man in charge, the one the others called Dominus, dropped a heavy looking sack into the scarred man’s hands. She leaned back against the roughly hewn wall and closed her eyes. I need to find an opening. Something. Anything.

“Girl, get up.” A boot reached out to lightly kick her in the leg. Someone grabbed the chain attached to her neck cuff and hauled her up. The Dominus slowly looked her over, roughly grabbing her face in his hands and turning it side to side.

“She’s still very healthy. We’ll keep this one separate from the rest, along with the other ones in good shape. Can’t let them get sick on the way over, especially this one. She’s my little golden goose, aren’t you sweetheart?” he smiled at her. Jia glanced at the rest of the room. Four other men were in here with them, the blood mage nowhere in sight, only 2 men between her and the door. If she could just get to the door. Jia gulped.

Focus. Breathe. Picture the flame.

One of the other men produced a old fashioned iron key out of his pocket and unlocked the cuffs from her neck and wrists. He turned to the side for a second to grab the new pair, and Jia struck out with all her might against his chest with her palms. Startled, he stumbled back a step and it was all Jia needed. She immediately moved into stance and kicked him directly in the stomach so he fell back again, and she swiveled her body around and threw her leg right into side, knocking him down. She sprinted for the door and the other man, who narrowed his eyes at her and charged her. Jia quickly sidestepped his advance, spun on her heel, and jabbed him right in the kidneys.

He stumbled to the ground, and hissed, “You little bitch!” Jia ignored him as she scrambled for the door. Another guard whipped around to face her out front and drew a dagger. Jia blanched.

Don’t panic! Focus. Breathe. Flame! A cultured voice yelped from behind, “Don’t mark the goods!” She took a step forward on her left foot, and blocked with her left arm. The impact jolted through her bones through her jaw and up to her temples. She grit her teeth as she grabbed his hand, dug her fingers into his pressure point, and jabbed up with her right hand into his throat. As he lurched over, she brought her right leg to the inside of his knee and kicked him down to the boardwalk. Run! As she turned to sprint down the street, she felt the air around her tingle with electricity. No! A lightning bolt arced out from someone behind her and jolted into her spine. Jia’s body stiffened and she hit the ground. Tears began to fall again. I was so close. It’s over now. They’re gonna kill me. Scuffed up leather boots filled her vision. The Dominus lifted her up by her neck as another guard quickly shackled her again. He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Didn’t realize I was a mage too, now did you? And yet, impressive. I never would have guessed a 10 year old could take down 3 fully grown men, one of them armed. What kind of fighting was that, hmm?” Jia spit in his face. Caladrius blinked, and then laughed. “Oh dear, you have more fire than I imagined. Who to sell you to, I wonder? I know of a few magisters who would love to break you into their pet. Hmm. Ah! I know exactly to whom to sell you. Put those interesting fighting skills to use.” He pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed the spittle off his face. He gave Jia a wide grin as he raised his arm. “But first-“ he lashed out with his fist and knocked her in her temple. Viggo caught her as she crumpled to the ground. Caladrius tossed him a flask. “Keep her under until she’s secure on the ship. I don’t want anymore mishaps. These southerners are getting quite greedy in their bribes.” Viggo nodded, and carried the unconscious girl back inside to wait on the ship.

Jia came to in a dark hole. A hole that was rolling and shifting. She rolled over and promptly threw up.

I’ve got to stop waking up like this. A small voice piped up from somewhere to her right. “Are you ok?” Jia shakily pushed herself up to sit. Ellana was scrunched up against the wall on the far side of the cell. They were in the hold of the ship, wooden walls damp and dark. The only light came from the hatch on the far side of the room. She could barely make out the more bodies
packed into the other cells. This cell was smaller, maybe 5 feet on either side, but there were only the two of them in it and they were both small.

Jia groaned. “My head is killing me. How long have I been out?”

Ellana shrugged. “A while I think. I don’t know anymore. Time is hard down here.” The little elf regarded her, the tiny square patch of light from the hatch reflecting off her large eyes. “Were you really going to leave me?”

Jia sighed and leaned back. “I don’t know. I’m sorry. I panicked. I don’t like water much. At least I can’t see it from down here.” Ellana frowned and looked down at her grubby toes. She picked at her hem of the rag that was her shirt at some point. Jia looked down at her own clothes and realized someone had changed her. Her pink and blue tank top was gone, as were her electric blue shorts and purple Converses. She was barefoot, wearing a loose, dun colored scratchy linen top and pants. The sleeves and pants covered her hands and feet, so she rolled them up a bit. Ellana sniffled. Jia looked up, startled.

She’s crying. She hasn’t cried yet. What am I supposed to do?

Jia scooted over closer. “Ellana?” The little girl sniffled again, then glanced up at Jia. With a loud sob, she threw herself into the older girl’s arms. Jia froze for a second, then wrapped her arms around her and hugged her tight. “Shhh, shhh, it’ll be ok. I won’t leave you again, ok?”

Ellana’s muffled voice traveled up. “B-but you know know that! We’ll probably get bought by different people! We’ll be se-pa-ra-teeeed!” she finished with a wail. Jia could feel her own tears starting again. Can’t cry anymore. It’s useless anyhow. Jia held Ellana closer. Bought. Slave. The words were chilling to think. Slavery didn’t exist anymore, not in suburbia America. Not like this anyhow.

“Ellana, is slavery legal here?”

Ellana sniffed. “No, just in Tevinter. It’s illegal everywhere else. Slavers aren’t supposed to be in the Marches.” Releasing a sigh, Jia continued to lightly run her hands across Ellana’s back. She shifted so she was laying on her side, and pulled Ellana into her chest and pillowed her small head on her arm.

“Elle, tell me about your people? Someone said you were Dalish? Is that different from the other elves?”

Ellana sniffled some more and began to talk in a small voice. “Most of the elves live in alienages. They mostly working serving the humans. The Dalish are free. We keep to our old ways and roam the wilds with our aravels and halla and worship the Creators.”

Jia snuggled the girl closer. “Tell me about your aravels.”

***

The trip wasn’t too bad so far. Most of the elves stayed locked in the hold, but a few of them were allowed onto the dock every day for fresh air. Mainly the pretty, young, healthy elves. And Jia. They were kept under heavy guard, of course, giving no option for them to escape. Escape, Jia thought with a snort. Can’t have the merchandise jumping overboard. She stifled a hysterical giggle at the image of a teacup jumping out of a barrel to throw itself over the sides of the ship. I’m losing it. The sight of the ocean was enough to make her chest tight, but she found as long as she didn’t look directly at the waves, she was fine. Instead she examined the rigging, the ship itself, and the sailors. The sailors for the most part ignored them. A few of them would sneak down to the hold every now and then and steal away for a few minutes with one of the other elves in the packed cages. Jia didn’t really know what for, but she assumed it wasn’t pleasant. The food was bland,
some sort of unflavored porridge, stale biscuit things, and sometimes jerky made out of a meat that tasted similar to venison.

The days passed in a haze. Ellana and Jia passed their time mostly by Ellana telling Jia about her young life and the stories the elders had taught her. Jia learned about the Elvhen pantheon, Arlathan, the Dales, Halamshiral, and weird things like the Blights and the Fade that she assumed were just bedtime stories. Really creepy bedtimes stories. No way demons and spirits were real. When asked about her own life, Jia would clam up. She never mentioned her world. Out of fear or something else, Jia didn’t really know. But she figured no one would believe her. Ellana might. Kids have pretty good imaginations. Sounds like a cool story. But it wasn't. Jia couldn’t explain it, so she told Ellana stories instead. She told her every fairytale she could think of, ones with glass slippers and ruby red apples and a dying rose. She told her stories of orcs and dragonriders and a sword pulled out of stone. Every book she could think. And Jia had loved to read.

So 3 months passed in this manner. One morning, Jia woke up from a fitful sleep to hear the sailors above deck running around with more urgency than the past few days.

“Land ho!”

The call floated down to the hold. Jia bolted upright. “Ellana!” she whispered, shaking the little girl. “Ellana, wake up!” A muffled “don’t wanna” was the only reply. Jia glanced toward the other side of the hold. Adara’s eyes caught her, the skin around them hollow and bruised, her cheeks sunken. Jia could feel the weight of defeat settle around her shoulders like a vice. Tremors shook her body. It’s over.

Ellana sat up groggily. “What’s wrong Jia?”

Jia frowned. “Don’t call me that anymore. It doesn’t fit now.” Jia. Jia meant innocent wisdom. If Jia was wise, she wouldn’t have run out of the house in a fit. She would have looked both ways before crossing the stupid road. She wouldn’t be here. Her parents were probably so worried. Or sad. Maybe she was dead. She had thought about her parents a few times these last several months, but each time, the guilt and fear she had felt had overwhelmed her, so she refused to think about it anymore. No more parents. No more ‘before life’. No more innocence. No more Jia.

“What should I call you then? Should I change my name too?” Ellana asked, cocking her head to one side.

Jia thought a name. Her favorite story. About a wild, red haired meek princess who became a dragonkiller, raised an army, and single handedly defeated the evil mage who threatened her people. The princess who wielded a blue sword, became queen, and loved a mysterious blond man who lived by a lake. The name that meant strong. “Aerin. My name will be Aerin.”

Chapter End Notes

The drowning account actually happened to me. I'm fine in boats and stuff after my mother finally forced me to take swimming lessons later on, but I still hate water in my face. Ugh. Also, Hero and the Crown is my FAVORITE BOOK EVER. It was the first fantasy book I ever read, when I was about 6. I reread it at least once a year still.
Minrathous. Jewel of the Tevinter Empire. Aerin couldn’t help gawking at the city. At first glance, the city glowed. It was on an island, a giant bridge in the distance connecting it to land. Graceful architecture grew out of the rocks, impossible floating bridges and gardens dotted the skyline, and at the center, a gleaming gold and obsidian spire towered above it all. It was beautiful. At first glance. Under all the gilt, the decay was visible. The sandstone structures were crumbling. Cracks laced the pale gray stone walls, hidden by strategically placed banners and sashes. Marble columns looked like they would fall to pieces at any second, but were apparently held together by sheer force of will. Or really strong super glue, Aerin guessed. It was like walking through a living ruin. A memory of a scripture her parents had read to her floated through her mind, like whitewashed tombs- beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones. The idea of bones and graves made her shiver.

The elves were crammed once more into cages, waiting at the gates above the docks. No blanket was tossed over them to hide who they were. No one cared. Aerin watched the city pass by, Ellana’s hand tucked tightly into her own. This part of town wasn’t so nice. Some humans were dressed in ragged robes, but still managed to hold an air of superiority. Other humans, in unraveling linen tops and pants, merely shuffled by. And still more elves, all bowed and bent under the weight of their fate, staring at the ground as they trailed behind masters. It was terrible.

The cart clipped down the paved stone road, eventually turning into a modest building built out of the same sandstone as most other buildings in this area. The cart came to a halt in the courtyard, and guards immediately swept down to line the entrances. Aerin and the rest were unceremoniously hauled out of the cage, and forced into the modest building. Most of the elves were shoved into one larger room, one that had a large trough of water along one side. The elves who had been given special treatment onboard the ship were separated and herded into a different area, where other elves, presumably house slaves, were waiting on them. It was a bathhouse. A low, long basin ran the length of the room, with carved stone benches dotting the room and and torches casting a warm glow on the sandy walls. They were all stripped and soaked and scrubbed with a soap that smelled similar to patchouli. Aerin hated it. She knew her face was bright red, having never been naked in front of strangers, especially men. But no one cared or reacted, so she tried her best to ignore it. Being clean after months of not bathing was heaven. Her hair had been a greasy, matted mess, but it slowly was worked back into straight, smooth tresses with a lot of patience and scented oils. A sleeveless, diaphanous cream colored shift dress that reached below her knees was draped over her head and tied at the waist with a sash. No underwear?! Aerin looked up and saw everyone else being dressed in the same manner. She took a deep breath. The elves attending them were silent and kept their eyes firmly focused on their work. More slaves, I guess. Feeling almost hopeful in her newfound cleanliness but also uncomfortable with lack of underwear, and with everyone also bathed and dressed, they were led to a simple dining hall, unadorned except for more torchlight, where food awaited them. Real food. A roast of something that definitely wasn’t chicken, but similar enough, basted with spices. Lightly sauteed bitter greens smothered in a sauce that tasted faintly of curry. And steaming, fluffy, fresh bread. Aerin settled herself lightly on the smooth wooden bench, and watched as the others ripped into the food, stuffing their faces with as much as they could grab. How long since they had eaten like this, if ever? She remembered when she first saw them, most were already rail thin and bony. Ellana glanced up at Aerin, seemingly asking permission, and Aerin smiled down at her, reached over to grab a roll, and gave it to her. Ellana’s face lit up and she picked up a leg of roast and began to take

About 30 minutes later, Caladrius waltzed in, beard freshly trimmed, and bald head gleaming. He clapped his hands. “My dear, dear friends,” he exclaimed. “I hope you all had a lovely bath and meal.” He noticed the stains and grease dripping down the fingers and onto the shifts of a few and eyed them distastefully. He motioned to a couple of the attending slaves and the offending newly stained elves were quickly whisked away. “Rest well tonight, for tomorrow you will meet your new masters!” Panic set in. One of the elves, a boy in his late teens, with a look like a startled deer in headlights, gaped at Caladrius for a minute, before he bolted from his seat and took off towards the door. A guard almost magically appeared in the doorframe and the elf ran straight into his armored breastplate, bouncing off with a sharp clang and a wheezed “whoof!”. The guard grabbed the elf by the upper arm, easily dragging him to where the others sat in petrified silence still. “Now, now, none of that my friend. There is simply nowhere for you to escape to.” Caladrius leaned over the hyperventilating elf. “Don’t worry, no one will kill you if you try to escape. Much too valuable for that, you see. You’ll simply wish you were dead.” Aerin felt a pang of ice pierce her heart. No escape at all. The Dominus stood up, and motioned at the guards, “Take them away for the night.” And with that, he swept grandly out of the room, as if he were a king and not just a slave trader.

Aerin and the others wordlessly followed the guards down the stairs, through a narrow corridor, and into a small room. There were several cots pushed up against the wall and windows, cut high into the walls with bars over them. Straining her neck up, she could almost see the moon. Well, one of the moons. She didn’t think she would ever get used to that. Two moons. And a world full of magic, dragons, and knights in shining armor. Too bad it was all warped. A fairy tale gone horribly wrong. She sat down on a cot against the far wall, as far away from the door as possible. Ellana took the next cot. “Aerin? I’m scared,” she whimpered.

Aerin reached out and perched on her knees by Ellana’s cot, and wrapped her arms around her. “I know Elle. Me too. No matter what, I’ll always love you. You know that?” The little girl buried her face into her shoulder, big, silent tears rolling down her pale face. Aerin thought, She was so strong at first. Now it's my turn. “Tell you what. See those stars up there? To the right of the bigger moon?” Aerin traced a few stars with her finger. “Kinda looks like a heart. See it?” Ellana hesitantly nodded. “No matter where we are, look up at that heart, and know I am thinking of you at that very moment. Ok? Doesn’t matter if we’re at opposite ends of the world. As long as that heart is up there, I will love you, da’len.” Adara had called her that. Adara...

Ellana nodded vigorously. “Ok, sis. Me too.”

Aerin smiled. “I’ve never had a sister. I’m glad it’s you.”

Ellana tightened her hold around Aerin’s neck. “Can I sleep with you tonight?”

Aerin glanced over at the tiny cot. They would fit, but barely. “Of course little sister. Anything for you.”

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Dawn came too soon. Aerin barely slept all night. Ellana had fitfully tossed and turned on their tiny cot as well. She hugged the little girl as tightly as she could and whispered, “Be strong. I love you.” A whimper and the tiniest of nods was her response.
At that moment, a guard swept in and began barking, “Everyone up! The lot of you. Up! Time to make yourselves presentable!” They all scrambled to their feet to follow the guard out of the room. Back into the bathing chamber they went. This time, after they were scrubbed, they were rubbed down by the household slaves with scented oils and lotions until their skin gleamed in the warm torchlight. Aerin's long hair was brushed until it shone like obsidian. Her eyes were lined with kohl, and lips were lightly painted with some sort of stain that smelled faintly of berries. She remembered the last time she had worn makeup, for a dance recital. She had been so excited to wear her mom's bright red lipstick. It matched her leotard. With a choked sob, she shoved the memory away. It's useless. Dressed in freshly laundered cream colored shifts, with a pale gray sash tied at the waist, and still barefoot, they were marched back into the house, upstairs to a finely appointed waiting room. The long rectangular room had a raised dais at the far end of the room, facing a staggered semicircle of about 7 divans. Wealthy looking men and a few women lounged carelessly, munching on a tray of assorted fruits and cheeses, sipping a dark red wine. Some of the men wore sleeveless robes, delicately armored leather leggings peeking through the high jagged slits of the skirts, arms clad in formfitting silken shirts, with gilded bracers over the forearms and a small capelet draped over the shoulders. Others wore simpler, but still expensive looking fitted pants and long sleeve shirts, made out of something shiny, satin or silk, with a cloak fastened at the neck. Of the two women that were present, one was dressed similarly to the robed men, while the other was decked out in a dark purple full hoop skirt and leather corset, embroidered with silver threading along the hems. Her black waves of hair cascaded down her bare shoulders and back. The power the woman wielded was electrifying and palpable. She was the most beautiful and terrifying woman Aerin had ever seen. Large, open windows were cut into the long wall opposite the door and the street below could be seen, teeming with carriages and humans in robes milling about. It was clean and orderly and devoid of color. Everything here seemed to be rich, dark colors and gold and silver. It was stunningly boring.

The guard led the string of elves to the dais, and Aerin made to follow them until another guard appeared at her arm and directed her to the back of the room. Frantic, she glanced back and saw Ellana being led behind her as well. Why are we being singled out? Did we do something wrong?! Ellana’s eyes were as wide as her own. Breathe. Focus. Picturing the flame, she tried to feed all her emotions into it yet again. She was getting better at this. She and Ellana stood side by side, hand in hand, waiting for whatever happened next. They silently watched the fancy people laugh and chat with each other, ignoring the gathered, terrified elves, with one divan still empty. Finally, a tall, elegantly muscled man strode into the room, his midnight blue robes billowing out behind him. His greaves and armor were made from a matte black metal, strange engravings etched onto them in gold. His robes were the same jagged cut as the rest, with a stripe of gold that ran along the hems, and his boots of a dark, fine leather. He wore no cloak or hood, showing off his white streaked black hair that was closely cropped to his head, his graying beard and piercing blue eyes standing out starkly against his dark face. A deep, jagged scar ripped down from his right eye, past his chin, and down into his robes. He was, overall, a very handsome man. He glanced about the room, seemingly uninterested in the whole affair, and pulled off his gloves, tossing them nonchalantly onto the waiting chaise. “Caius!” Caladrius swept up to the newcomer. He held out his arms, and lightly pecked the man’s cheek. “Welcome! I’m ever so delighted you could join us my friend.”

The one called Caius gave him a curt nod. “You said you had something special for me?”

Caladrius chuckled dryly. “Straight to business, as it always is with you, dear Caius. Yes, well, remember you asked me to find you the next great spectacle of Minrathous? Something that this city has never seen before? I have found her.” He gave a flourish to where Aerin and Ellana stood frozen to the ground. Ellana kept her eyes downcast, while Aerin all but glared at the man. I will not be afraid any longer.
Caius glanced over at them, folded his arms across his chest, and thoughtfully stroked his beard. “She’s unusual looking, give her that. Healthy, too. What makes you think she could fight, let alone win enough to make it worth it?”

Caladrius grinned. “Why, this slip of a child took down 3 of my men. Disarmed one completely! Think of what she could do with the real training that Ludus Therion is known for!”

Caius raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow at that. “Three? Interesting.” He walked a circle around the two girls, feeling their arms, examining their legs. “And what of the other? I have no need of child slaves such as she.”

Caladrius nodded. “This I know my friend. But it seems they are very close. Sisters, I think they fancy themselves. ’Twould be a shame to part them, don’t you think?” he finished with a sly smile.

Caius considered this for another minute. “You two want to be kept together?” Ellana vigorously nodded, while Aerin’s nods were slightly more composed and confused.

They would let us stay together? Why?
The older man leaned in. “I think we can arrange that. Let us discuss payment then, Caladrius.” The two men turned away, to where the others sat, examining the other elves like horses at a market. Caius motioned at a nearby guard. “Take those two to Erebus. I will be but a moment behind.”

The guard saluted Caius, hand over heart. “Yes, Lanista. Come on you two.” Grabbing a girl in each of his arms, he marched them downstairs to waiting nondescript black carriage where a huge, bald, scarred mountain of a man stood, leaning against the door. “Erebus, two new purchases for the Ludus.”

The mountain shifted and gazed down at the two girls. Girls. Ants, really. “Oh? This one is so… small.” He bent over and picked up Ellana by the neck, his meaty hand easily wrapping around her tiny neck. Aerin shrieked and without thinking, obviously, she launched herself at the mountain.

“Let her go!” she shrilled, raining punches against his arm. He glared down at her, her punches harmlessly bouncing off his arm as if they were raindrops. He did, however, immediately drop the tiny elf and grabbed both of Aerin’s arms and lifted her up instead.

“I see. You’re the fighter.” At that moment, Caius walked out of the side doors.

“Yes, Erebus. She’s to be a gladiator.”

“And the runt elf?”

Caius gave him a lazy smile. “Why, she’s incentive of course.”

Chapter End Notes

I am like Aerin, in that I hate running. My dad, on the other hand, once ran 17 miles to town and back in the middle of a SC summer because he was bored. I can't make this stuff up y'all. In my head, Caius looks like Caspian, Aladdin's dad from the King of Thieves.
The carriage rolled smoothly down the paved roads of Minrathous. Aerin and Ellana wordlessly gazed out of the windows to the passing city. It was pretty much the same, street after street of crumbling sandstone and gray stone walls, decadently adorned with gilded banners and flowers to distract from the decrepit city. After an hour or so, they finally pulled into a sprawling complex. A tall 5 story tower-like building decorated with arches and hanging gardens and mini dragons on the buttresses loomed over a large, dirt training yard that was scattered with training dummies and what looked like an obstacle course. A 2 story, simpler building ran along the opposite side of the tower. This one had barred windows and no mini dragons or flowers. The carriage ground to a halt, and a well dressed elf jumped to open the door for Caius, bowing deeply. He moved to walk away and called out, “I’ll leave you to it then, Erebus.”

Erebus bowed, “Yes, Lanista.” He reached into the carriage and dragged both girls out.

“Hey!” Aerin protested. “You could try asking us instead!” He smirked at the adolescent and swatted Ellana to the ground with a heavy blow.

“Elle!” Aerin gasped. “Why?!”

Erebus casually regarded her. “It’s simple really. You do what we say, or the elf gets hurt. You back talk? We cut out her tongue. You try to escape? We chop off her feet. You disobey? We chop off her hands. You refuse to do anything we command? We pass her around the guards for a bit of… entertainment,” he leered. Aerin stared at him, stunned. This is why they kept us together.

Ellana whimpered from the ground. “You will refer to the master as Lanista. I am Doctore. You will not speak unless spoken to. The only words I ever want to hear from you are ‘yes Doctore’ and ‘no Doctore’. I will train you, while your little pet elf her will learn to heal you. You will do nothing to tarnish the name of Ludus Therion. I am ever so glad Lanista was able to bring her along. This way is so much more amusing and easier than using blood magic to control new fighters. But believe me, if you ever decide that your pet rabbit’s life isn’t worth anything anymore, and you try something stupid, we will not hesitate to resort to magical means. Am I understood, sentina?” He all but hissed that last word. Aerin didn’t have a clue as to what it meant, but she guessed it wasn’t complementary. She clenched her first and her jaw, and replied through gritted teeth, “Yes, Doctore.” He smiled. “Good girl. You there, take her to the armory and get her outfitted. You, take the elf to their new room. Make sure she’s… comfortable.” Aerin glanced down at Ellana, who was shakily rising to her feet. She grabbed the little girl’s hands and gave them a quick squeeze and small smile and nod.

The first elf approached Aerin and muttered, “This way.” He led her across the training yard. A few men and women, dressed in bits of leather armor practiced with weapons. One fair skinned human man wielded a huge sword as tall as Aerin. And probably as heavy. Another elven woman with bright red hair, swung a woven net with her left hand at another elf, brandishing a trident in her right hand. And yet another elven man swung at a wooden dummy with a curved scimitar in each hand. It was all rather terrifying. The elf leading her glanced back and hissed, “Hurry up! Don’t dawdle.” Aerin gave a squeak and scampered closer to the elf. “I’m Helier by the way.”

“Aerin.”

“No, you’re not.”
“Huh?”

He sighed. “Better go ahead and forget that name now. They’ll give you a new name soon. Once they figure out what will suit you.”

“Oh.” Aerin shrugged. Names meant little to her these days anyways. The interior of the armory was dusty and dim. Helier bowed, his long light brown ponytail, falling to the side, to the large man that was working leather on a wooden bench.

“Leonius, new trainee. Doctore asked that she be outfitted.” The man turned. His hair was completely gray, and his face clean shaven. One eye was covered by a patch. His nose was a craggy blob, appearing to have been broken multiple times. He wore a simple leather apron over his naked torso and canvas pants with leather sandals, doing nothing to cover the multitude of scars that littered his arms and chest. Aerin thought that if she counted them all, it would take years. He stood up to examine her, and nodded at the elf.

“Thank you Helier. Let me look at you girl. How old are you?” His voice was low, but not as cultured as the other Tevinters she had encountered. He was also less dismissive than the others. Aerin decided she liked him.

“I’m 11 years old sir.” He nodded and continued measuring her with a piece of string. “Can I speak sir?” she asked.

He looked up at her and nodded. “You’re free to talk as you will around me and the other fighters. We’re all slaves here.”

Aerin looked down at her toes. Slaves. Right. Can’t forget that. “What exactly am I supposed to do here?”

Leonius moved to a rack where several sets of beat up leather armor was stored. “Simple really. Ever hear of the gladiators? The great fighters of Minrathous?” Aerin thought. She knew of the gladiators of Ancient Rome, Earth. Was it the same thing here?

“People that fight in an arena for entertainment?”

“The same. That’s you now. You’ll learn to fight for Ludus Therion. That’s the name of this here gladiator school. The Lanista is the owner. Train for a few years first. In 4 years or so, you’ll have your first match. All goes well, you’ll win. Means better food and clothing for you. Win enough, since you’re human, you might gain your freedom. Lucky you’re not an elf. Poor sods are stuck here for life.”

Freedom. Aerin breathed. She regarded the man, watching as he carefully pulled out parts of armor and set to examining them for defects. “Were you a gladiator? Your accent isn’t the same as theirs.”

He nodded. “Aye. I’m originally from Ferelden. Sold myself into slavery as a young lad for enough money to send my mother to a healer. She was mighty sick. Brought here and won a decent amount of matches. Came pretty close to earning my freedom. But last match lamed my leg. Luckily for me, the current armorer took me on so the Lanista wouldn’t sell me off to the mines. That’s what happens if you can’t fight anymore.”

Aerin frowned. “So I’m supposed to fight others? Are the fights to… the death?” she gasped.

He sighed and looked up remorsefully. “Not gonna lie to you, girlie. Some are. Most of the fights are to a certain amount of points. Each hit you make on your opponent grants points. One with the
most points in 20 minutes wins. Some of the larger fights are to the deaths. The ones in celebration of the Archon’s ascension, for example. Or First Day. But you shouldn’t be in any of those for a long time to come.”

Aerin paled. To the death. I’d have to kill someone else? If I don’t, I die. Or Ellana gets hurts. I promised her. She nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

He frowned. “Leonius is fine for the likes of me. No sir needed. Now come here and let’s see if this set fits.” The next 2 hours passed in companionable silence as Aerin reflected on her new role in life and Leonius adjusted armor to fit her small frame. There was the chest and back plate to cover her torso, the pauldrons for her shoulders and upper arms, bracers for her forearms, cuisses for her thighs, greaves for her shins, and sandals for her feet. All made out of a midweight, unadorned leather that weighed her 11 year old body down. It was surprisingly flexible at least. “No gloves,” he said. “Need to build up calluses on your hands first. Now let’s find the Doctore.” He led her out of the small armory and searched the field. Erebus glanced up from where he was observing the red headed elf from earlier and saw Leonius and the new trainee. He walked over.

“All set then?”

“Yes, Doctore. This set should serve her well for the first stages.”

“Right. Well then, sentina, give me 30 laps around the field.” He pointed to the dirt track that encircled the training field.

Aerin stifled a groan and instead said, “Yes, Doctore,” and jogged out. She hated running. Absolutely despised it. Her father loved it and regularly would run upwards of 10-12 miles on his days off. Aerin had to be bribed to run. Although I suppose Ellana counts as my bribe now. Gods, please don’t let me hurt her. Breathe in, out. Picture the flame. Feed all my fear and anger and sadness into it. Empty myself. Breathe. In. Out. Aerin had been in decent shape, but 30 laps was pushing it. A lot. Aerin finished the last lap and sputtered to a stop, gasping for air. Erebus casually strode over to her.

“Finished all 30 laps already girl?”

Aerin barely gasped out, “Yes, Doctore.”

“Didn’t look like 30 to me.”

She dared a glance up at him. “Doctore?”

He smirked at her. “Do 5 more laps, just to be sure.”

Aerin’s mind blanked. She would die. She would scream. She would hit him. She would just fall over right here and- “Yes, Doctore.” Aerin turned back to the track and gritting her teeth, continued putting one foot in front of the other. Breathe in. Out. Think of Ellana. This is for Ellana. Feel nothing. Five laps later, she was sure her lungs were on literal fire. She hunched over her knees, trying to keep from vomiting. Helier met her on the field this time.

“Water skin?” he offered her a pouch. Aerin gratefully grabbed and it held it up to her lips, her arms trembling. The water was warm and tasted of dirt and mildew but it was glorious. “It’s lunch break now. I have some bread and meat for you, if you’d like,” he said, holding out a wrapped up towel. Aerin smiled up at him.

“Thanks Helier, you’re a lifesaver. How long have you been here?”
He shrugged. “Six years I think? Came in when I was about nine years old. With my older brother. He’s the one out there with the sword and shield.”

She bit her lip and wrinkled her nose. “So… you’re incentive too? For your brother, I mean.”

Helier sighed. “Yeah. Iduma’s little sister is here too,” he pointed at the red headed elf with the trident. "Same deal with that little girl you came in with? What is she to you?"

Aerin studied her bread. “She’s my little sister,” she replied softly.

He jerked back in surprise. “Sister? A shem would claim kinship to an elf?”

Aerin glared up at him. “So what? Just cause she’s an elf don’t make her any less of person, you—you jerk!”

Helier grinned at her. “Whoa there. No offense. Just surprised. Not many humans would be caught dead being friendly to an elf, let alone want to let them into the family. You’re weird.”

Aerin gave a harumph and rolled her eyes. “Maybe y’all are all the weird ones.” She looked up at him. “She’s all I have in this world now.”

He gave her a gentle smile. “She’ll be fine. You both will. Come on, lunch break is over. Doctore is coming back out.”

Erebus stalked over to where Aerin and Helier stood. Helier smoothly bowed and said, “Doctore.” Aerin quickly followed suit. He threw a small wooden sword at Aerin’s feet. “Pick it up. We’ll start with basic sword forms. Ever hold a sword before?”

“No, Doctore.”

He snorted. “Right, of course you haven’t. Just some spoiled rich noble’s brat. You think they even miss you right now? Or glad you’ve been pawned off and are off their hands? Maybe they’re even celebrating your disappearance.” Aerin stared at him in horror. *What if they are glad I’m gone? My mother was always so frustrated with me. Are they really glad?* She could picture them, standing around the kitchen island, laughing with relief now that they didn’t have to worry about her anymore. *No.*

“NO!” the shout rose unbidden to her throat. “They miss me, I know they do!” Erebus grinned. “Oh ho, have we already forgotten the rules? You there, go grab the elf brat.” Aerin fell to her knees in terror.

“No, Doctore, please, please, forgive me. Please please please!”

He smiled, loving this power trip. “I do so love it when they beg. But rules are rules sentina. Do you know what that means? It means you’re from the dirt. You are worthless. You are the scum of Tevinter, not even fit for other slaves to wipe their feet on right now. Only through us and the grace of the Lanista will you ever amount to anything. Do you understand?” he spit.

“Yes, Doctore,” Aerin whispered. *Please let this be a bluff please let this be a bluff.* She watched as a burly guard dragged Ellana out by her hair, the little girl crying and begging for him to stop. He threw her on the ground at Erebus’ feet. He considered the little girl and turned to Aerin.

“Since this was such a minor infraction, I’m thinking small. Maybe just a finger? The tip of the pinky. She won’t miss that much.” And with that, he withdrew a razor sharp dagger from the
leather sheath at his side. Ellana’s face was filled with abject dread. Aerin threw herself at the man’s feet.

“Please, I beg of you, Doctore! Punish me instead. Please!” The man ignored her pleas and advanced on the little girl. Grabbing her left wrist, he turned and said, “Let this be your first lesson. I demand complete obedience. Disobey, and you will be punished.” And he raised his hand to bring the dagger down.

Time froze. Aerin’s heart stopped. She felt a deep thrumming in her veins. All her pain and panic from the past few months were building up behind her chest. She gasped at the sensation, reached inside herself, instinctively pulled at the pressure, threw her arms out, and pushed. A shockwave pulsed out of her hands and into Erebus, throwing him at least 10 feet back. Aerin stared in shock at her hands.

“W-w-what?! Oh my god! I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to! I don’t even know how! Please!” she fell to the ground babbling senselessly. Erebus narrowed his eyes at her, and stood up, dusting his pants off.

“You, you, and you. Take her to a holding cell. Put the brat back. I’ll deal with this.” He stepped up to Aerin, grabbed her throat and pulled her close enough she could smell his rank breath.

“Looks like we’ve got ourself a little mage.” Throwing her at the guards, he turned sharply on his heel and stomped towards the tower.

Ellana threw herself at Aerin, sobbing. The guards dragged her off, and Aerin called out, “Don’t worry Elle! It’ll be ok! Promise!” I hope.

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The robed mage stepped into the room, the twilight sky casting long shadows upon everything. Caius stood in front of a window, gazing out at the skyline of Minrathous in the distance. Erebus stood at attention behind him, slightly off to the side. Casius inclined his head at the mage.

“Nicon, did you examine the girl?”

“Yes, my lord. The Fade is unusually strong around her. It clings to her in a way I’ve never seen. Her mana reserve is extraordinarily deep for someone so young.”

Caius frowned. “So she’s powerful, then?”

“Yes, Lanista. If trained properly, she could be one of the strongest mages Tevinter has seen in centuries.” Caius sighed. This was a problem. Usually magic already manifested itself in children by age 9-10, so he never had to worry about a slave gaining magic. It was illegal to keep human mages at slaves. Elves, less so. And if the elf chained to her showed signs of magic, he would definitely lose her. He spent far too much coin on her to let her gain her freedom. Erebus’ voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Shall we bind her magic then, my lord?” Caius shook his head, pensively stroking his graying beard.

“No, the audience adores it when a gladiator has control of a bit of magic. Flashy magic and all. Reduce her powers. Bind her at about, say… 20 percent? Would that still give her enough power Nicon? How many do you need?”

“Should be more than enough for a few fireballs and chain lightning strikes, my lord. One should suffice.”
Erebus hesitated. “Lanista, she’d still be a human mage.”

Caius raised one eyebrow and smirked. “Well, fix that.” Erebus felt his mouth split into a wide, toothy grin.

“With pleasure, my lord.”

Nicon paused. “I may need more then, lanista. Four probably.” Caius nodded.

“Anything you need. I want it done by week’s end.”

*****

Aerin huddled into the straw. Four days, she had been left in this tiny, dank cell. She had regular meals, and her own chamberpot - I’ll never get used to that- but no one came to see her otherwise. I hope Ellana is ok. She must be, otherwise they would’ve just killed me and her both. Right? Or maybe they’re sending us to the mines? How did I even do that? Was that magic? How do I have magic? Magic doesn’t exist! She could still feel the thrumming in her veins, but was too scared to do anything about it. I’m in enough trouble as it is. Please let Ellana be ok. She hung her head, miserable and stuck in her mind, running around in circles of despair.

Voices echoed down the hall. Aerin perked her head up. There was no light down here, no tiny windows or even a torch. Just her, the moldy straw, and the squeaks of the rats. She could see the firelight moving toward her, shadows dancing on the walls from the flame. Aerin shrunk back into the straw. A short, wiry man in mage robes stopped in front of her cell. His small, sharp eyes reminded her of a snake. Unlocking her cage, he motioned for the guards and stepped back. “Fasta vaas! The stench! She must be washed properly for the process. Take her and don’t bring her back ’til she’s cleaned.” The guards silently hauled her up the stairs, into the yard, one gripping her on either arm. They dragged her to a single story stone building at the back of the property and shoved her in.

“The mage demands she be bathed,” a guard informed the attending slave. The redhead elf, probably in her late teens, nodded and drew Aerin further into the bathhouse. Aerin stripped off her shirt and pants and the girl tossed them in a bin in the corner. Aerin watched as the girl approached her with a bucket of water.

“Do you know what’s going to happen to me?” The girl shook her head, and dumped the bucket over Aerin’s head. Aerin sighed. “Don’t suppose you know if Ellana is ok? You know, the little kid?” The girl shook her head again, red curls bouncing. “Can’t you just talk to me for a little? It’s been so long since I heard another voice.” The elf smiled sadly at Aerin, and opened her mouth. Her tongue was gone. Oh. “Oh. I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to!” The girl smiled again, and patted Aerin’s arm. Aerin sat in mortified silence the rest of the bath, scrubbing at her skin while the other slave brought her water to rinse with. Finally clean again, she led her to the door, stopping before the exit to give Aerin a quick hug. She patted the younger girl on the face and smiled, before knocking at the door to alert the guards that she was done. The wooden door swung open.

“About time. Let’s go.”

Aerin padded softly across the training field, sandals kicking up dirt into little clouds. The night was cool, and a gentle breeze wound its way around her. It’s such a nice night. Surely nothing bad can happen on a night like this. She glanced upwards at the guard flanking her left. Expressionless and silent as always. I wonder where they’re taking me. The tower cast a long shadow over the courtyard, hiding a door was tucked into a small alley. It was to this dark corner the guards led her. One man pushed the door open, forcing her into dimly lit darkness. The lights are blue, Aerin
thought curiously. It was a largish room, maybe 15 by 20 feet. The center of the room was sunken in and there was a large marble table in the middle. Workbenches filled with parchment and different glass flasks and vials of liquids lined the room. In the back corner, there was a cage with four disheveled elves, all of them huddled together on the ground, wearing similar shifts to what Aerin had worn the day she left the slaver’s house. The torches on the wall were giving off an eerie pale blue light. *Not fire then?* She couldn’t feel any heat emanating from them. *Must be magic.* Erebus and the small, wiry mage from earlier stood next to the worktable nearest the door. The mage shuffled through the papers, making some last minute notations while Erebus surveyed the tools nearby. Aerin shivered looking at those. *Torture? But why do they need notes for that?* He looked up and grinned.

“She’s here Nicon. Let’s begin.” Nicon clapped his hands together.

“Excellent! Remove your clothes and get up on the table girl. Face down.” Aerin froze. She couldn’t move. Tears began to burn her eyes. Erebus narrowed his eyes at her. *No, I have to do this. I have to. For Ellana. Ellana. My little sister.* Aerin slowly shuffled over to the table, slipped her shift over her head, and hopped up onto the cool, smooth surface. *I did ask them to punish me instead of her. I can do this. I can. Breathe.* Picturing the flame brought her a little comfort. Aerin laid down, drawing in a sharp breath at the cold marble against her skin. She closed her eyes and concentrated on breathing. She felt rough hands grab her wrists and twist them above her head. Thick leather restraints were tied around her wrists and ankles, bound to the table. Her breaths became shorter and more shallow. Panic rose in her chest into her throat. She started tugging at the restraints and gave a pitiful whimper. “Now, now dear girl. No need for all that. The restraints are just a secondary precaution.” Nicon gave her a gleeful grin. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the elves from the cage dragged to the side of the table. Another of the house slaves stood nearby with a bowl full of water. *No, not water. Some sort of liquid that glowed a brilliant blue. “We’re just giving you a makeover! Won’t that be fun?”* And with that, he muttered an incantation and Aerin felt her body go completely still. *I can’t move. I can’t move!* She tried to convince her muscles to move, flail, anything, but her body wouldn’t cooperate. She was paralyzed, except for her eyes. Casting them about frantically, she saw Erebus slide his dagger out and bring it up to the first elf’s throat. *No. NO!* Aerin screamed silently. The elf stared Aerin down with bright, shimmering eyes that were already dead. Erebus swiftly drew the knife across the unknown man’s skin, his body violently convulsing, ruby red blood gushing forth the gaping laceration. Several shrill voices from behind started screaming. She heard a low chanting sound from off to her side, and watched as the blood from the drained, bone white elf slowly floated up, like smoke from a campfire, dancing through the air. The glowing, electric blue liquid snaked out of the bowl, intertwining in the air above, two deadly snakes coiling around each other. The chanting grew louder. Aerin could hear her heartbeat in her head, feel the reverberations of her veins echoing through her skull. Another slave was brought forth, bound and struggling- this one slashed and bled out in the same manner. And so it went, til four deathly white elves laid, depleted of their life force, thrown to the side like a discarded candy wrapper. The glowing blue liquid and *so much* blood danced above her, forming strange shapes that almost looked like letters from an ancient language. She could see Nicon’s hands, gesturing and twisting the fluids into the patterns only he could understand, the blue binding the red, ‘til the blood pulsed with an unearthly glow. The chanting crescendoed. And Aerin finally knew pain. Centered on her lower back, it felt like a thousand barbed knives stabbing through her skin. Felt like her spine was being ripped out through her body. She tried to scream, begged for whatever holy force was out there to make it stop, and yet, no one came. She could smell a strange burning scent, realizing with horror it was her own flesh. Seconds passed, or maybe minutes, or possibly an eternity. The young girl could feel a weight settling over her skin, constricting her like a boa constrictor, compressing her lungs and heart and kidneys til she was sure she would suffocate and her skin would rip like wet paper and all her insides would burst through. Smaller and smaller, her body was choked and strangled into the barrier that had been lain
over her flesh. Aerin fought to scream, to throw herself across the room, to do anything to drown out the sensation of being slowly shredded to bits. She tried vainly to throw all her emotion into the flickering flame in her head and finally just retreated into her mind and prayed to the powers that were ignoring her. Ellana! We need to leave. I don’t know what their game is, what they are doing to me, or what they want from us. But I will learn. I will fight. And one day, somehow, we will find a way to escape. And kill them all. Every last one of them fucking bastards.

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Ellana jolted up out of her restless dozing. The room she and Aerin were supposed to share lay in shadows, a tiny sliver of moonlight just barely illuminating the empty cot. It was a small room, just big enough for the two cots and a small cabinet between. She sat up groggily, blinking the sleep out of her eyes. It was late, well past midnight, far too late for men to be coming into the barracks. None of the slaves were allowed out past nightfall. So what was all this commotion?

She heard the fumble of iron keys outside the heavy wooden door. A guard swung it open with a creak, and Erebus stepped into the room and laid an unknown stranger down on the opposite cot. Ellana stared. It was an elf. The most beautiful elf she had ever seen. The unconscious elf moaned and her eyes fluttered briefly. Her eyes. Eyes that were bright blue, like the lyrium the dwarves mined, bound by a thin ring of burnished gold. Hair the color of spilled blood, deep and dark scarlet. Delicate nose, high cheekbones, and a perfect rosebud for lips. Ellana had no idea who she was. Where is Aerin? Is she gone forever? She pulled her tiny knees up to her chest and huddled under her threadbare blanket. Erebus turned to face Ellana, throwing a jar at her. “Put this over her back every 2 hours for the next 3 days. And when she awakes, tell your sister she has a new name.” Sister? Aerin?! He paused, a slow, pleased, genuine smile overtaking his face.

“She is to be called Seraphina, warrior of fire, reborn to us in flames.”

Chapter End Notes

Fucking blood magic, amiright?
The clanging of swords echoed across the yard, where two figures were caught up in a deadly dance of blunted steel. A human male swung his greatsword in a high arc, balancing on the balls of his feet for a brief moment before letting the momentum bring the blade down where his opponent should be. But no one was there. Grunting, he spun around to spot where the blasted elf had been last, but too late. A slender blade lashed out with unerring accuracy, the flat smacking him against the inside of his wrist, jarring against his worn leather bracer. His grip faltered and he jerked forward to keep his balance. Pressing the advantage, his elven opponent pirouetted on her toes, scarlet braid whipping around her head, struck high with the sword in her right hand, forcing him to raise his sword barely fast enough to block, then dropped down in less than a blink of an eye to press the tip of the other sword against his unprotected flank. She froze instantly, as if held in a paralysis glyph. He was caught. She glanced up with a smirk. “Got you, Petrus. Yield.” Petrus let out a loud sigh.

“Fine, fine, yield. Blasted elf.” She grinned again, and rose to her feet, twin swords dangling at her side. Stretching, she flipped her long braid over her shoulder. “You know, you’ve been insufferable since you won the Septicentennial last year, Seraphina.” The 700th anniversary of the founding of gladiator battles had come and gone. It was the biggest spectacle Minrathous would see in years, full of violence, surrounded by decadence and lust and gilt. Aerin, at the tender age of 17, had won it all, claimed the title of Victorem, basked in the glory, for all appearances enthralled with her newfound status. Behind her meek smiles and graceful curtseys and loyal obedience, lay a very angry human, skilled at deception.

“Why, Petrus, jealous are we? Don’t worry, you’ll have another chance on Wintersend next month to reclaim your former glory. Since I won’t be there to beat you. Or maybe it’s just time for you to retire, old man.” Petrus yelped in protest. Aerin chuckled. “I need to see Leonius about my new armor. We can spar again later if you’d like.”

Petrus muttered. “I don’t know if my ego can handle more than four defeats at your hand in one day. Maybe later.” Aerin smirked at the burly human, nodded, and trotted off. Since her debut 2 years ago at 15 years old, prior to the Septicentennial, she had dominated the Imperial Proving Grounds. Her unusual fighting style tended to catch all her opponents off guard. She was fast as lightning, seemingly teleporting across the field, steps slightly enhanced by her Fade Step. Her dual silverite swords turned her into a whirlwind of blood. Her hand to hand combat style was entirely unique, as no one in Thedas taught a martial art quite like hers. And then there was her magic. Average in ability, yes, but her accuracy without a focus was unprecedented. Most mages who cast without a focus had trouble aiming their spells and things tended to go awry. Not Aerin. Her spells always found their mark. She knew there were whispers that she had sold her soul to demons. They sold my soul for me, Aerin thought. Sheathing her swords, she stepped into the armory, simple wooden furniture still covered in a layer of dust years later. Leonius had promised her a new set of armor for the upcoming tour. Aerin, as the Victorem of Minrathous and representing Ludus Therion, would be touring all the great Tevinter cities, challenging the reigning champions in each city. There would be plenty of parties, feasting, wine, and nights of being sold to the nobles for… favors. That was her least favorite part of her life. The fighting, she rather enjoyed. It was the only time she felt like she had power over her life. She liked to imagine it was the Lanista and Doctore she was pummeling into the dirt. And then afterwards, when the adoring crowds cleared, she was always reminded of how false that illusion was. Caius would sell her to whatever noble or magister
desired her that night. Her virginity had fetched the highest price in decades after she won the
games at Satinalia at 15. She was their newest, shiniest toy and everyone wanted a turn. Caius, who
had anticipated all this fervor over her, the bastard, had spent the previous year making her learn
the arts of seduction, along with her weaponry and mage training. Talented and desired, indeed.
Her only consolation was that Ellana was spared all of this.

Ellana. Her sweet, feisty little sister. She had, of course, learned to hide her spirit years ago. It was
necessary for survival. Ellana stood by, learning to heal all sorts of wounds and cure 41 different
kinds of poisons and pretty much every training injury possible. She was Aerin’s rock, and
supported her big sister as best as she could. In turn, Aerin was the perfect slave. She refused her
masters nothing, giving them her complete adoration and obeisance. To the point where she had all
but lost her soul.

“It’s not worth it!” Ellana had sobbed one day about 4 years ago. One of the newer slaves had
been caught trying to escape, and Erebus decided Aerin would handle the punishment. Aerin,
terrified for Ellana as usual, had unflinchingly agreed. Aerin was gone for hours that night. When
she returned in the graying dawn, covered in a multitude of dried blood splatters, Ellana almost
didn’t recognize her anymore. Gone was the spark in her eyes. Her smooth, graceful lilt turned
into a harsh, grating thing. Her fluid movements had become jerky and forced. Ellana was so
scared she had lost her for good. “I’m not worth it!” she collapsed sobbing on her cot. “I’m so
useless. A-all I am is a weight around your ankle, a noose around your neck. You’d be better off if I
was dead!” A resounding slap echoed through the room. Ellana raised her head in shock, her left
cheek already turning bright red.

“Don’t you dare say that!” Aerin grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. “I never want to
hear you say that again! You are the only thing keeping me alive, do you understand? You are the
one thing in my life I am allowed to choose. Everything else is decided for us! But every day, I can
make the choice to protect you by own free will. And so everyday, I get to sleep knowing I’m still
my own person. I’m still Aerin, not Seraphina. And as long as I have you, I will always be Aerin.
Otherwise, I lose myself.” She let go of the younger girl’s shoulders and slumped to the ground.
“My own soul is already cursed. Let me at least protect yours,” she whispered, a haunted look in
bright blue-gold eyes. Ellana let her tears roll down her pale cheeks. She kneeled next to Aerin and
wrapped her arms around her.

“I’m sorry sister. I spoke without thinking. I will never leave you.” The girls had sat like that until
dawn finally broke through the bars of their room’s window.

Aerin shook her head to clear her brain of the memory, and cast her eyes about the room.
“Leonius? Are you in here?”

A rough voice called out to her from the back. “Aye, girl, back here.” Aerin made her way to the
back of the armory when Leonius kept all his pet projects. She gasped.

“Oh, is that mine? Please say it is! It’s gorgeous!” Aerin stared in awe. The leather was an icy,
almost white, light blue shade, tooled with inscriptions all long the edges. Silverite fastenings
veritably sparkled off the smooth leather. She reached out to run her slender, callused fingers along
the surface. The outside felt almost like metal, but it was ever so slightly flexible, and the inside
was padded and lined with the softest wool encased in linen. It was luxurious. Nothing but the best
for the Victorem.

He chuckled. “Pretty piece of work, ain’t it? You’re gonna look like a picture, that’s for sure,
riding along down the Imperial Highway.” He paused, and cast a furtive glance about. “So,
where’s your first stop? Vol Dorma, right?”
Aerin nodded, curious at his behavior. “Yes. Vol Dorma to Vyrantium, then down to Perivantium. Back north to Marothius, Neromenian, Carastes, then finishing in Qarinus. All in all, I should be gone almost the whole rest of the year.”

Leonius whistled. “That’s a long journey. Gonna miss you.” She smiled fondly at the old man. He had become the closest thing to a father figure here in the last 7 years. He gave her a serious look. “Perivantium, you say? The road to there is sparsely populated. Pretty close to Nevarra. Only a day’s ride away you know. Maybe 3 if you had to walk it. Pretty dense forest on the border there. Think I recall tales of a Dalish clan that wandered the northern Nevarran hills too.” Aerin narrowed her eyes at him. “Ah, but listen to me ramble. Here, try this on. Need to make a few adjustments. Looks like you’ve finally stopped growing, so hopefully this will be the last set I make you.” Aerin felt her heart racing under her thin cotton tunic.

Shit. Is he hinting what I think he is? Is it possible? Thoughts scattered across her mind like dust in the wind. She remained silent for the rest of her time there, barely murmuring her thanks and farewell as she slipped out into the training yard. Best think of it later.

She schooled her face into the impassive front she was used to displaying, going about her training for the rest of the day. She bowed and simpered before Doctore, sparred with Iduma, ate her supper in the mess hall, and moved through her mobility exercises at the end of the day. All like normal. She was dying to get to Ellana.

When the gong for curfew finally sounded, it was all she could do to not sprint to their room. Forcing herself to steadily walk as she always did, she measured her steps. Was our room always this far away? She nodded to Iduma and her mute sister in the room next to theirs, waved to Haliel and his brother in the room across the hall. Pushing the heavy wooden door open into their small cell, she found Ellana reading a large bound book about surgeries. She perked up when Aerin ambled in. “Look! Atticus is going to start having me assist in surgeries from now on. Isn’t that great?” Aerin mindlessly nodded and sat heavily on the edge of the bed. “Aerin? What’s wrong?”

Aerin gazed across the room at Ellana. My little sister. Well, not so little anymore. The best damn healer out there, Aerin was positive. But useless when it came to fighting. Could we really do this? An 18 year old dragging a 13 year old through unfamiliar woods and hills? Outrunning mages and guards? This is suicide. Aerin groaned in frustration and dug the heels of her hands into her eyes. No. This is our shot. Possible our only chance. If we fail, at least we tried. She looked up at Ellana, who sat there, twirling her dark mahogany colored hair through her fingers, studiously. Aerin bit her chapped lower lip and leaned closer. “Ellana, there might be chance for us to escape,” she whispered. Ellana jerked up straight, her mouth wide open. “It’s risky, obviously, but on the road, before we get to Perivantium. It’s only a day’s ride away from Nevarra. We get to Nevarra, we can get lost in the woods. Da’len, there’s a Dalish clan that wanders northern Nevarra. We can find them, find out where your clan is. We could take you home.”

Ellana blinked. And blinked. They stared at each other. With each second that passed, Aerin could feel her earlier confidence slip away. Maybe this is a stupid idea. It is a stupid idea. Damn it, why didn’t I just-

“Yes.” Aerin sucked a sharp breath in. “Creators, yes.”

“Are you absolutely sure Ellana? You know what will happen if we’re caught. They’ll… you’ll…”

“I know.” She fidgeted with her fingertips, looking down. “I know. But all these years, you’ve taken the burden of my safety on yourself. I want to do this. We could both be free. My clan would take us both in. We could have a family, a home. That chance is worth everything.” Home. Funny
how such a simple word can mean so much. Before, it was a word Aerin took for granted. Something she assumed would always be there. Until it wasn’t. She idly rubbed her arms.

"Does it still hurt?"

Aerin shook her head and lied. "No, not really." The binding. A elven body laid over a human figure. It wasn't an illusion. It was as if her real body had been vacuum sealed into a plastic bag. There was always a tinge of mild suffocation. Her skin felt as if it would rip at any second, her organs bursting through the seams. She convinced herself that she was used to it by now, as nothing eased the pain. Ellana smiled slightly. “Do you remember Vir Tanadhal?”

*The Way of Three Trees.* Aerin kept her gaze riveted on Ellana. “Vir Assan, Vir Bor’assan, Vir Adahlen. The Way of the Arrow- fly straight and do not waver. The Way of the Bow- bend but never break. The Way of the Forest- together we are stronger than the one.” They grinned at each other. Andruil’s tenets were perfect for them. Aerin felt a minuscule bubble of hope rising again. “Ok, ok. These next few months will be crucial. We leave the first of Nubulis. That’s 6 weeks away. If anyone suspects anything, it’s over.” Ellana nodded decisively. “Ok. We need to start planning then. I’ll find out who’s in the guard. How much blood lotus can you get your hands on without anyone suspecting? And ghoul’s beard and dragonthorn?”

Ellana pursed her lips. “Depends on how many doses I need to make. I can boil it down though. Make a super concentrated solution. The last two might be a little harder. Should we pack anything in advance?”

Aerin shook her head. “No, they’d find it and suspect. When we run, we’ll have to make do with what we have on hand. Ok. Here’s what I’m thinking so far.”

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Six weeks passed like Antivan molasses in a Seheron heat wave. Agonizingly slow and suffocating. Ellana felt like she was balancing on the tip of a needle. One too quick glance away, one uncoordinated movement, anything to cause suspicion that she was hiding something- it’d all be over. Aerin was good at hiding her thoughts from the others. She’d been doing it since they were brought here. Ellana, on the other hand, was left mostly to train with the healer Atticus, so she never had need of hiding her emotions. Atticus could care less if she was in a foul mood or not, as long as she paid attention and learned and didn't talk back. So their entire plan hinged on her acting ability. Ellana hid mostly. Buried her nose in her books. Spent time mixing potions and tonics, chopping and drying reagents, washing and labeling flasks. Anything to keep her hands busy.

The first of Nebulis dawned overcast and cool. Spring had arrived in Tevinter, the smell of rain permeating the air. The cool respite wouldn’t last long. The wet heat of summer would soon descend upon the coastal nation, but Creators willing, they would never see it. Ellana finished putting the last of her clothes into the leather satchel she was permitted to bring. Her healer bag full of reagents and potions and tools was already stowed securely on a horse. Horses. She was terrified of them. They were so much… more than the halla she remembered. Cinching her bag shut, she glanced on their tiny room once more, before firmly shutting the door and spinning away. She nodded to Iduma’s sister and Haliel, who were making their way to their own posts for the day. Haliel called out, “Safe travels! I’ll be looking forward to hearing about your worldly adventures when you return.” Ellana found herself unable to respond. Instead, she sketched a grand bow and gave him an impudent grin and wink before rushing out the barracks door. Jogging across the training yard into the courtyard, she found Aerin already waiting, tying the last of the bags onto the horses. Caius would travel in his own carriage with 2 of his personal slaves, surrounded by 6 guardsmen and 2 mages, each mounted on their own horse. Aerin had her own horse for the
procession in and out each city, but would be expected to ride doubled up with a guard on the road. Ellana as well. She thanked every Elvhen god she could think of and the humans’ Maker and Andraste for good measure that Erebus would not be accompanying them. If he came, she wasn’t sure either of them would have the nerve to even attempt an escape. He would stay behind with the other fighters. As she handed Aerin her bag, Caius swept out of the side tower door, yawning. “Are we all set then?”

The head guard bowed, “Yes, Lanista. Everything is set for departure.” Caius nodded and climbed into his waiting carriage. Giving a lazy go ahead motion with his hand, he settled himself into the plush velvet seat and closed his eyes. The guard saluted again, then motioned at Aerin to mount his horse. Grabbing the saddle, she swung herself up into the saddle, surprisingly graceful for someone who only had the barest knowledge of horseback riding. The other guard had to shove Ellana up onto his horse, limbs awkwardly askew. He grunted.

“We’ll have to work on that slave.” Ellana nervously nodded.

“Yes, sir.” With the guards settled securely in front of each girl, the rest of the procession filed into formation. First stop, Vol Dorma. Then, Nevarra. Or torture and inevitable mind control and death. Whichever came first.

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The Imperial Highway to Vol Dorma reminded Aerin of the causeways in ancient Rome back on Earth. Light beige stone was set smoothly against each other into the ground, making for a pretty comfortable ride. The sound of the horses’ hooves clapping against the road was almost soothing to her. Almost. Hour by hour, the pit in her stomach grew and grew until she was certain the Lanista could hear how nervous she was. She was thankful there were two layers of armor between her and the guard in front of her so that he couldn’t tell how hard her heart was beating. Can’t let it get to me. Still have to fight in Vol Dorma. Still have to make it out of the city to the crossroads. Breathe. Summoning the mental image of the flame in her mind was second nature now. Funneling all her turbulent emotions into the flame, she felt her body relax and her mind clear. Instead, she thought of the Dalish. How happy Ellana’s clan would be to see their lost child again. How happy Elle would be to be back with her people, where she belonged. How safe she would be. No more being used as bait for Aerin. She allowed herself the tiniest of smiles. “Something amusing slave?” the guard next to her spat.

“Just excited to be seeing the rest of Tevinter, sir. And I’m excited to fight in Vol Dorma.” She kept her voice low, her tone demure, just how they liked it. He sniffed.

“Nothing holds a candle to the beauty of Minrathous. Although I’m sure a simpleton like yourself wouldn’t know the difference. Backwater cesspools, all of them.”

“Eh, Qarinus is pretty grand. My cousin lives there. Likes it ok,” another guard shrugged. Aerin tuned them out as the men began to banter back and forth on the definition of grand and debating the legitimacy of each other’s bloodlines.

Aerin forced all thoughts of their escape out of her mind as they reached Vol Dorma. It was large enough to still be called a city, but barely. Aerin perched on her horse, the chestnut mare prancing her legs high, almost dancing down the main thoroughfare. Crowds lined the road, eager to get a glimpse of the Victorem and see her legendary beauty. Beauty bought with blood magic. There was something ironic about the crowds celebrating an elf. Would anyone here care that I’m actually human I wonder? Aerin was sure they would all pretend to be scandalized. After all, blood magic and sacrifices were technically frowned illegal. But anything for the price of power. Since one’s station in life was all that mattered after all. She flexed her hands on the rain, feeling the skin pull
Giving a well rehearsed coy smile, and keeping her eyes solemn, she held her head high, catching the glances of the elves in the crowd. Every single one gazed up at her with disgust and hate. Some had the appearance of jealousy etched across their visages. If they only knew.

The battles were scheduled for all 5 days of the celebration. Local gladiators fought each other in smaller skirmishes throughout the afternoon, with the last slot of the day going to Aerin and whatever helpless sod chosen to face her. They all ended up facing the dirt. Aerin mercilessly teased and mocked her opponents, driving them into a clouded rage—how dare this young female ridicule me? I am a great big strong man, infinitely more powerful and experienced and blah blah blah. They each fell to their knees and grudgingly saluted her at the end. Hubris, she thought. What a bitch.

The last night, the feasting carried on into the small hours of the morning. Aerin, dressed in a sheer sky blue gossamer gown that concealed nothing, kneeled beside the governor and his magister wife, feeding them grapes and orange slices while the assembled party toasted her victories. This part of the party is always weird. All hail the slave. The magister, inordinately drunk on copious amounts of wine, ran her hands up and down Aerin’s toned thighs. “Pleasure me, slave,” she slurried. Her husband smiled indulgently down at his wife. Creators. Here? Now? Fucking ‘Vints.

“It would be my pleasure, lady magister.” Last fucking time.

Chapter End Notes

Getting more into the swing of writing. Hopefully my action scenes and dialogue will get less awkward soon.
They had left the city with much less fanfare than they had entered with. Caius napped comfortably for most of the day, sleeping away his hangover. Aerin sat, seemingly relaxed and at peace against the head guard’s back. Ellana stared at nothing, lost in her own thoughts. The guards were in a sour mood, bitter about being on the road again away from all their creature comforts. Two more days until they reached the first crossroads where the Imperial Highway split. The main road would continue east to Perivantium. One leg would branch off south. To Nevarra.

Aerin spent the next 48 hours obsessively rehearsing their plan. When they camped tonight, Ellana would spike the guards’ and mages’ wine with the essence she had distilled from blood lotus, ghoul’s beard, and dragonthorn, stored safely in a hidden pocket sewn into her smalls. Aerin would poison Caius’ wine. The concoction would cause the men to fall into a deep slumber for at least 15 minutes, and cause them severe burning pain and hallucinations upon waking for another hour or two. As soon as that was done, Aerin would knock out the accompanying slaves, grab Ellana and their bags, steal a horse, and ride south on the highway. It was a simple plan. Ellana had asked before why they didn’t just kill them all after dosing the men. “Because,” Aerin had replied. “If we just escape, that’s only on the Lanista to retrieve us. If we kill them, that’s murder under Tevinter law and we will be ruthlessly hunted across Thedas for the rest of our lives.” Killing them would be a last resort for sure.

Dusk started to settle on the horizon. Aerin was paralyzed in place on the saddle, counting down the seconds til they made camp. *Come on. Come ON. Why aren’t we stopping? We always stop at twilight!* She began to panic, maybe somehow had figured it out? Maybe they knew? Maybe it was a trap set up by Leonius? No, he wouldn’t have done that. Would he? As the dread accumulated in her throat, Aerin fought the urge to scream and run. She glanced over at Ellana, who was rigidly mimicking Aerin’s exact same posture and expression.

Just as soon as Aerin was about to snap and hit the guard in front of her in frustration, one of the mages called out, “How much further to the inn?”

“Another hour should be.”

“It will be such a relief to sleep on an actual bed tonight. I do despise sleeping on the ground like a barbarian.”

*An inn?! Are we staying in separate rooms? Will we even be in a room? Will they lock us in?* Millions of questions flooded her mind. *Is our chance gone?* Ellana’s eyes caught Aerin’s, wide and beseeching. Aerin gave an imperceptible shake of her head. *Wait and see. We’ll figure something out.*

The lights of the inn glowed warmly against the dark sky. Travelers could be seen milling about outside, laughing and drinking and smoking with each other. Aerin could hear the guttural accents of the Nevarran merchants, mixing with the cultured voices of the Tevinters, with even a Starkhaven brogue chiming in. The horses cantered into the courtyard and headed left to where the stables were situated. Soon as the guard in front of her dismounted, Aerin lifted her leg and slid down to the ground. And waited. Caius, the senior mage, 2 guards and his slaves proceeded into the smoky interior of the tavern. The other mage and 4 remaining guards eyed Aerin and Ellana distastefully. “In you go, slaves,” one snapped, motioning for the stables. Aerin grabbed Ellana’s
hand and all but dragged her inside the stables, making for an empty stall. “No, not the stall, stupid bint, the loft,” he sighed exasperatedly. Aerin glanced back and saw the ladder tucked into the back of the entrance room. She bowed her head and murmured an apology. She grabbed the smooth rungs of the ladder, hauling herself up, Ellana scrambling behind her. The loft was clean at least, fresh hay spread around the old wooden floor. Ellana set down the bedrolls in a row and began unpacking rations from their packs for their evening meal. The guards and mage clambered up soon after.

“Can’t believe we’re stuck out here with these slaves when there’s a warm, hot meal in there,” one muttered.

“Quit your whining, you just can’t go more than a day without getting your dick wet.”

“Can you blame me? Haven’t you noticed how handsome I am? Why ever should I sleep alone? Maybe I’ll just go bring a wench up here for a roll instead.”

“Lanista will have your balls if you do. Protecting his precious gladiator is his main priority.”

“Then why isn’t she in there with them?”

“Tavern’s full for the night. Lots of travelers going to Minrathous for the Spring Festival.” With a theatrical groan, the complaining guard slumped against the rough wooden loft wall.

“Venhedis.” His dark eyes locked onto Aerin. “Fine. I’ll just have to find something else to keep me occupied tonight, won’t I, precious Seraphina?” Aerin grit her teeth and lowered her head.

“Of course, sir.”

The other guard snorted. “At least wait til after supper. Someone’s bringing food out.” Aerin perked up. Full bellies make for relaxed men. I can’t get to Caius and the other mage inside. But maybe I don’t need to? If we can incapacitate these, sneak down and snatch a horse, can we still make it?

She walked over to Ellana.

“You can put the food back, da’len. They’re sending food out.” Ellana nodded in relief. More food meant less time they would have to waste hunting and gathering while they searched for the Dalish. She quickly set to repacking the food, deftly rearranging nonessential items into one pack, and distributing the food between Aerin’s and her clothing satchels. If a guard glanced over, it would appear as if she was just reorganizing things.

An hour later, everyone was well fed and contentedly sprawled out across the floor. The night had grown still and silent outside the stables. Two of the guards were playing dice, the mage was deeply engrossed in a tome of some sort, and the other two guards were laying down, resting. The lecherous one from earlier turned to the girls with a leer. “Seraphina, remove your armor and come here.”

Aerin rose smoothly. “Would my lords prefer a glass of wine first?” she queried as she unfastened her leather armor, standing clad only in a cotton tunic and leather leggings. The pale blue armor was too noticeable to take anyways. At the word ‘wine’, all the men roused.

“Excellent idea, slave,” the mage responded.

“Aerin, come help me. Get the cups,” Aerin instructed. “It will just be a moment, sirs.” She turned to where the luggage was at the back of the room. Ellana grabbed the cups and the flagon of wine and passed it to Aerin in trembling hands. Don’t spill don’t spill don’t spill. Aerin poured the wine slowly into each cup, willing her hands to not betray her. Deftly producing the vial of distilled
poison from under her clothes, Ellana carefully dropped a teaspoon in each cup. Collecting the cups, the elves rose and passed it to the eager men. Aerin and Ellana both backed away, kneeling, balancing on their toes, heads bowed but eyes patiently raised and waiting.

A minute passed. The mage yawned. He grumbled, “Please do try be quiet when engaging with the whore. I do not wish to be pulled from the Fade tonight.” Another guard yawned a few minutes later.

“ Balls, I guess I’m more tired than I thought.” One by one, each man nodded off. Aerin swiftly bolted upright as soon as the last one closed his eyes and slumped to the ground. She and Ellana both snatched their packs, two sets of daggers from the unconscious guards, and two of their cloaks. Padding softly across the loft, they reached the ladder and froze at the sound of one of the guards stirring. They both stared at the man. He shifted a bit, but remained otherwise oblivious. Aerin didn’t dare breathe as she continued to slide down the ladder, pausing to survey the stables. *Kaffas! I forgot about the horses! They’re all unsaddled. I’ve never dressed a horse before!* Wildly flinging her eyes about, she ran through options in her head. *Set out on foot? Bareback? Do I try saddling one and risk it falling off as we run?* Ellana nudged her pointedly in her side, pointing outside the stables. Tied to a wooden post was a solitary horse, all prepared to leave. Some hapless traveler’s then. They raced silently to the door, bundles clutched in their fingers, slipping out into the dark yard. The torches from the inn cast long shadows across the grounds, hiding them as they crept along the edge of the stable to the opposite side where the horse was. Aerin held up her hand for the horse to sniff while Ellana lashed their bags to the back of the saddle. The horse gently huffed Aerin’s palm, but otherwise remained unaffected by his new companions. They both swung their cloaks over their shoulders, the coarse material completely drowning their small frames. And hiding them from prying eyes. Aerin ungracefully heaved herself into the saddle, reaching down to grab the reins from Ellana, and hoisted the younger elf up behind her.

“Hold on tight,” she hissed. She flicked the reins and prayed this was the correct signal for the horse to placidly walk. They couldn’t draw attention ‘til after they left the courtyard. The horse remained still. “Come on, pleease!” she begged, squeezing her knees together. At that, the horse lurched into a fast clip. Ellana’s arms held her waist in a death grip, her heart pounding in counterpoint with Aerin’s. Neither could hide their violent trembling now. They both kept their head down, praying to all the powers that were to let them pass unnoticed. *Almost to the gate. Almost. A few more feet and-*

“Hold!” Aerin instinctively sat back and jerked on the reins. The horse stopped mid-trot. She felt Ellana’s hands move from her waist. A guard approached them. “Mighty late at night for you to be leaving, isn’t it? What’s the trouble?”

Aerin lowered her voice an octave and affected what she hoped passed for a Nevarran accent. “I received unfortunate word from home just earlier, good sir. My father is ill and I must depart now.”

“Oh really?” The guard leaned in closer. “Why don’t you lift that hood and let me get a good look at you?” Aerin was distraught. She slowly lifted her head and-

“FUCK! You little-“ the man dropped. Ellana shoved the stopper back into the vial of poison. *Did she throw it in his face?* Ellana pinched Aerin’s arm.

“Go!” Right. Escape. No time to check if someone heard that. They probably did. Aerin dug her knees into the horse’s flank, hard. The horse immediately set off in a canter, then broke into a gallop 100 paces outside of the tavern gate. She could hear shouts behind as they raced south along the Imperial Highway. *They know something is wrong. How long before Caius finds us gone?* She almost felt sorry for the unconscious guards they left behind. How angry Caius would
be at them. Aerin wolfishly grinned through her fear. *Ha, sorry for them. That’s a good one. My only regret is that I won’t witness their punishment.*

After they got a mile or so down the road, they loosened their cloaks and cast them off. The long, heavy material would just trip them up in the woods. It was warm enough during the day, and hopefully at night, they could find shelter, a warm hole under a tree perhaps. If not, they had each other. Miles passed by in a blur. Eventually, the horse began slowing down. Aerin glanced around. The woods were fairly dense to their left. Good as place as any to start. She pulled the horse up. “There, there boy. You’ve done enough. Ellana, let’s go.” They both slithered down the beast’s side, acutely aware of how tired and sore they were, pausing just long enough to grab their bags. They patted the horse on his nose, then Aerin slapped him rump, sending him cantering south to Trevis. They slipped into the woods. “We need to get deep into the woods tonight. Guards are probably only 30 minutes behind, at most.” She glanced at her little sister. Adrenaline had worn off. Exhaustion would set in soon. It would kill them. Ellana shook off her fatigue and gave her a determined nod. Jogging lightly through the moonlit trees, they tried their best to only step on leaves and moss, leaving as small of a trail as they could manage. If only they were both trained as the Dalish. Then they could fly through the foods, invisible like a deer. Or halla.

The sky began to lighten. Ellana stumbled once, then twice. Aerin sighed. “Sorry,” Ellana mumbled, rubbing her tired eyes. Aerin shook her head.

“It’s ok. You did good so far. We need a place to rest. Look for a hole or something where we can hide.” A few minutes of poking around yielded a sheltered copse surrounding a larger oak tree. The roots had worn away an indentation just big enough for the two girls to squeeze into. Stuffing their bags into the hollow, they settled themselves in, pulling up small branches and scattering dead leaves over their bodies to conceal themselves. Finally, as the sun began to peek over the far horizon, they slept.

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Aerin wrenched herself awake with a violent lurch, expecting to find themselves surrounded by guards. Instead, there was silence. The late afternoon sun cast broken golden rays that filtered through the tree leaves across the entrance to their little sanctuary. She listened. Still nothing except the sounds of birds. She’d have to ask Ellana too. Elven hearing, from real elven ears, were so much sharper than hers. She didn’t have to wait long. Ten minutes later, Ellana stirred. She gave Aerin a sleepy smile, before her eyes flew wide open. Aerin smiled back. “What can you hear?” she whispered.

Ellana closed her eyes, ears slightly twitching as she concentrated. “Small animals. Birds. Light breeze. No footsteps or shouting. No breathing around us either, as far as I can tell.” Aerin nodded thoughtfully. She reached behind them to wiggle her pack free, unpacking some jerky and dry bread for both of them. As they munched, Aerin talked.

“I supposed we’ll keep heading east and slightly south. I’d feel better if we were farther away from the border. The Dalish are supposed to wander the northern hills, so we should be close. If we can’t find them, we can keep going east ‘til we reach Starkhaven and the Free Marches. Rations should last us another week at least. Then we’ll have to hunt. Or try to at least.” Aerin grimaced. It’d be easier if they had a bow. Tracking down a rabbit or squirrel or something with just daggers sounded like it would be ridiculously frustrating for two inexperienced hunters. Did they even have rabbits and squirrels here? She didn’t recall seeing anything like that in Tevinter. “We’ll set out again when the sun sets.” Eyes crinkling, Ellana grinned.

“We did it Aerin. We made it!” Aerin contemplated her cautiously.
“Not in the clear yet, Elle. Stay focused, ok? We don’t know if they’re tracking us or not. They could be following our trail right now.” She felt bad about scaring Ellana, but fear was good. Fear made you sharper, more aware. They needed every ounce of their senses about them to reach safety. As the light began to darken, they slipped out of their little hole and relieved themselves. Glancing at the sun, Aerin erased her signs of their little camp and set their course for southeast.

And so they traveled for the next 9 days. They had managed to stretch their rations out until the night before. But now they were hungry and cranky. Even as slaves, they had been accustomed to regular meals. Aerin especially was used to being fed well. Once, they had heard voices calling to each other. Petrified, they had ran the only direction they could think. Up. They shimmied up into a tall, leafy tree and breathlessly waited for the voices to pass. Not Common. Not Tevene. Nevarran then? The voices seemed calm, bantering in a friendly tone. They didn't sound like they were searching for two escaped slaves. Maybe just hunters? Regardless of who they were, the girls decided to stay up in that tree, terror-stricken and hidden, for a full day. Only when the voices had been gone for good 14 hours did they let themselves down. And now their food was out. Ellana tried to remember which mushrooms and roots were edible. After just one painful sample of an innocent looking caramel brown fungus, she gave up. Aerin glared at her. “I thought Dalish were all taught these things!” she growled as she clutched her belly, writhing on the dirt.

Ellana threw her hands up. “I told you not eat it yet! I said, hey Aerin, I think this is edible but I'm not sure, and you went and popped it in your big mouth! Gah! And I was 5! It’s been 8 years! What did you expect?” Aerin had just moaned pitifully in response. So now the starving warrior perched on a low branch, waiting for an unsuspecting furry woodland creature to stop by.

“Can’t you Dalish summon forest animals with your mind or something?” she muttered. Ellana just rolled her eyes. Finally, a small pig bunny thing snuffled out into the clearing. Aerin crouched, daggers glinting in the fading sunlight. Closer, closer… She leapt out of the tree, aimed for the animal and-

Missed. It squeaked and skittered off into the brush. “Te odeo! Fututus et mori in igni! Interface te cochleare!” Aerin shouted obscenities at the offending bunny pig. Ellana groaned. Another voice snorted. Aerin snatched up her daggers in less than a heartbeat and spun around. “Who’s there?” she hissed. Slowly scanning the clearing, she saw nothing. No movement, no clothing, no skin. No, there! She spotted something. Two bright violet eyes that were observing her in amusement. Moving herself into a deceptively relaxed stance, Aerin waited. Ellana jumped down from the tree to sidle up behind her back. The eyes popped out of the bramble, and an elf stepped into the clearing.

“That was the worst attempt at hunting I’ve seen in my life. Wasn’t it, Alhren?” Another elf materialized out of thing air to stand next to the first elf.

“Aye,” he chuckled. “Made for excellent entertainment. So why are two city elves out here anywhere? Trying to play at being Dalish?” Aerin studied them. They were short, about the same height as her, maybe a little shorter, as was typical of most elves. They were wearing lightweight, dark leather armor that blended in perfectly with the forest. A bow made of a gleaming grayish-white material was strapped across their back. Bone? No, wood? And both bore tattoos on their faces. The one called Alhren had stylized branches that framed his forehead and temples. The other had an arrow that pointed up from the tip of his nose to the center of his forehead, with darker lines drawing a circuit over his brow, down his cheeks, to his lips. These were the vallaslin Ellana had told her about, which meant-

These were the Dalish. They had found them.
Ellana recovered from her shock first. Straightening her slender figure, she held up a hand in greeting. “Andaran atish’an. I am Ellana of Clan Lavellan. This is my sister, Aerin. We have been searching for the Dalish in hopes I can reunite with my clan. We’ve just escaped Tevinter.” The both raised their brows, visibly startled, clearly not expecting that answer. They glanced at each other.

“I am Kadueil, this is Alhren. We are hunters for Clan Alerion. You may accompany us back to our keeper, if you so wish.”

“Ma serannas, hunters. We will follow.” And with that, Ellana gave Aerin the most blinding smile she had ever seen in her life. *All will be well now.*

Chapter End Notes

Te odeo- I hate you
Fututus et mori in igni- Fuck off and die in a fire
Interface te cochleare- Kill yourself with a spoon

Poor nug.

I don't really have a set posting schedule. I'm aiming for twice a week, or at least once, but I have a toddler who is as we speak on my lap chanting waffle into my ear and trying to stuff a toy frog into my eye socket. So we'll see. The Blight starts soon! And everyone's favorite ex-templar Grey Warden is appearing soon. :D
The winds picked up as they trekked on. The cold wind cut through flimsy cotton, setting off a chain reaction of shivers neither girl could stop. Kadueil glanced back from in front them, with something akin to pity in his eyes. “We’ll get you something warmer when we reach the others. You should have brought thicker clothing with you.”

“We couldn’t,” Aerin responded flatly. She didn’t quite trust them yet. She was unsure what would happen when they reached camp. Would the Keeper welcome them? Refuse aid? Tie them up and turn them over to the nearest guard? At the very least, she would ensure that Ellana would be safe. Surely they would take her, seeing as how she was Dalish. Right? Ellana had told her that Dalish clans acted independently of one another. Some clans, like Lavellan, interacted and traded peacefully with humans. Other clans guarded their lands fiercely and killed all outsiders on sight. Which type of clan was this? She watched Ellana prance along to her right, the young adolescent oblivious to her sister's inner torment, all but skipping behind the hunters. At least someone was confident.

The trees grew sparse as they reached the top of an incline overlooking a large clearing near the edge of the woods. Beyond the treeline, small boulders dotted rolling hills covered in sharp, dead grasses as far as the eye could see. The open lands made Aerin’s heart pound. No cover, nowhere to hide. If she had to strike out on her own, and Caius was still tracking her, she’d be a sitting duck. Down below, graceful wagons of differing sizes were scattered amongst the trees. No, not wagons. They’re almost like ships. The larger ones had up to six wheels, while the smaller ones had only 2. A series of pale yellow triangular sails were strung up on slender masts above the ship-wagons.

“Oh, aravels!” Ellana squealed. “Aerin, I told you about these, remember? Oh it’s been so long.” She sighed happily, gazing at the aravels, a happy tear slipping down her face. Aerin smiled and wrapped one arm around her shoulders.

“They’re beautiful,” she murmured, turning to press her lips against her head. “Are those the halla over there?” A group of pure white deer creatures with huge, silvery intertwining antlers milled around the camp, coming and going as they pleased, not tied down or penned up as horses were. Ellana nodded.

“They hurry up!” Alhren called. They hurried down the slope to the largest aravel, conscious of the people that were gathering to watch them. The elves stopped in surprise, some with open suspicion and hostility, and silently watched the two girls walk through camp. All of the adults wore similar vallaslin to the two hunters. The children and teens were barefaced still. Most were dressed in similar clothing to each other, natural colored long sleeve tops and leggings out of leather. No one wore boots; instead, feet were wrapped in cloth strips, ineffective as it seemed against the chill of the ground. A few wore armor, similar to Kadueil’s and Alhren’s, interlocking hardened leather strips that reminded Aerin of leaves. She could also see bows and daggers made out of the same pale wood as well. Wooden daggers? They stopped in front of a large crackling fire, where an older man dressed in a pale gray robe, his long white hair pulled back into a ponytail, waited. He ran his rough fingers over the surface of a gnarled wooden staff in his hands. The two hunters approached.

“Alhren, Kadueil. You have returned from your watch early. And brought guests, it seems.” They gave a half bow.
“Yes, Keeper. We found these two wandering rather helplessly in the forest.” Aerin bit back a scowl. “They say they were searching for us. The younger one claims to be of Lavellan.”

The Keeper regarded them closely, holding their gazes with his bright green eyes. “Andaran atish’an, daughter of Lavellan. You are a long way from home. Come, sit by the fire. Cyril, bring them both a blanket. They’re both severely undressed for the hills.” An elf about the same age as Ellana darted to a nearby aravel, digging around for a minute, before returning with two thick woolen blankets. Aerin murmured her thanks before lifting the first one and wrapping it around Ellana’s shoulders. Giving her a small shove in the direction of the fire, she turned back to take the second blanket and settled it around herself, sighing at the warmth. It was almost perfect. The Keeper arranged himself on a cushion nearby, waiting until all were settled comfortably, clutching steaming mugs of elfroot tea.

“I am called Tirshinan, Keeper of Clan Alerion. This is Cyril, my First. Would you care to tell me your story?”

Ellana glanced at Aerin, who briefly paused, then nodded. Ellana turned back to the Keeper. “Eight years ago, my clan was camped in the Free Marches. I don’t recall the town, but they didn’t have enough arrows. By the time the Tevinters were upon us, it was too late. They killed 2 and took the rest.” Ellana hesitated, lost in memory. Tirshinan gazed up at the sky.

“I remember your Keeper, Deshanna, telling me about this at the Arlathvhen six years ago. Your story is, to my knowledge true.” Aerin slightly frowned. Why would they think we were lying? He glanced at Aerin. “Ah, da’len. We must always be on guard against the tricks of humans. They are not comfortable with our presence here.”

“And what of you?”

Aerin pondered the question. Do I tell him I’m from another world? Would he think I’m lying? Would Ellana? She pulled her knees under her chin and stared into the fire. “I was 11 when they took me. I… I’m sorry, I really can’t remember much from before. There was an accident of some sort, and when I woke up, I was lying in a cage along with Ellana and several others. They took us all to a ship bound for Minrathous, where she and I were sold to a gladiator school. I was compelled to fight and Ellana served as my healer. Two weeks ago, we managed to escape our master and his guards on the road to Perivantium. One of my fellow slaves, a Ferelden, told me that a Dalish clan roamed this area and so we thought to try to find you. Or make our way into the Free Marches.”

The Keeper’s sharp eyes bored into Aerin’s soul. She watched him from where she was slumped over the tops of her knees, then slowly straightened her spine and met his gaze evenly. He smiled. “I sense the Fade around you, da’len. It’s curious. It presses in against your aura, and yet is restrained by darkness, as if held back by a dam. You are a mage?”

She nodded. “The barrier… my magic was restrained. I was more powerful than they wished me to be.” He breathed in sharply.

“Blood magic.” She closed her eyes and let her head fall. “It is alright, child. I will not fault you for things beyond your control.” She made a small noise. “You have cared for each other these long years.”

Ellana gave her a sweet smile as she answered Tirshinan. “We are sisters.” Aerin pulled her close and kissed the top of her dirty hair. Laying her cheek against her head, Aerin spoke.

“Keeper, we do not mean to impose long on your clan. Allow us to rest a bit, and we will set off further east to find Ellana’s clan.” He shook his head.
“No, da’len, that will never do.” *Oh*, she thought disappointed. “You shall travel with us.” *Oh!*
“We can take you as far as Starkhaven. From there, you will be able to find Clan Lavellan. You are a woman grown, but still a child in the ways of the land. Travel with us, and we shall teach you.”

Ellana’s face lit up like a child on Christmas morning. *Satinalia. Whatever.* Aerin felt the tidal wave of relief crash down over her. “Keeper, we would be most grateful. But we would not wish to burden your people.”

“We are the same people, of the People. We have much to teach you, it seems.”

Aerin bowed her head. “I am willing to learn.”

Smiling, he stood up, brushing debris off his robes. “A wise answer. Our clan is heading east anyways. We usually pause at Hasmal, but Starkhaven is not much farther. From there, we will be able to get you on a boat down the Minanter to the village of Braemore. If you follow the Alban River north, you will find Clan Lavellan. They are always in northeastern part of the country for the summer equinox.” Ellana squealed and threw her arms around Aerin.

“Home!” she exclaimed giggling. Aerin smiled. It wouldn’t be home for her, but it would be start.

***

It would take almost exactly two months to reach Starkhaven. The weeks passed by almost like a dream. Aerin trained with the hunters, teaching them to fight with dual swords while they showed her how to track and hunt. She would never be a master archer or hunter, being far too impatient, but she wouldn’t starve either. Alerion’s healer monopolized all of Ellana’s attention once she realized how much the girl knew. They often spent their days wandering the hills, the healer showing Lavellan how to identify herbs in the while. “Teach her to figure out mushrooms, too!” Aerin had shouted one day. Ellana stuck out her tongue.

Ellana begged Aerin to tell the Keeper about her glamour binding. “They might be able to help!” she insisted. “Keepers hold the old knowledge and pass it on, they’re really wise!”

Sighing, she shook her head. “I’ve talked a bit about Elvhen magic with the Keeper. The binding is a complicated Ancient Tevene rune infused with lyrium onto my skin with blood magic. The Keeper will have no knowledge of that. Plus, he’s doing us a big enough favor as it is. It will keep.”

“But it’s hurting you still!”

“How-”

“Ugh, I know you sister. I know when you lie to me. And when you lie to yourself.” Aerin felt her eyebrows rise in surprise. Ellana pouted. “Fine. Will you at least talk to Keeper Deshanna about it when we reach them?”

Aerin hesitated. Ellana set her features into a perfect imitation of a mule. Bursting out laughing, Aerin acquiesced. “Fine, fine, stubborn fool. I will talk to Keeper Deshanna. After we get there. And after we get settled in.” Ellana threw her fists up in victory and headed back into camp, leaving Aerin on a high ridge above the river. The lights of Hasmal glittered in the distance behind them. Alerion had made camp along the banks of the Minanter, just east of the city. A few hunters and tradesmen had gone into the market in order to trade and barter for necessities the clan needed. There wasn’t much to do right now except wait. *Less than two weeks ’til Tantervale, then four more to Starkhaven. I can’t believe we actually made it this far. I wonder if they’re searching for*
Lost in her thoughts, Aerin didn’t pay attention to the soft swoosh of the wind behind her, of the rustle of skirts against grass.

“How interesting. A dreamer who doesn’t dream.”

Aerin leapt up off the ground, whipping her ironbark daggers out of her sheaths. She had given her stolen steel daggers to the tradesmen to sell in town. All material traces of their previous lives were now, finally, gone. Crouched low in a waiting stance, she faced the intruder. How did she get up here without me seeing? The stranger serenely regarded the elf. An older woman, statuesque and elegant. Bright white hair, formed into… horns, was it? A high necked deep maroon armored bodice inlaid with gold rivets. Pauldrons made out of black feathers. A heavy skirt of some unknown material flared out from her hips, stopping at the knees in front and brushing the ground in the back, trailing like a wedding dress behind the woman. Wickedly sharp and jagged stiletto boots adorned with metal encased her calves and feet. Strange all around, Aerin mused, but most striking were her eyes. They were a brilliant yellow, two miniature suns held in orbit. Or like a cat. Whatever this woman was, she was powerful. Aerin could feel it rolling off of her. Magic. Standing up straight, she planted her legs firmly in a wide-legged stance, keeping her daggers at the ready, leveling her gaze at the other woman calmly. The mage smiled.

“Such a brave young woman, to stand up to what she does not comprehend. Or is it stupidity? Not many stand in front of Asha’bellanar who do not bow.”

“I have had enough of bowing in my life to people I do not know, who did not deserve it,” Aerin replied quietly yet firmly. “I do not know you. How can I tell if you therefore deserve my respect?”

Full lips broke out into a wide grin. “Oh, I think I like you. Sensible. If a little bit foolhardy.” She cocked her head to one side. “You are a mystery, my dear. All the talents of the Dreamers at your hands, and yet you purposely confine yourself within the Fade. Why?”

Aerin pulled back, startled. The Fade? She had, of course, been taught about the inherent dangers of the Fade the day she awoke as an elf, back in that dark cell. The dangers of demons and possession and subsequent transformation into a monstrous abomination. The idea had so terrified the child that she vehemently refused to sleep for 3 days and had to eventually be drugged to sleep. Every night since, she laid down determined not to dream. So far it had worked. Her dreams had not changed much from when she lived on Earth, without the Fade. “I don’t know what you mean, ma’am. Dreamer? How have I confined myself in the Fade?”

“Interesting,” Asha’bellanar murmured. “You don’t even know you are doing it. Very well. Most mages when they dream travel freely within the Fade, interacting with spirits and demons alike. But you, my child, have walled yourself off in a fortress of pure will in the Fade. Almost nothing can penetrate it.”

Aerin blinked. “Isn’t that a good thing? I mean, it’s keeping the demons away, right?”

The old woman shook her head. “The nature of the Fade is to be fluid, constantly changing, and you are a bastion holding against its current. It is not the nature of things. Not your nature. One day, your wall will slip and you will drown under the current. For you are a Dreamer, a somniari. Oh.” She paused. “Then again, you would know about magic that warps nature’s intent, wouldn’t you child?” Aerin blanched and took an inadvertent step back, raising her daggers. Asha’bellanar held up her hands in a peaceful gesture. “You have nothing to fear from me, I shall keep your secret. In fact, I will help you find release in exchange for your future assistance.”

Aerin narrowed her eyes at the mage. “What could I possibly do for you?”
Chuckling, she responded, “Why, help save the world of course. Not now. I will find you when it is time. In the meantime, speak to the Keeper. They still have some scraps of knowledge of the somniari and will be able to help you. Do you agree?”

Hesitating for a moment, the elf nodded. “No sense in me refusing and then the world ends and we all die anyhow, is there?”

Throwing her head back, Asha’bellanar gave a throaty laugh and clapped her hands together. “Oh, how I adore you! I think you and my daughter would get along fabulously. Very well. The path to your freedom will be long, but it is possible to break the binding. Or at the very least disrupt it. The methods do not exist yet, but they will. I will come for you when it is time.” She extended her arm, and Aerin reached out and firmly clasped her arm. Drawing back, she blinked once. She was once again alone on the ridge. *What the... Crazy old bat.* Shaking her head to clear it, she made her way back to camp.

Expecting to feel dread at the revelation that she was somniari, whatever that was, and that she had all but pledged her assistance to a madwoman mage of all things, Aerin was shocked that she was instead confident in her choice. *I'm getting soft. It's the only explanation. Why would I trust an unknown mage?* She glanced over at the trampled spot where Cyril and Ellana lay crushing embrium, the sweet scent drifting up to meet her. “Where is the Keeper?” Cyril raised her arm, pointing down to the riverbank. Nodding her thanks, Aerin picked her way over the rocky shore to where Tirshinan stood, hands folded behind his back, vacantly gazing out over the dark, rushing waters. Stopping several paces behind him, Aerin copied his pose and cleared her throat.

“Keeper, I had the strangest meeting a minute ago. I was told you might be able to shed some light on what I was told.” He did not turn to face her, just inclining his chin as indication she should continue. “Right. Well. This is going to sound crazy,” she muttered under her breath. “A… woman appeared to me. A human, a mage I think. She was very powerful and well, she told me I was a Dreamer? A somniari? Do you know what she was talking about?”

“Did she give you her name, da’len?”

“Asha’bellanar. It sounds elven. But she was human…?” Tirshinan did not move, continuing to stare out over the choppy river. Aerin waited. Then shifted her weight to one foot. Back to the other. Just when she thought maybe he didn't hear her, he turned to face her, his expression inscrutable.

“Asha’bellanar. The Woman of Many Years. That is what the People call her. She has other names, other titles. I do not believe she is entirely human anymore, however.”

“Not human? So, an abomination?”

Turning back to gaze at the water, he shook his head. “Not in the way humans understand, no. She is extremely wise, and yes, as you said, powerful. Somniari. They are rare these days. Most are immediately killed by the templars, as they are at greater risk for possession. That you survived this far with no training is no small feat indeed.”

Aerin shifted uncomfortable. “It was mentioned that I created a wall within the Fade. And that it protects me now, but will fall one day. And if that happens…” she trailed off.

Nodding, he continued for her. “If that happens, you will be possessed and become an abomination without the proper skills.”

“I can’t let that happen.”
“You were right to come to me. I do have some knowledge of the somniari of old. I will teach you what I can. Deshanna can pick up the rest.” Sensing her dismissal, Aerin turned to go, then hesitated.

“Keeper?”

“Yes, da’len?”

“Is she trustworthy?”

Crossing his arms across his chest, the old keeper turned to face Aerin. “Trust…” he mused. “Asha’bellanar is old. She has her own motives and goals that are unclear to those of us she speaks to. I doubt if anything she says has the full truth to it. However, I have never known her to lie.”

Aerin sighed in relief. “Thank you, Keeper.”

***

Starkhaven gleamed in the distance on the far shore. The Minanter’s rushing water flowed around the earthen walls, topped with pale gray stone. Two more rings of walls within the city rose above the gates. And at the very center, a palace of white and gold sparkled in the late morning sun. The clan had stopped, but no one moved to unpack. They would soon be on their way back west into Nevarra. Placing the last of their clothes into new ram leather satchels, they were ready. Keeper Tirshinan called the girls over. “It seems it is time.” Ellana wrung her hands for a moment, fighting some internal battle, and then losing. She threw her arms around the Keeper’s neck.

“Thank you for everything!” she sobbed. He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he patted her back fondly.

“Of course, da’len. You must send word when you reach your people. Perhaps I will see you at the next Arlathvhen?” Ellana nodded, sniffing noisily and wiping her nose on her sleeve. He turned to Aerin. She gave him a smile that was almost unguarded. Almost.

Bowing at the waist, she said, “Ma serannas, Keeper. We owe you our lives.”

“Nonsense, dear girl. We simply made your passage easier. I think with your tenacity, you would’ve made it by yourselves eventually.” Her lips twitched, guard falling. “Dareth shiral.”

“Dareth shiral.” With a final wave to the rest of the clan, Aerin and Ellana picked their way down the rocky slope towards the bridge that led to the gates of Tantervale. Alhren and Kadueil chased after them. Aerin raised an eyebrow at them. “Decide to come with us then?”

They grinned. “Didn’t think you’d have to find a boat yourself, did you? With nothing to pay for your passage?” Alhren asked.

“Oh. I didn’t think of that.” The girls looked at each other. Neither had dealt with anything like money before.

“Yeah, thought so. Come on. My cousin lives here. He works for a guy with a boat that might be willing to take you down the Minanter.” Aerin sighed in relief. What would I do if I ever needed to work? I supposed I could find work as a mercenary or something. Protecting caravans? That’s a thing, right?

“Halt! State your business.” Light reflected into her eyes, blinding her for a minute. Moving to the side, she looked up at the gate guard. His armor is so pretty, she drooled. Silverite plate armor
inlaid with what look like ivory, engraved with gold, with a deep blue sash fastened at the shoulder. It was shiny enough to be used a mirror.

“Visiting family,” Alhren replied. “And booking passage for these two down the river.” The guard nodded.

“Enter. And don’t think of starting any trouble, elf.” Biting back a sneer, the hunter merely nodded. Aerin and Ellana stepped through the massive iron gates and gaped. The entire city was beautiful and so… fresh, compared to Minrathous. The buildings here were bright, clean, and light. People bustled all around, calling out wares, lifting crates and barrels, scurrying from place to place, same as in Tevinter. But the atmosphere of despair was gone. She saw city elves actually smiling. Besides the Dalish, she had never seen another elf smile so openly, much less joke and laugh as these were. And some of them were laughing with humans! She felt her heart seize in sudden happiness. Swiveling in all directions, her eyes remained fastened on the scenery surrounding them as they made their way to the docks, completely oblivious to the stares she was receiving from the townspeople.

Kadueil clucked at them. “Come now, else I’ll have to tie your hand to mine and lead you as a child.” The girls giggled at that and sped up. Ellana’s expression was just as wide eyed. A few women in a red and cream robe, with a golden sun embroidered on the chest and sleeves, passed sedately, smiling at the group. Aerin frowned.

“Who are they, Kadueil?” He glanced over at the women.

“Chantry sisters. You’ve seen them before, right?” Shaking her head, she frowned. “I’ve heard of the Chantry, but I don’t think they wear the same thing in the Imperium.” Alhren swore, grabbed both of the girls by the arms, and dragged them into a nearby alley.

His voice low and urgent, he pulled Aerin close. “Is Tevinter the only other place you’ve lived in?” Confused, she nodded.

“I can’t remember where I was before, remember?”

He leaned his forehead against the alley wall. “The rest of the world is very different. The Chantry here has a very intolerant view of magic. They preach that magic exists to serve man. And so, every mage is locked up in a Circle, guarded by templars. Listen to me. You must keep your magic hidden. If anyone suspects you are a mage, they will brand you apostate and you will be taken to the Circle and imprisoned. Do you understand me?”

Scoffing, Aerin flipped her braid over her shoulder. “They’d have to catch me first.”

Kadueil leveled a glare at her. “Don’t be stupid. These templars are trained in hunting mages. They have the ability to cut you off from the Fade, which will not only prevent you from casting, but will severely physically weaken you, if it doesn’t cause you to faint entirely.”

Eyes wide as saucers, all she could manage was, “Oh.”

“Oh, she says,” Alhren snorted.

Lowering her eyes, Aerin muttered, “I get it. I won’t use magic.”

“I’m just glad you know now, before you did something stupid. You wouldn’t do well caged up again.” She shook her head vehemently. He patted her head. “Ok, let’s keep going. My cousin should be down at the docks.” The cousin was, in fact, at the docks and his boss, a kind man in his
late 40s, was more than willing to take the girls downriver in exchange for the healing tonics the hunters had brought with them.

“You caught us at the perfect time! We’re just loadin’ up the last of our cargo, ‘bout to leave in a just few hours. It’ll be 4 days to Braemore,” the man said in his thick brogue. The girls hugged the hunters good bye, and departed with a promise to see them again one day. The captain eyed Aerin and remarked, “Probably best you wait on board, lass. Otherwise, the other men will get no work done with their gogglin’.” Aerin blush a bright red. She had noticed people staring, but hadn’t realized it was because of her appearance. Grabbing Ellana’s hand, they swiftly boarded the flat-bottomed riverboat and found a couple barrels to the side to perch on and wait. The younger elf bounced in place, grinning.

“Home. Aerin. We’re almost there!”

Chapter End Notes

Got a bunch more written, so should be updating a chapter a day until I run out.
The trip down the Minanter was blessedly uneventful. The sixth month was well upon them, and the cool river breeze provided the perfect counterpoint for the warm, slightly humid days. The boat captain was pleasant to both of them, and attempted to draw the girls out into light conversation.

“What takes you to Braemore? Not much there, just a wee fishin’ village.”

Ellana remained silent, letting Aerin answer in short, vague sentences. “Returning to family.”

“Ah, family fishers then?”

“No.”

Eventually, the man got the idea and left his passengers in silence. Aerin felt bad being unfriendly to the kind man, but neither of them knew if Caius was out there searching for them. The less said, the better. Sighing in frustration, she leaned back against a barrel and tried not to look at the water. Luckily, the river was fairly calm and gentle here. Instead, she gazed out at the forest that lined the bank. Peaceful and green. It reminded her of home. Or was it home? It was another lifetime ago. Ellana will be home soon. I’ll probably stay for a while. Then what? Ellana will be fine here, she blends in well with her normal dark brown hair and green eyes. I stick out too much. Hell, I’d probably put the clan in danger if I was traced there. Plus, I don’t think the Dalish life is for me, as free as it is. She was too used to sleeping indoors, inside an actual building, with a roof. Used to the hustle and bustle of the city. I suppose I could make my way further south. Orlais maybe? Or Ferelden? I wonder if Caius would think to look for me there. I wonder how elves are treated there? They seemed happy in Starkhaven. Is everywhere like that?

“Aerin! We’re here we’re here we’re here!” Ellana pounced on Aerin’s stomach, knocking the wind out of her. Aerin grunted. “Sorry, sorry! But look!”

Aerin shoved herself up to sit. To the left, a smaller river joined up with the Minanter. Scattered around both sides of the bank was a small village of sturdy wooden cabins, fishing boats lining weathered docks. Here, men with swarthy, broad arms pulled pulled a haul of fish into their boat. There, women in faded dresses and stained aprons sat descaling and cleaning the fish. And over there, old men with gnarled hands and broad hats sat mending nets. Through the dirt streets, half naked children ran wild, screaming and laughing. It was a quaint, pleasant sight. What would my life have been if I landed in a place like this instead? I probably would’ve been an ungrateful brat and complained the whole time about the mud and smell, she decided ruefully.

Thanking the captain profusely for his help, and receiving a friendly smile and handshake in return, the two elves disembarked. A few of the locals eyed them from a distance, not entirely unfriendly. Pausing to pull out a square, dark brown piece of linen, Aerin wrapped it around her head and tucked her hair underneath it, then smiled placidly at them as they poked their way through the mud to drier ground. Checking to make sure her foot wraps were secure, she lifted her bag to her shoulder and began walking towards the outskirts of the village, Ellana in tow. “So Tirshinan said it would take about a week ‘til we reach the edge of Lavellan’s territory. All he knows is that they should be somewhere along the river.” Ellana tapped her fingers against her lips.

“I think the area is fairly flat and the woods are thin. Hard to remember. But the aravel sails are
dark blue, that should make it easy to spot them.”

“Alright then.” Exiting town, the shady forest welcomed them. The sun still had a few more hours before it would begin to set, so they set off at a fast pace to try and cover as much ground before stopping for the night. An owl called out from somewhere deeper in the woods. Neither girl spoke much, keeping their ears alert for strangers and wolves. *If they made me into an elf, couldn’t they have given me elven hearing and eyesight too? That would at least have been useful.* As it stood, she had to rely on Ellana to give her advance notice of any intruders.

At last the sun set behind the tree tops. Finding some dense shrubs, Ellana stomped out a small clearing, shaking the spiders away since Aerin was afraid of the arachnids. The twelve year old had teased her mercilessly about that. “The mighty Victorem of Minrathous, reduced to a squealing mouse at the sight of a tiny spider!”

“It’s not my fault spiders have those stupid creepy crawlly legs and evil souls and hate puppies.” Ellana just cackled. As Aerin settled into their little shelter, getting comfortable and making sure her daggers were easily accessible, Ellana shot up. Furrowing her brow, Aerin shot her a questioning glance, then swiveled to where Ellana was pointing across the river. Torches. Faint shouts. Aerin jerked upright and immediately rolled into a low crouch. Ellana balanced on her hands and knees, peeking out of the brush.

“Tevinters. They’re looking for tracks. Searching for someone,” she breathlessly whispered. *No. We’re so close.* Ears twitching, she strained to hear more. “Something about… he glows? Those marks are easy to spot, why haven’t you found him yet? The magister will not be… Kaffas! They’re moving away from shore. I can’t hear them anymore.” Aerin wracked her brain, trying to remember if they had left tracks to their camp.

“So, they’re looking for a he? Someone with marks? Not us then. Must be another escaped slave,” Aerin mused.

“Should we move?”

“No. We would make too much noise leaving this area. The leaves hide us pretty well here. Just... stay awake for now, ok? Let me know if they get closer to us.”

Ellana shivered and sat back on her feet. “Ok.” Neither got much sleep that night.

***

Luck was on their side. The soldiers tracking the other slaves moved south. Meanwhile, the forest around them thinned out the further north they headed. The days passed relatively pleasantly, with Ellana chattering aimlessly about everything under the sun, and Aerin hunting here and there for meals. The closer they got to Lavellan, the worst the incessant talking got.

“Oh look! I remember this rock. Well, I think I remember this rock. They all kinda look the same don’t they. Huh this tree isn’t the same as the rest. Wait, there’s another one? Do you know what kind of tree this is? I wonder why it just appeared now. Do you think we could try to catch a fish for supper? One of the hunters showed me this neat trick where he caught a fish with his bare hands! I could learn that. Do you think I could learn that? That hunter was cute. He was always looking at you though. Did you think he was cute? Maybe you could find-”

“Ellana, I swear to the Creators, if you don’t shut up I will feed you to a frog.”

“Right. Sorry. It’s just that I’m nervous. What if they don’t remember me? Or like me? Or believe
I’m me? Do frogs even eat humans? What if-

“Ellana.”

“Oh. Sorry.” With a long suffering sigh, she offered her little sister a pained smile.

“I’m sure they’ll remember you, da’len. And be very excited to welcome you back. Think about how surprised they’ll be!” Aerin thought of something. “Elle. Your mother and father. Are they with your clan still? Or were they…?”

“No, they weren’t taken. My father died in a hunting accident when I was a baby. My mother caught sick right before I was taken. That’s why I was with the group gathering herbs that day. I wanted to help her get better. I don’t know if she lived or died.” With a tiny frown, Ellana stared down at her feet. Aerin squeezed her shoulders.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

Shaking her head, Ellana replied, “No, it’s ok. Just took me by surprise. I actually hadn’t thought about her in a long time. What about your parents? You never talk about them.”

Aerin smiled wistfully at the branches above her head. “I don’t know. I don’t know where they are, if they think I’m alive or dead, if they’re alive or dead, or what. I hope they’re ok.”

Ellana frowned. “So you do remember your life before.”

Rubbing her eyes with her hands, Aerin pulled her braid to her front and began playing with the end. “Yes. I do. But it makes no sense. So I never talk about it.”

“I’m your sister. We should be able to tell each other everything.”

“I know, love. It’s just… You’d think I’m crazy.”

Ellana barked a short laugh out. “I already think you’re crazy.”

Aerin rolled her eyes. “Thanks for that.”

Ellana turned sharply to glare at her. “If you don’t wanna tell me, you don’t have to. I’m not forcing you to.”

Aerin groaned, shoulder slouching forward. “I am telling you! I told you you’d think I was crazy. Or lying. I’m not from Thedas. I was born in a country called America, in a world with no such thing as magic or Fade or elves or dwarves whatever else this place has. Just humans. And technology. Cars, airplanes, flushing toilets, electricity. It’s nothing like,” Aerin waved in a wild, sweeping gesture, “this.”

Dark green eyes bore into her blue-gold ones. They both had stopped walking and just simply stared at each other. After a few minutes, Ellana twitched. And grinned. And started giggling. “You’re right, I do think you’re crazy. I don’t even understand those last words you said.”

“Yeah, me neither anymore,” Aerin muttered. “So you don’t believe me then?”
Ellana shrugged, still giggling to herself. “A world with only humans and no Fade? Sounds like every shemlen’s dream. I believe you believe it. I just think maybe you hit you head harder than I thought 7 years ago.”

Aerin shook her head in exasperation. “Whatever. Come on let’s keep going.”

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It took 16 days before Ellana’s sharp eyes spotted the blue sails of an aravel in the pale, early morning sunlight. From here, it does look like a sailboat floating across the plains, Aerin mused. Ellana began to sprint towards the sails. “Come on!” she shrieked.

Aerin chuckled. “That sail is still far away, Elle. You’ll wear yourself out before you reach it.”

“But they’re getting away!” Aerin shrugged.

“They’ll stop for the night at some point, I imagine. Don’t worry da’len. We’ll catch up with them by tonight.”

Letting out a frustrated scream, she groaned dramatically. “Fiiiiiiine,” she whined. She was sure this was going to be the longest day of her life.

It was. The aravels stopped sometime around sunset, but it took the girls another four hours to catch up. The bonfire the clan built illuminated Aerin and Ellana as they approached.

“Hold, strangers!” a handsome elf dressed as a hunter jumped in front of them. “State your business.” The rest of the gathered elves craned their necks to get a glimpse of the newcomers.

Ellana froze. “I- me-, well I’m- uh…”

Aerin stifled a giggle at the uncharacteristically speechless elf. “What she means to say is, she’s Ellana of Clan Lavellan and we seek her people.”

“Ellana?!” A middle-aged woman that was beginning to gray strode out to meet them, her robes swirling around her legs, oaken staff in hand. “Did you say your name was Ellana?” she demanded.

Blinking, Ellana slowly nodded. “Keeper Deshanna? Is that you?”

The Keeper paused, standing as still as a statue while she examined the smaller elf. “Creators. Praise be to Mythal, it is you!” She rushed to them, arms wide open, crushing the girl to her chest, tears streaming down her face. “I thought I’d never see you again, da’len. How are you here?”

A muffled voice spoke from the Keeper’s chest. “Aerin. She saved me and brought me here. She’s my sister now.” Deshanna met Aerin’s eyes.

“Andaran atishan, friend. You have my eternal gratitude. You must tell me your story. Come, come sit by the fire.” Drawing back, she held Ellana’s shoulders at arm’s length. “Da’len... there is something you must know first. Your mother, she- she has passed on. Not long after you went missing. The strain of losing you was too much, I think.” Ellana closed her dark, emerald green eyes.

“I didn’t dare hope she would be here. All of this doesn’t seem real yet,” she replied wistfully.

Warm eyes crinkled into a heartfelt smile. “It is very real, da’len. You are here and here you will stay. Now come, let's get you and your sister fed. I wish to hear your tales.”
The handsome hunter from earlier smiled warmly at Aerin. He was taller than most elves, with a shock of shoulder length white hair tied back in a thong and dark, stormy gray eyes. “Andaran atishan, friend. I’m Erival, hunter of Clan Lavellan.”

She blushed. Why am I blushing? I’ve seen handsome men before. Stop that this instant! “Aerin. Pleasure to meet you.”

He raised a white eyebrow. “Just Aerin?”

Glancing aside at him as they walked, she firmly nodded. “Just Aerin.” She followed the Keeper to the large fire, listening as Ellana told their story, from the day she was captured to the day they had escaped. The whole clan had gathered closely around to listen to the daring tale, intent on every syllable. Ellana was a natural storyteller. Content to be silent and listen, Aerin relaxed against the cool grass and watched the twinkling of the stars in the vast sky above. *Gods, I never realized how many stars I can see here. I’ve never seen so many.* It took her back to when she was a child, camping in the backyard with her dad, trying to trace out constellations with the few stars that were visible. *He always promised to take me to the desert one day, so he could show me the Milky Way.* The memory made her smile, chest brimming with nostalgia. Sitting up, she realized Ellana was done talking and motioning to her.

“Sorry, I didn’t get that. Come again?”

Ellana rolled her eyes. “I said, you owe me your life for defending you from that spider on your bedroll two nights ago.”

Aerin laughed, reached over to muss her sister’s hair, and said, “Brat.” The Keeper chuckled.

“It seems we owe you much for returning Saera’s child to us. You truly have the favors of the gods, to have come so far to us.”

“Keeper Tirshinan said it was plain stubbornness of not knowing when to quit,” she answered ruefully.

Several people laughed at that. “Yes, well, that always helps too,” her eyes sparkled mirthfully. “I assume you will be staying with us, then?”

Spinning around to face Aerin, Ellana started. “You’re not leaving me, are you? We just got here!”

“I will stay, da’len. For as long as I am welcome.” To her left, Erival grinned at another male and winked. Boys.

“Forever?” Ellana quipped, looking at the Keeper, who merely chuckled.

“If she wishes it, yes, forever. She will always have a home here with us.”

A tender smile broke across Aerin’s face. *It’s a start.*

Chapter End Notes

Fact: spiders do, in fact, hate puppies. And ice cream and rainbows and unicorns. As of now, we have at least 2 black widows out on our back porch and we're OUT OF SPIDER RAID. The first time a giant spider attacked me in DAO, I screamed. And ran
away. Fucking spiders. My husband is also terrified of spiders and won't get near enough to kill them. I should've put that in our marriage vows. "Must kill all spiders."

Oh, I made a tumblr. Ideally, I will use it for updates, random ramblings, and whatever else suits my fancy. Realistically, I'm still figuring out how the site works. So drop by, ask me questions, tell me jokes, whatevs.
A bright blue tail swished lazily, swinging droplets of mud to the side. A pale gray snout burrowed through the shallow water, sniffing out slimy marsh weeds, while a long, forked tongue slipped out to wrap around the delicate stems. Munching contentedly, the gurgut stretched its armored body out on a broad, flat rock, trying to soak up as much of the thin, winter sun as possible.

Abruptly, a streak of dark brown mahoghany darted towards the lizard’s back, sinking two ironbark daggers into its right flank. Roaring in pain, the gurgut burst to its feet and twisted to snap massive jaws at the offender. Another streak of white appeared to the left, swinging a sword in an upward arc against the bright red neck. Spinning around again to focus on the new attacker, a third streak, this time of bright scarlet, sprinted up behind the beast, leapt onto its back, drove a sword into the ground right against the left side of the neck, then slammed a dagger upward into the jaw from the right, forcing it into the waiting sword edge. The gurgut thrashed once, twice, and collapsed into the bog. Aerin pulled her dagger out of the gurgut’s neck. “Gross,” she wrinkled her nose. “Mud and blood do not mix.”

The mahogany haired elf with the daggers grunted. “Mud and anything don’t mix,” he added.

Crouching down to the dead gurgut, he began severing the head from the body. “Come on you two, don’t just stand there. Sooner we get the meat back to camp, sooner we can get out of this thrice blasted swamp.”

“Scared of the creepy things?” Erival quipped, sauntering over to help skin the beast. “I know Aerin is.”

Rolling her eyes, she muttered, “Stupid spiders. Stupid snakes. Stupid mud, stupid marsh, stupid Dalish hunter boys.”

“Aww, don’t be like that vhenan. You know you love me.”

She snorted as she deftly sliced the organs out of the carcass and carefully wrapped them in the waxed linen they brought along. “Love is such a strong word. Let’s go with… tolerate. Tolerate is a good word.” Bantering back and forth, the three elves got the gurgut partitioned and packaged, pausing to clean their weapons before heading back to camp.

It was winter, the first month of a new year. A year and a half had passed since Clan Lavellan had welcomed them. They had halted in Antiva for the winter, on the edge of the marsh, south of the city of Seleny. The weather was mild here, with no snow in sight. Aerin wasn’t sure what she would do if she had to deal with snow dressed in only leather, wool, and fur with no central heating or fluffy water resistant down filled parkas. *I’d need at least three bear pelts to just not freeze into a popsicle.* She could hear Ellana pipe up in her head. *What’s a popsicle?* The thought made her smile.

Erival noticed her secret smile. Nudging her, he sirked. “Thinking about me, are you?”

“Mmm,” she replied. “Thinking about you tripping face first into the mud. Always brings me joy.”

The other hunter with them laughed. “Give it up Erival, she’s never going to bond with you.”

“Not true,” the man declared. “I think I’m growing on her!”
“Like a mushroom,” she agreed. Truth was, she adored Erival. He was kind, witty, dedicated, an excellent hunter, and handsome. But she knew how the Dalish felt about humans. Lavellan was better than most clans, but still. So if she chose to stay, she would have to give up her dream of being completely free. And she couldn’t do it. She had yet to tell Keeper Deshanna about her binding, much to Ellana’s chagrin.

But life went on. Or tried to, at any rate. The darkspawn were on the move south of Ferelden. Aerin thought they were merely tales to scare children around the campfire. But Keeper Deshanna had awoken one morning and announced that she had spoken with another Keeper within the Fade, Marethari of Sabrae. Two of their hunters had already fallen to darkspawn corruption. Sabrae clan would be fleeing the Kocari Wilds and travel north, to the Marches. Whispers circulated camp. Was this a true Blight? Or just a random, unorganized horde? Would the Fereldens end it? Were the Grey Wardens already there? A few of the clansmen traveled to Seleny to gather as much news as possible. Lavellan was on friendly terms with the town, for unlike other Dalish clans, Deshanna believed that if they respected the humans, the humans would respect them in turn. And for the most part, they did. Traders and merchants welcomed the Lavellan clan in the small towns they frequented along their nomadic routes.

As the trio jogged into camp and distributed the meat to others to be cooked, the other Dalish returned from town. Aerin ducked out of the aravel she changed in. She dressed herself in a soft cream colored cotton long sleeve top, tucked into dark leather leggings and hardened leather boots worn into perfection that laced up to her knees. Not wearing foot wraps pleased her to no end. They were fine for dry ground and warmer weather, but not swamps in winter. A thick, leather vest completed her ensemble. Walking to the fire, she shook her long hair loose and began to re-plait it. Ellana jogged over from where she had been practicing her archery. The girl had a natural talent for the bow. “You stink,” she wrinkled her nose.

“I just came back from gallivanting through 3 feet of mud to go roll around in gurgut intestines. What do you expect?” Aerin shot back. Someone behind them shushed them- one of the elders had begun to speak.

“The Ferelden army and Grey Wardens march to Ostagar to confront the darkspawn horde.”

“Hahren, is it a Blight?” a female called.

“An archdemon has not been seen yet,” the first man replied. “The horde is still small. The hope is that they can be destroyed in the Kocari Wilds.”

Murmurs floated around the gathered elves. Archdemon. That's a dragon. A Blighted dragon. A real fucking dragon. This place never ceased to amaze her. Or terrify. All the same at this point.

Later that evening, after everyone ate their fill of fishy flavored gurgut meat and roasted tubers, Erival sprawled out next to where Aerin sat, mending the ties on her bracer. She raised an eyebrow.

“Yes?”

“How old are you?”

She feigned outrage. “Why sir! Don’t you know it’s rude to ask a lady her age?”

Grinning lazily, he reached over and tucked a loose flyaway strand of hair behind her ear. She felt her face grow warm. “Just tell me,” he responded in a low voice. She shivered. Stupid night air. “Nineteen. I’ll be 20 this summer.” He rolled over onto his stomach and propped his head up his arms, watching her.
“You’re old enough to get vallaslin,” he pointed out. “Are you considering it?”

Pausing her work, she considered him. “I’m not Dalish. I wouldn’t want to offend.”

“You could be Dalish. Stay here with us. You fit in well, you can’t deny that. And you know enough of our culture now.” Gazing at her features in the flickering firelight, he smiled dreamily. “Andruil’s arrow would suit you well.”

Smiling, she pretended to consider it. “Yeah? I’ll think about it, talk to the elders later. Although I think the master hunter would have other things to say about me fitting it well.” Erival laughed. She really was hopeless at sneaking and stealth. Very un-Dalish. She nodded at him. “I have my lessons with the Keeper tonight. Sleep well, Erival.”

“What, no kiss goodnight?”

“Goodnight, Erival.” Shaking her head, unable to completely wipe off the smile plastered across her cheeks, she put her armor and repair kit away for tomorrow. Stretching out in her bedroll, she cocooned herself in her thick blanket, shifting until she found the perfect arrangement, and stared at the stars, tracing the path of a shooting star with her eyes. Make a wish. I wanna be a real boy, she dryly imagined a talking cricket singing to her. Sighing, she closed her eyes and slipped into the Fade.

Standing up, she found herself standing in front of dunes on a white sand beach, watching dark greenish brown waves roll in and out on the shoreline. The wind was sticky and smelled of salt, seagrass idly drifting in the breeze, the sound of gulls calling out in the distance. Breathing deeply of the sweet air, Aerin sat in the sand and dug her toes in. Concentrating, she cast her mind out, searching for the now familiar aura, and pulled it to her.

“You always dream of the strangest places, da’len.”

“Keeper. It’s a memory from my childhood. My parents brought me here in the summer. I always loved this beach. I’d spend hours here, playing in the sand.” The Keeper smiled fondly at her pupil.

“It’s lovely.” They stood there together for a few moments. The Fade was always so peaceful. It was the only place she truly felt like herself anymore, whoever that was. “Shall we start, then?”

“Of course, Keeper.” Aerin imagined a grassy field, and pushed her will out to the Fade. The environment shifted to match her imagination, and Deshanna gave a satisfied nod.

“Excellent. You may begin whenever.” Creating a staff in her hand, Aerin hefted the weight for a minute before raising it and throwing out a fireball. Deshanna lifted her own staff to block. “Faster.” Whirling through the air, the younger girl threw out fireball after lightning bolt, digging deeper each time for more attack power. She had protested the idea of training at first.

“My magic is already bound, I can’t get any stronger than I am.”

“Nonsense, child. The binding restricts your maximum potential, but by training, you increase your total power and thereby the current portion of power available to you now. Also, ideally you would know how to fight with a staff.”

Aerin pulled her face into a grimace at that. “Everyone will know I’m a mage if I run around with a staff.”

Deshanna had rolled her eyes at that. “I didn’t say you had to use the staff as your primary weapon. A good warrior uses all the implements at her disposal, yes? The staff will just be another tool in
“Finding no fault in that logic, she agreed to train in the Fade. “It will help your control of your dreams as well.” Bit by bit, she had been able to tear down the oppressive wall in her mind and come to terms with her power as a somniari. When the wall came down, demons flocked to her, calling out her deepest desires—promising her power, revenge against Caius and Erebus, Erival’s acceptance of her human form—tormenting her with visions of her darkest fears—drowning in an ocean of dark blue, her parents holding her dead body as they wailed in utter despair, Ellana sneering that she didn’t want a shem for a sister. The Keeper stood by her side as she was assaulted within her mind, encouraging her to draw her weapons, exercise her will, take back control, and destroy them. Control was the key. Aerin vowed to never let another control her again. No slave master, no demon, no anyone would hold that kind of power over her again. With this promise held tightly in her mind, she had ripped all the demons that were attempting to feast on her to shreds. In the end, a panting Aerin had kneeled in the Fade, entirely alone, save for her proud Keeper.

The hours of the night passed swiftly while the two sparred. Finally, Deshanna held up her hand. “You’ve made good progress since last week.”

“Ma serannas, Keeper.”

“I think that will be all for tonight then. The sun rises. You may release me from your dream now.” Nodding, Aerin focused her mind and gently pushed her out. Alone in her own dream, she transformed her surroundings. The Grand Canyon loomed before her, and Fade stars twinkled above within the cloudy Milky Way. Smiling, she reclined herself on the red rocks and relaxed for the rest of the night, listening to the far off roar of the Colorado River below.

***

The winter morning started as any other. With Ellana spread like a starfish next to Aerin, arm sprawled across her face, lightly snoring. Aerin grunted, pushing her sister’s arm off her face. Crawling to her feet, she stretched out tired muscles. One of the other elves, a female that was way too perky for her own damn good, waved exuberantly to Aerin. “Good morning! Sleep well? Tea?” Grunting in assent, the sleepy elf shuffled over, wordlessly accepted a steaming mug, nodded once, and shuffled back to her bedroll. Aerin was most definitely not a morning person. Thirty minutes later, she decided she was coherent enough to get ready for the day. She kept her cream top and leggings on from the day before. Dark, hardened leather boots went on first. Ironbark armor crafted into flexible scales fit over her torso, complete with a reinforced leather skirt, came next. Bracers fastened over her forearms. She wrapped her braid up into a high bun and tied it. Ensemble complete, she grabbed a few slices of jerky from a nearby bag, and waited on the edge of camp for the other scouts to start the morning rounds.

Instead, the Keeper approached. “Aneth ara Aerin. May I have a word with you?” After she nodded, Deshanna motioned for them to walk out of earshot of camp. When they were far enough away, she stopped and turned to the young woman. “Erival mentioned that you were considering taking vallaslin? Is that true?”

Aerin exhaled. “I… No, Keeper. I mean, he did talk to me about it and I said I’d consider it. But I’m not Dalish. And never will be, not really. I would not want to offend.”

The older woman considered her. “And why is that? I sense there is more to the story that that.”

Fidget. Fidget. Shifting a couple times and playing with her fingers, Aerin thought, and turned away to look out west over the plains. Tevinter laid out that way, somewhere not too far away, across the plains. I do need help figuring it out. I doubt I’ll be able to break free on my own, after all. “I… the binding on my magic. There’s more to it. There’s a glamour charm as well.” She
pointed to her lower back. “It’s a rune. Tattooed on my back in lyrium, placed there by blood magic to hide my true self. I’m... actually human.” Stopping, she waited for the Keeper’s reaction. What would it be? Anger? Disappointment? Indifference? When no words came, Aerin turned to face her. She had a pleased smirk on her face. *Huh?*

“A human. And yet you have taken an elf as your own sister, you have ate meals with us, rejoiced in our triumphs, and shared our burdens as your own. Your soul may be human, but your heart is Dalish.” Blue-gold eyes lit up in a genuine smile. Deshanna laughed. “And you’re pleased by it! A human, pleased to be called an elf. I would never have imagined. But you were right to not share this with the others. Some would not be as accepting, sadly. I assume Ellana knows? Right. Well, let’s keep it between us for now. Is it painful?”

Aerin slowly nodded. “Yes. I’ve learned to cope with it though.”

“What other choice did you have, my brave child? I will look into who might possibly have the knowledge to know what to- Oh!” Deshanna gasped. Aerin whirled around. A solitary, white haired figure strode across the plains to meet them. White hair formed into horns. “Asha’bellanar! Andaran atishan. It is an honor to see you.”

The witch smiled. “Deshanna, what a lovely sight. I came to see how your new acquisitions were settling in.”

Yeah right, Aerin thought. She bowed anyways. “Asha’bellanar, it is a pleasure to see you again.”

“Decided I was worthy of respect, have you? Hmm. No matter. You might regret saying that dear. Remember our little deal from before?” Deshanna shot Aerin a questioning look. The younger woman evenly nodded. “The time has come. Darkness descends on the land. Darkspawn have overrun the Wilds and the Grey Wardens were all betrayed at Ostagar. Only two remain, and they are in desperate need. If they fall, so will the world. Will you go to them and assist?”

Aerin shoved the ball of panic in her chest down firmly. “I will. It will take me some weeks to reach Ferelden. How shall I find them?”

Asha’bellanar flicked invisible dust off her arm. “Never mind that, I’ll take you myself. Time is of the essence. Go pack what you require. I shall wait here with your Keeper.” *So fast. No time to say goodbyes. Ellana will kill me.*

Turning away from the two women, she raced back into camp. Ellana had just woken up and was sleepily combing her hair. Aerin unceremoniously dumped out her bag and began reorganizing her belongings. *Few changes of clothes- pants, shirt, socks, smalls, breastband. Armor repair kit. Extra laces. Soap. Blanket. Tie my bedroll together. Food? Best grab some food.* A sleepy voice cut into her train of thought. “What are you doing Aerin? Are you going somewhere?” Aerin froze. This would be the first time the girls would be apart since they met, almost nine years ago. **But she would be safe, here with her clan. Provided I can help stop the Blight.** She leaned over and pulled Ellana to her chest, burying her face in her hair.

“Elle, my sweet little sister, I have to go,” a cry interrupted her. “No, shh, listen. Asha’bellanar has come to me. She says there’s a way to break my bindings eventually, but I have to help. I have to go help the Grey Wardens fight the Blight in Ferelden. She’s waiting for me now.”

“Why do you have to go? There are dozens of Wardens! What difference will one more make?” Ellana cried out.

“Not dozens, Elle. Two. Just two. The rest have been killed.”
“Creators,” she whispered. Hanging her head, she muttered, “I get it. You have to go. Just… promise me you’ll come back? Promise me you’ll be safe?” Grabbing her arms, the thirteen year old frantically pleaded. Aerin tucked a stray lock behind her pointed ear.

“I promise.” Gods, let me keep that promise. She finished packing. “Tell Erival I’m sorry I left without saying goodbye, would you?” The cool air sent a shiver down her spine, apprehension icing over her chest. Swinging her pack up to her shoulders, she made to head back to where the witch awaited.

“I’m coming to see you off,” Ellana stated, a stubborn tilt to her chin. Aerin smiled indulgently.

“Of course, da’len.”

“There you are. All set?” Ellana squeaked at the sight of the legendary woman, and ducked behind Aerin, who rolled her eyes.

“Yes, my lady. Keeper, I…” Deshanna gave her a tight, nervous smile and reached out to grasp her shoulders, warm brown eyes brimming with emotion.

“Be safe my child. I do not envy the path set before you. Know that you are one of us, no matter what. Aerin of Clan Lavellan. May Mythal guard you way and Ghilan’nain bring you home safely to us. Dareth shiral, da’len.” Fighting back tears, Aerin quickly hugged her Keeper.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Pulling Ellana from out behind her, they crushed each other in a fierce hug. “Ar lath ma, vhenan. Practice well. I expect to return to find you a master archer.” Ellana nodded through her sobs, unable to form another word. She turned to face Asha’bellanar at last. “I am ready to depart.”

The fierce woman smiled. “Let the journey begin, then.” Her body began to glow, forcing all the others to look away from the blinding light. When they glanced back, the woman was gone and in her place, a massive maroon dragon stood. “Venhedis!” Fuck. This. Shit. The dragon opened her claw, indicating that the girl should climb in. Shaking, Aerin did as she was bid. With a final wave at her slack jawed sister and the wide eyed Keeper, the dragon gently closed her fist, wings flapped once, then twice, creating a strong gust of wind that forced the two on the ground to shield their faces, then they were airborne.

Chapter End Notes

I imagine a gurgut would taste like crocodile. Gamey, chewy, and slightly fishy.

The main storyline is finally starting. I'M SO EXCITED.

Tumblr: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/kawakaeguri
A mabari sniffed ragged leather boots, circling the woman the boots were attached to. A slender leg kicked out at the dog. “Stop sniffing me mongrel. I have nothing you want,” the sultry voice demanded imperiously. The dog looked up at her with sad eyes and whined. “Why do you keep staring at me so, you flea-ridden beast? Can you not tell when you are not wanted?” Another whine. “Ugh.” She motioned with the staff in her hand for the dog to shoo.

“I thought you liked animals, Morrigan. You know, being able to turn into one yourself. Creepy bit of magic, that is.” A tall, strawberry blonde warrior leaned against a nearby fence, watching the pair. His broad body was encased in worn splintmail armor, a battered metal shield attached to his back, and a longsword sheathed at his waist in a rough leather scabbard.

Morrigan scoffed, drawing a purple hood over her pale, elegant face and hair black as a crow’s wing. “I enjoy the company of creatures of the wild. Not stench-ridden, domesticated wolves.” Yet another whine. The dog’s head hung low.

“I think it’s sweet,” a rich, lilting, accented voice declared. A slender archer was perched along the wooden fence near the man, short red hair framing delicate features. “Calenhad loves you, Morrigan.” Calenhad barked happily.

“And he persists! Maddening!” the witch stalked away. A few nearby villagers turned to stare at the woman, dressed only in bits and scraps of leather and cloth, before quickly scurrying out of her way.

“Alistair! Leliana!” another warrior clad in heavy chainmail strode up to the two, who were still waiting by the fence. He was of a similar build to the one called Alistair, well suited to the large shield and sword safely strapped to his body. Light brown hair was just barely pulled back into a knot. A neat, trimmed beard covered his strong chin. Hazel eyes found his companions. “I convinced that dwarf, Dwyn, and his two henchmen to fight tonight with us. I think that’s all that’s left to do. The blacksmith is back to work. The barkeep and that weird elf in the tavern have also been... persuaded to fight. All that’s left is talking to the Revered Mother for Ser Perth, yes?” He looked around. “Where’s Morrigan and Sten?”

Leliana shrugged, kicking her feet idly. “Morrigan wandered off just before you arrived, Aedan. Sten is... somewhere?”

“Somewhere glowering and probably scaring the children,” Alistair added. “Alright, back to the Chantry we go.” The trio ascended the stairs into Redcliffe’s chantry, where the women and children were collected, huddling in fear for the coming night. Leliana smiled brightly a nearby girl, still holding her little brother tight and sobbing while the child muttered his apologies for running off. Alistair hung back, settling himself on a pew while the other two went to try and convince Mother Hannah to give the knights the Maker’s blessing. A little blonde haired boy sidled up to the warrior, giving him a shy smile.

“Are you one of the knights defending us?”

Alistair smiled at the lad. “I’m not a knight, but I am helping to defend you.”
The little boy considered this. “I’m scared,” he informed the man. “The monsters are scary.”

Leaning down until their eyes were level, Alistair admitted, “It’s okay to be scared. I’m scared all the time.”

“Really? But you’re still fighting!” the boy was clearly confused.

“Yup. I am. Because I know it’s the right thing to do. And I know I’m pretty good at fighting, because I’ve trained for years. So it’ll be ok. I’ll be fine, you'll be fine, and then we'll have one big party later.”

The boy suddenly grinned. “I’m gonna learn to fight to! So one day, I can be brave and do the right thing too!”

Alistair chuckled. “Alright then.” Leliana and Aedan walked out of the side alcove, the petite bard glowering at the other man.

“This is false hope! The faith that protects those men should come from their hearts. You should just tell Ser Perth that the Revered Mother cannot grant his request,” she insisted.

Aedan sighed. “False hope, but still hope Leliana. It will boost the men’s morale, and they need all the extra help they can get, real or not.”

Making a disgusted sound, she stomped away and out of the chantry. Running his hands through his hair, he motioned to Alistair. “Come on, let’s get these damned amulets to Ser Perth.” A sister hissed at him. “Sorry! Sorry. Ahem. Let’s get these beautiful, lovely amulets to the esteemed knight.”

Grinning, Alistair followed his friend out the door and up the hill to where the knight waited by a giant windmill. “Warden Cousland!” Ser Perth greeted them. “And Alistair! Have you returned with the Mother’s blessing?”

“Warden Alistair,” the younger man mumbled.

Aedan nudged him in the ribs. “Yes, ser knight. She sent these amulets with me; they have been given the Maker’s blessing.”

“These are the same symbols worn by the priests? Excellent! This is more than sufficient. You have my thanks.”

Glancing around at the others, Aeden nodded. “Everything else Murdock has asked of us is complete. We are ready to make our stand.”

“Good luck to us then, and may the Maker watch over us all.”

“Alistair, can you go collect Sten and Morrigan? Bring them here. It’s time to hurry up and wait for nightfall.”

***

“It’s just like being home again! Except with more undead,” Alistair observed, watching the hordes of corpses descend upon the village. Ser Perth was up near the town entrance still, holding the line. Cousland and the others had retreated to defend the village. Wave after wave flooded the town square. They came from the mountains, from the lake, from the sky even, it seemed. There was no end.
“Damn it all!” Leliana shouted, stringing another arrow. _Shit. Only two arrows left._ Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as Dwyn the dwarf tripped backwards over the tavern owner’s mangled body. _Lloyd, wasn’t it? Poor creature._ A giant broadsword flashed just to her right, cleaving a corpse in half. “Thanks, Sten!” she shouted. The Qunari grunted in response. “Aedan! No!”

The warden was locked in battle against the remains of what used to be a knight. Focused on his opponent, he didn’t notice the undead archer aiming at his back. Leliana desperately grabbed another arrow, but before she was able to notch it, the archer had fired. The barbed tip sank into Aedan’s hamstring. With a cry, his leg buckled, forcing him to lift his shield to defend against the knight corpse’s blows. Withdrawing her daggers, Leliana raced to his side, only vaguely aware that Morrigan’s spells were slowing in intensity. _We’re overwhelmed. What do we do?!_ At least Sten seemed to be the exact same as he had been at the beginning, but even he could only fight against so many at once. Alistair and Murdock were next to where training dummies once stood, back to back, facing down five more undead. The entire situation looked grim.

“It’s been an honor, Warden Alistair,” the mayor gasped out, drenched in sweat. Alistair shifted his steel and parried a thrust.

“Not over yet, mayor,” he grunted. _It can’t end here. It can’t,_ he thought desperately. _We need a miracle._

He felt, rather than heard, Leliana’s shock. Sparing a quick glance over, he saw a strangely armored small shape standing over the fallen knight’s corpse… corpse. _Is a dead undead just called dead?_ he thought. _Oh right, battle. Fight. Dismember and stuff. No time to gawk yet, Alistair._

The figure- an elf?- darted to where Alistair and Murdock were trapped, twin swords whirling above her head. With a practiced swing, she easily lopped off one body’s head and jabbed another through the stomach. Alistair glanced over, thinking _oh, it is a she._ Then, _Maker. She’s beautiful._ His own pale blue eyes stared in awe at her cobalt blue and burnished gold eyes. Her blood red hair was pulled back in a braid, pinned in a knot, small tendrils escaping to frame her face. Her face. He was sure Andraste herself hadn’t been this perfect. And… she was ignoring him. Nodding to the mayor, she spun on her heel and darted off to cut down more undead that were shambling into the square. “Come on, Alistair! We can end this!” Murdock called.

“Huh? Wha- oh right, the undead. Of course,” he rambled, following on the mayor’s heels. _Alistair, you’re an idiot._

***

The pink light of dawn shone down on the village of Redcliffe, a village that was, mercifully, silent. The remaining townsmen and knights picked through the fallen, lining the bodies up off to the side of the chantry courtyard. Later, loved ones would come out to identify their faces and pray over their memory, before commending their souls to the Maker.

The newcomer leaned against the fence outside the blacksmith’s house, silently observing the villagers. Leliana stood near the chantry, studying her in turn. “Her armor is Dalish,” she told her companions. Morrigan raised an eyebrow. She could feel the Fade against the young woman, identifying her as a mage, but for some reason, the elf had used no magic in the battle. _Curious,_ she thought.
“Do you think she came here to help?” Alistair piped up hopefully. He really, really hope she had.

“Another woman who wishes to be a man,” Sten muttered, eyeing the females distastefully.

Aedan shrugged. “Only one way to find out. Let’s talk to her.” Sten remained where he was as the rest of the group walked over to the rogue. Aerin looked up.

“Which of you are the Grey Wardens?” Startled, Alistair pointed to Aedan.


Shooting his fellow warden a withering glance, Aedan looked back at Aerin. “I’m Aedan Cousland, of the Grey Wardens. This is Alistair, also a Grey Warden. These are my other companions, Leliana, rogue and bard, and Morrigan, a... well. Thank you for your timely aid, my lady. You saved my life and the lives of many others tonight. You are a highly skilled fighter.”

Aerin’s eyes locked onto Morrigan’s. Bright yellow eyes. Just like Asha’bellanar’s. Forcing her eyes away from the witch, she responded in a regal tone, “I’m no lady. Aerin of Clan Lavellan. I have heard of your fight against the darkspawn. If you wish it, I would offer you my aid.”

“Yes! Ah... That is, we would welcome your aid. With us. Fighting with us, I mean.” Maker. Aedan stared at Alistair, who was turning an interesting shade of red. Morrigan rolled her eyes and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “fool” under her breath. Leliana just giggled again.

“It seems my fellow warden has spoken for us then. We would welcome your help.” He continued on the explain the situation, how they had come to Redcliffe to petition the Arl for support against the darkspawn, but found instead a town in the middle of being overrun by a curse of undead, with the Arl locked away in his castle, fate unknown. “We plan on infiltrating the castle today, if you would care to accompany us.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

“Aedan’s fine. I’m a lord no longer. Titles have no meaning with us,” he replied grimly. Surprised, Aerin nodded.

“Aedan, then.”

Leliana motioned at the group. “Bann Teagan is coming out of the chantry. Let’s go listen.” Aerin followed the others to the steps of the chantry, finding a place off to the side, hiding behind a column. She listened to the handsome nobleman praise the warden and his group, crowd cheering all the while. The warden, the leader one, not the bumbling one, seems like a good man so far, she pondered. That woman. I wonder if she’s related to Asha’bellanar. Would it be wise to even ask? She carries a staff like the Keepers did. So she’s a mage too? Is she from a Circle? Ugh. There’s so much I don’t understand about this place still. After the crowd dispersed, the group began moving up towards the windmill on the hill. She got a good glimpse of the town as they ascended. It was a quiet, picturesque place, with a beautifully dark lake shimmering in the distance. It was a nice place, she decided. Or would be with less dark magic.

As Aedan talked with the bann, Aerin studied her new companions. Alistair seems simple enough. There’s more to Leliana I think. Definitely not the sweet innocent person she portrays And her accent. Orlesian? Sounds French. Aedan turned to Alistair. “I assume you’ll definitely want to go, right? Should bring Leliana too in case we need any locks picked. And let’s bring our new friend
with us. Morrigan, will you take Calenhad with you and stay in town?” With a disgusted sound, the
dark haired woman stomped off, happily barking dog in tow. “Alright then, let’s go people. Stay
sharp.”

The secret passage was dark and moldy. Cobwebs were everywhere. Aerin shivered and inched
closer to Leliana, who smiled questioningly at the elf. “Spiders,” she muttered by way of
explanation. The archer nodded in agreement.

“Don’t worry ladies, your valiant heroes will protect you from any eight legged fiends we might
encounter,” Aedan called back. At that moment, Alistair walked into a web and let out a shriek
eerily reminiscent of a six year old girl. The girls dissolved into giggles, grinning at each other.
With a wide grin, Aedan continued, “Then again, maybe not.”

As the group continued in the dim tunnel, Alistair responded, “It’s just this place. Can’t you feel
the evil in the air? Smells wrong.”

“Templar senses tingling?”

He shrugged. “I suppose so, if no one else can sense it.” Aerin panicked. A templar? Here?!

Clearing her throat, she asked in what she hoped was a noncommittal tone, “You’re a templar,
Alistair?”

Peering into the dark, he answered, “I trained as one but I never took the vows. Recruited into the
wardens before then. Good thing too. The life of a mage hunter never appealed to me.”

“Oh.” After a few moments, she turned to Leliana. “So Morrigan… She’s a mage, right?”

Aedan answered, “Yes. The daughter of the Witch of the Wilds, actually. Her mother... saved us at
Ostargar.”

“She’s not from a circle then?”

Alistair snorted. “Don’t ever let her hear you ask that. She’s as far from the circles as an apostate
can get. Lovely woman, really.”

“She is useful, you can’t deny that,” Aedan chided. The other warden just grumbled under his
breath, something about harpies and toads and swooping. So they travel willingly with an apostate?
Would they not turn me into the templars then? Best not to tempt it. Pushing the heavy wooden
door at the end of the tunnel in, the group found themselves in the dungeons. Aerin eyed the
numerous cobwebs warily. More corpses were lumbering around, gathered around a cell near the
end of the hall. A frightened voice called out for help.

A few moments later, after the hall was cleared, Aedan was speaking to the imprisoned mage.
Aerin held back, listening in. A blood mage. Of course. The mage was begging Aedan to let him
go, insisting he had just poisoned the Arl, and he was innocent with regards to the undead.

Alistair stared at Aedan. “You’re not seriously considering freeing him, are you? He’s probably
lying about the whole thing!”

“We should just leave him here for now,” Leliana suggested. Thus decided, they pressed on
through the rest of the castle, fighting their way up through more undead to the main hall, where a
young boy stood on the dais, watching Bann Teague turn somersaults like a circus clown. Gods
above, what is going on? The boy made a deal with a demon to help his father? Oh, poor little fool.
“This man spoiled my fun by saving that stupid village, and now he’ll repay me!” the boy pointed angrily at the warden. Bann Teagan and the guards withdrew their swords and advanced on command.

“Don’t hurt them,” Alistair shouted. “Uncle, uncle, it’s me!” Huh? Uncle? Aerin didn’t have time to decipher what was going on.

“So, just maim then?” She spun about, knocking a guard to his knees and striking him in the back of his skull, sending the man slithering to the floor.

“Maim is good. Gently, please,” he begged. A few moments later, all the men lay unconscious on the ground and the boy had run off deeper into the castle. Teagan wearily stood up, wincing against the bruises that were already forming, once again himself. Leliana disappeared while Teagan and Isolde argued amongst themselves as to what to do, returning shortly with the blood mage in hand.

“This is all his fault!” Isolde screeched, pointing, while Jowan predictably and vehemently denied any part in the demon.

“So… the boy is a mage? And summoned the demon. And now he’s possessed. This is the short of it, yes?” Leliana clarified, arms crossed.

“Seems that way,” Aedan crossed his arms.

“Surely there’s another way besides killing him, isn’t there?” The idea of killing a child obviously didn’t sit well with Alistair.

“Killing Connor is… the easiest way to kill the demon, certainly. But a mage could confront the demon in the Fade, without hurting the boy. I could send a mage into the Fade, but that would require lyrium and several mages. Or…” he hesitate. Teagan crossed his arms expectantly.

Crossing his throat, Jowan continued, “Or I have blood magic. The ritual I know, requires life energy. All of it, in fact. I’m sorry. It isn’t much of an option, I probably shouldn’t have even mentioned it.” The collective faces of all darkened.

“So be it,” Isolde straightened, resolute. “Let it be me, then. I will give my life for his.” Leliana gasped. Aerin watched the noblewoman carefully. A mother’s love indeed.

“We still have to go to the Ferelden Circle,” Alistair spun to face Aedan. “We can petition for more mages to come and cast the ritual! Nobody has to die!” Cousland’s face fell.

“Alistair. We’re already short on time, we can’t… And by the time we travel there and back, it might be too late to save any of them. The town is defenseless against another attack. No one is sure how long Eamon will remain... stable, either.” Falling back, Alistair stared vacantly at the stone floor.

“Wait. The sacrifice and ritual is just needed to send a mage to the Fade, correct?” Jowan nodded. Aerin took a deep breath. “Will you protect me?” Aedan and Alistair shared matching confused looks.

“Do you know a Dalish ritual of some sort?” Alistair piped up hopefully. She hesitantly nodded.

“Of a sort.”

Alistair bowed. “If you can solve this without anymore bloodshed, I promise I will protect you to
the Black City itself.” Aedan agreed.

“Right. That’s a little extreme, but okay. I can go to the Fade. Without lyrium or a ritual. The boy is still in the castle, yes? Shouldn’t be too hard to find him then.”

“Maker’s breath,” Jowan stared in awe. “You’re a Dreamer.”

“You’re a mage?” Leliana narrowed her eyes. Aerin inhaled a deep breath.

“Yes. Look, I’ll just... sit here. Give me a bit.” Alistair sat next to her and gave her an encouraging smile.

“Good luck, my lady.” Quirking her lips into a lopsided smile, she closed her eyes and reached for the Fade.

***

The waters of Lake Calenhad were particularly bright that day. The cold winter’s wind howled around the fishing houses, making Aerin curl further into herself. Stupid Ferelden. Why is so fucking cold? A heavy coat dropped around her shoulders, catching her off guard and almost pitched her into the frigid waters.

“Sorry! Sorry, I just uh, thought you were cold, and um. Yes, well.” Glaring back, she found a sheepish Alistair, who was kicking at a wooden plank sticking up out of the dock. Sighing in relief and slight annoyance, she clutched the coat.

“Thanks, Alistair.”

“Not used to cold weather, are you?”

“Mm. It’s much warmer where I’m from.” He sat down next to her.

“Clan Lavellan you said, right? Where are they?”

“Free Marches. Near Antiva this time of year.”

“Oh that sounds lovely. You’re not what I imagined a Dalish to be, you know. Less stabby towards humans for one. No tattoos either.”

She smirked. “I can be stabby if I care to be. And I just haven’t taken my vallaslin yet. Not the right time.” She eyed him. “You’re not what I imagined a templar warden warrior to be either. Friendlier. And much more awkward.”

“That’s because I was raised by dogs. Giant, slobbering ones from the Anderfels,” he grinned, leaning back on his elbows.

“That would explain the smell then,” she agreed.

“Hey!”

They sat in companionable silence for a few moments more. “So... you said the Bann was your uncle? You and Aedan are both nobility then?”

Groaning, he flopped down onto his back and stared at the pale blue sky. “Teagan is only sort of my uncle. Aedan is a Cousland. Son of the Teryn of Highever. Or brother to the Teryn now. Arl Howe murdered his parents right before Duncan, my mentor, recruited him. Me, I’m just a bastard.
Arl Eamon raised me, until I was sent to the chantry. Queen Rowan was Eamon and Teagan’s sister. Maric, the king, was allegedly my father.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “King? So you’re a prince? The heir?”

“Maker’s breath, I hope not!” he flailed on the ground. “I don’t think so. You don’t think so, do you? People were quite clear on my place in the world. My mother was a regular, common serving girl with a predilection for indiscreet kings. Nobody even knows about me, which is just how I prefer it, thankyouverymuch.”

Aerin was confused. “Wait, you don’t want to be king? All that power and wealth? Most men would kill to be king. In fact, they do kill. Lots of wars and stuff all throughout history.”

“Nope nope nope. I’m quite content with being just Alistair. I can’t lead. Bad things happen when I lead. We get lost, people die, and the next thing you know I’m stranded somewhere without any pants.”

Throwing her head back laughing, Aerin felt herself smile for the first time since leaving the clan. Alistair grinned, pleased with her reaction. “You’re a strange one, Warden Alistair.”

“You’re not the first to tell me that.” Aedan passed them, heading for the windmill, and called out at them to meet the rest of the group. Trotting uphill, they found Morrigan and Sten already waiting.

“So apparently, the ashes of Andraste are Eamon’s only hope,” Aedan sighed. “And a scholar, Genitivi is our best lead. He’s in Denerim. The mages are on our way to the city, as well as the Dalish. We can stop briefly at both places.” Morrigan made an irritated sound at the mention of the circle, while Sten scowled. Again. Aerin wondered if that was his permanent expression.

“Let’s go then.”

Chapter End Notes

I realize in the game, Alistair has brown/hazel eyes. However, in the comics, Until We Sleep to be precise, he’s drawn and colored with pale blue eyes. It’s a striking combination with his hair and face, so I kept it. I’ll post a screenshot on my tumblr later if anyone’s curious. Plus, I do what I want.
“I have heard such tales of the Dalish,” Leliana skipped happily along side Aedan. “Will you tell us some?”

“Uh, I’m not much of a storyteller. My sister is much better at it,” Aerin deflected.

“Surely you must know some,” Morrigan drawled, watching her carefully with those unnatural eyes.

“Looking for a bedtime story?”

“Hardly,” she scoffed. “‘Tis simply a curious thing. I’ve heard the Dalish were all overly fond of their history.”

“And I’ve heard all humans were all overly fond of enslaving elves and killing each other. Let’s try to prove them wrong, hmm?” The witch’s eyes flashed as she haughtily stalked away.

“I’m surprised you two aren’t the best of friends,” Alistair remarked. “Both of you being apostates and all.” Aerin stiffened as the witch whirled back around.

“You are a mage! I thought as much. Why do you try to hide it?”

She gave a mirthless laugh. “Right, because a Dalish elf prancing through chantry lands throwing fireballs around always ends well. Besides, I prefer stabbing things. Much more satisfying.” The Qunari glowered at them both. “He doesn’t like me much, does he?”

Leliana smiled and linked arms with Aerin, who stared in horror at the overly familiar, physical affection. “He doesn’t like any mages. Or women who fight. Or people in general, I think. It’s fine. He pretends to be all stern and fierce, but he’s really just a big softie. But tell me. Your accent is curious. You said your clan roams the Free Marches, yes? Where did you pick up that adorable accent?”

She’s sharp. Her accent was rather unusual. A hint of her original southern accent had remained, mixed in with a dash of Tevinter. Aerin shrugged, indifferent. “I’ve always had it. Not really sure.” The bard’s eyes narrowed quickly, so fast, Aerin thought she imagined it. Then the bright smile returned as she returned to her previous, cheerful self. The massive wardog bounced along side them, coming up to sniff Aerin every few minutes. Eventually, she leaned down and offered him her hand. “Hi doggy! Such a good boy, aren’t you?”

"Bark bark!" Aerin giggled.

“You like dogs?” Alistair’s face lit up.

“Always have. Especially smart sweet doggies like you, yes you are.” The dog barked happily.

“Cal made a new friend, it seems,” Aedan remarked. Aerin beamed, and took off running, jumping and playing with the mabari. She was feeling more free here on the road than she had in years.

Strange, how comfortable I feel with these strangers already. She continued prancing around with Calenhad, totally oblivious to Alistair’s stares, although Leliana was not.
“Beautiful, isn’t she?” Alistair stammered in embarrassed denial. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell,” she teased. “She is quite lovely and talented, no? Hmm. Maybe she likes women. Do you think she likes women? I should ask her.” A spluttered cough was the only response she got.

“Leliana, don’t break Alistair. We need him,” the other warden called back.

“Yes, please don’t break me. I’m quite delicate, I’ll have you know.”

***

The sun had set by the time they reached the circle. “Welcome to Kinloch Hold, home of the Ferelden Circle of Magi,” Alistair muttered. “Gives me the creeps.”

“How very fitting that they would build a prison for mages in the middle of a lake and make it look like a giant phallus,” Morrigan sneered at the building. Aerin burst out laughing.

“It really does,” she gazed out over the lake.

“Well then, who’s coming with? Right, not Sten or Morrigan,” Aedan sighed as both made a contemptuous face.

“Do you enter the tower to gain the assistance of the arvaarad?” Sten asked.

Alistair nudged Aerin. “He means templars.”

Aedan shrugged. “It’ll be whichever group is willing to help, mages or templars.” Wrong answer. The response was stilted. “I swore myself to your cause. If you wish it, I will accompany you.”

“Would you three want to come?” Aedan asked hopefully. Alistair and Leliana both readily agreed. Aerin was slower.

“I… Just promise you won’t leave me there, would you?”

They all assured her they’d do no such thing. Guess we’ll see. Aedan approached the templar by the boat, who stubbornly refused to grant them access and now insisted he was the Queen of Antiva. Throwing his hands up, he called back, “Help? Someone? Anyone?”

Aerin whipped out two of her daggers from her boots. “Help, you say? I can be very… persuasive, my friend,” she purred at the hapless templar, trailing the flat of her blade down her neck seductively.


“Don’t like water?” Aedan asked.

“Water’s fine in small amounts. Glasses, puddles, soup bowls. Not so much when I can’t see the bottom.”

“Just pretend it’s the biggest soup bowl you’ve ever seen,” Alistair suggested.

“And that would make us, what? The meat?” Leliana asked, mirth in her voice.
“Right. Uh. Bad analogy?” Aerin just groaned. Luckily, the boat ride didn’t take long until it pulled up on the rocky shore, moonlight casting a dark shadow over them. *How ominous.* The templar, Carroll, pushed open the large double doors of the tower as Aedan and Alistair walked in to talk to a frustrated Knight-Commander.

*Great, more abominations and demons and uggghhh this place.* “What is with all the mages in this country and demons? I suppose we’re going into the possessed tower then?” Aerin muttered.

“Looks that way,” Alistair replied unhappily.

Leliana just shook her head. “Let’s get this over with.”

***

Aerin wanted to throw up. So she did. Repeatedly. She had seen some horrible things in Tevinter, but nothing compared to this. Mangled bodies, fleshy sacks, and blood and organs lay splattered all over the walls and floors and even ceilings. The ceilings were some twenty to thirty feet high! She tried not to think about the force it would take to get a spleen that high and make it stick. The rest of the party didn’t fare any better. Leliana was ghostly pale, Alistair was green, and Aedan was right along side her, throwing up. “This sucks,” she muttered to no one in particular. Wynne, the kindly older mage that accompanied them, patted her back.

“It really does,” she sighed. “All these poor souls…” Aerin gave her hand a quick squeeze.

“I’m sorry.” Wynne smiled, a tired thing.

“Thank you for your sympathy dear. But we must press on. The fourth floor stairs are up ahead.”

Throwing open one door, the group spotted a curvaceous mostly naked lavender demon sinuously wrapped around a distractedly smiling templar.

“If you kill the demon, you’ll kill the templar too.”

“You can’t let the demon go!”

“He was dead the moment it possessed him anyways.”

The group wearily stumbled into the last room on the floor. Beautiful stone work with fancy iron scrolls encircled the open room. And in the middle, more dead people. Putrescent growths crawled up the walls. In the center by a small carved table, stood an unfamiliar, tall, misshapen demon. Aerin gagged again, stomach seizing up the repeated action.

“Aren’t you tired of all the violence in this world? I know I am,” the demon drawled in a surprisingly relaxing tone of voice that made them all yawn. “Wouldn’t you like to just lay down, and just… forget about all this? Leave it all behind?”

“Resist!” Wynne cried out. “You must resist, else we are all lost!”

“Why do you fight? You deserve a rest. The world will go on without you.” Aedan blinked heavily, and stumbled back. *So tired.*

“No…”

The world went black.

***
A buzzing sound startled Aerin awake. She shot up out of bed, slamming her hand down on the offending alarm clock. Yawning, she checked the time. 7:30am. Just enough time to get dressed and make it to her first class. Throwing on a pair of jeans and a hoodie, she quickly brushed her teeth and grabbed a poptart out of the small dorm pantry. On her way out, she checked her phone. One new voicemail. She dialed her mailbox.

“Hi sweetie! Your father and I have missed you so much! Our plane lands in LaGuardia this morning at 10am, then we’ll catch a taxi to your campus. Can’t wait to see you! Love you, bye!” her mom’s voice rang out cheerily from the phone. That’s right, mom and dad are coming to town for the week to see me for Christmas. How could I have forgotten? She chalked it up to being exhausted with her studies. She had her regular classes in the mornings, math and English and basic sciences, and rehearsal four days a week in the afternoons. Nights were reserved for her serving job down in Midtown. She was busy, but so happy here. She couldn’t believe she had gotten into Juilliard. Or that her parents accepted and supported her dance major. Or that they had actually let her come all the way here and live in NYC by herself. It was a dream come true.

The skies were overcast, clouds rolling in thick. It would probably snow later today. Wrinkling up her nose, she made a mental note to grab her boots and parka later. And gloves. Maybe two pairs of gloves. She hated being cold. Thank goodness the classroom is warm. Taking her gloves off, she reached out to take the test back from her professor.

“Excellent work, Aerin. Highest score in the class again.” She beamed. A boy next to her groaned at his test, then glanced at her hopefully. “Hey, you do really well in here, right? Maybe we could get together sometime and you could help me study?” Aerin blushed. Oh he’s so cute. That strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes and god his accent.

“Of course!” she brightly chirped. Eeeeeee! Her inner voice squealed. She nervously pushed a black lock of hair behind her rounded ear. Huh? Black? Wasn’t my hair red…? No, it’s always been black. And my ears. Come on girl, why would you have pointed ear? Halloween’s over. She was having the oddest thoughts today. Bustling out of her last morning class a little over two hours later, she checked her phone.

Text from mom: “Hi Jia! We just landed a few minutes ago, going to get our luggage. Where should we meet you?”

Type type type: “Just go to your hotel so you can drop off your stuff. Then we can go sightseeing!”

Text from dad: “And eat, right??? :D :D”

Jia snorted. Her dad loved food. For such a small guy, he sure did love to eat. She headed back to her dorm to grab her winter gear, then began walking along the busy sidewalks to where her parents were going to stay. It was near Central Park, so she could wander around for a bit while she waited on them. She loved the park, and never really had to time to stop there, so it would be a nice treat for her.

The crosswalk light turned green, and she stepped out onto the road.

“Andraste’s bloody balls of fire!” That was a weird curse.

“Aerin! Aerin, slow down!” Jia kept walking. New York has such odd characters here.

“Maferath’s beard, Aerin!” Don’t make eye contact don’t make eye contact. She reached the
opposite sidewalk, the entrance to the park only a few feet away now. A hand reached out to grab her arm. She jerked it away.

“Hey mister, the hell is your problem?!” She paused, anger fading as quickly as it came as she took in the strangely dressed man. “If you’re here for a comicon, you’re in the wrong district. Or are you LARPing in the park?”

His face screwed up in confusion. “What the bloody hell are you talking about? Aerin, it’s me. Aedan.”

She eyed him warily as she slowly backed away. “Look, dude, my name’s not Aerin. And I have no clue who you are.” Even though he is familiar. Why is he familiar? His armor too. It’s real. Actual metal and scratches and is that blood?! Why is he familiar?! Shaking her head, she ran into the empty park. Empty? That's not right. Central Park is never empty, except maybe in the middle of a blizzard.

“Honey!” her parents stood there suddenly, smiling. How did they get here so fast? Disregarding her doubts, she ran at them.

“Mom! Dad! I missed you guys so much!” Flinging herself into their arms, she buried her face in her dad’s chest. Breathing deeply, she inhaled their familiar scent, overlaid with something metallic. Maybe from the airplanes. They always smell weird.

“We missed you too, kamo-chan,” her dad grinned down at her. “Now let me look at my baby girl.” Holding her at arm’s length he appraised her.

“Look at her, dear. So grown up,” her mom sniffed. “Who’s your admirer? Why is he dressed so weird?” Frowning, she turned around where Sir Lancelot stood, watching her.

“No clue, Mom, just some random freak that started following me around a minute ago.”

Her dad frowned. “That’s the problem with big cities like this. Too many nutcases.”

“Aerin, I’m begging you, please, try and remember. You’re a Dalish elf. You have a sister in your clan. You’re in the Ferelden Circle of Magi with Alistair, Leliana, Wynne, and me. There was a demon. A sloth demon, do you remember? This isn’t you.”

“No me? Who else would I be?” she snapped. Those names… Elf? Self consciously, she reached up to her ears. They were pointed. Jerking her fingers back, she stepped away. “What did you do to me?!”

“I didn’t do anything. I know you remember! You have to come back with me. This isn’t your home. This isn’t real.” She glanced back at her parents. Her mother walked up to the man.

“Jia is very happy here. Why do you try to take her away?”

“She’s not Jia, whoever that is. Her name is Aerin, of Clan Lavellan, and she swore herself to help the Grey Wardens defend Thedas against the Blight!” Lavellan. Blight. Images assaulted her, forcing her to her knees, eyes screwed shut, hands covering her face.

Caius. The glowing lyrium binding itself to blood. Erebus, whipping her when she dropped her sword. An arena, twin swords in her hand, screaming crowd surrounding her as she battled a captured Qunari for their entertainment. Riding for her life down the Highway, away from her master. Sitting outside of an aravel, listening to the hahren sing to the children. Ellana. My sister. Sweet Ellana, holding her in their tiny cell as Jia cried from the pain of the binding. Wrapping
poultices around her wounds after a match. Tripping through the woods as they raced away from
their bondage. Holding her new bow and arrow and hitting the target for the first time, shrieking at
Jia to come watch. No. Not Jia. Aerin. Knees pressed into the cold ground, she let her hands drop
into her lap and whispered, “No.”

“I’m so sorry Aerin, but we have to go. You have to fight back.”

“You will not have her!” her mother screeched, launching a bolt of electricity at Aedan. Well, that's
definitely not her then.

“No!” the cry spilled from her lips. Her jeans and hoodie fell away, revealing battered leather
armor, and her swords appeared in her hand. She shook her braid to the front. Red. With a yell, she
charged the thing wearing her mother’s face. The one pretending to be her father lunged for Aedan.

“She was happy here, back with her family! Why do you interfere?”

“Because it’s not real,” Aerin shouted, tears streaming down her face. The demons fell quickly.
Aerin felt herself begin to fade away. “I’m so sorry Aedan.”

He gave her a sad smile. “It’s ok. We’ll talk later?” She nodded as the world turned black once
again.

***

The group stopped in the last room before the Harrowing chamber. No one had talked much.
Alistair’s face was stuck in a perpetual blush and Leliana's was pensive drawn. Seems like I wasn’t
the only one caught in a fantasy world. Aerin’s eyes were drawn to a hunched figure besides the
stairs. A curly haired templar in the typical full plate armor, sword emblazoned on the breast,
kneedled, trapped in a circle of light. His dead brethren and other mages carelessly littered the edges
of the room in a gory tableau of horror.

“This trick again? I know what you are. It won’t work. I will stay strong.” The templar voice was
harsh and dry as he grabbed his head between his hands, rocking back and forth on his heels.

“The boy is exhausted,” Wynne remarked, voice full of pity. “And this cage… I’ve never seen
anything like it. Help is on the way, Ser Cullen.”

“Enough visions! If anything in you is human, I beg of you, kill me now and end this game! You
broke the others, but I will stay strong! For my sake… and theirs… Sifting through my thoughts,
using my shame against me, my ill-advised infatuation with her… I’m so tired of these cruel jokes,
these tricks… these… Begone!” With that the templar fell onto his bottom, drew his knees into his
chest, closed his eyes and began murmuring the Chant of Light. He cracked open an eye. “You’re
still here? But that’s always worked before. You’re real, then?”

Alistair muttered, “Poor sod. He’s probably been trapped here for days, tortured.” He certainly
looked like it. His pale face was drawn, blonde hair matted, black circles ringed his sunken red,
bloodshot eyes, a rough layer of stubble covered his lower face.

Aerin knelt down in front of him. “We are real, ser. We’re searching for the First Enchanter. Is he
in the Harrowing chamber?”

The templar stared. “You can’t be real, such beauty is not found among mortals.”

Behind her, Alistair snorted. “Is that what I sound like?” he whispered to Leliana, who nodded. The
former templar groaned. Aerin turned back to hiss at them.
“They deserve to die. All of them. Uldred most of all. They caged us like animals, looked for ways to break us. I’m the only one left. There was nothing I could do…” Cullen trailed off. “Irving and the others went into the chamber awhile ago. The sounds coming out of there… oh Maker. You can’t save them. They’ve been surrounded by blood mages, whose wicked fingers snake into your mind and corrupt your mind. You have to end it now, before it’s too late. To ensure this horror is ended, you must kill everyone up there.”

The warden sighed. “I won’t make any decisions until I see it for myself. I won’t kill an innocent.”

“Thank you for making a rational decision,” Wynne breathed.

“Rational?! How is that rational? Fine. Don’t waste time on me. Once Uldred is dead, I will be free.” Shaking his head, he glared at them, anger marking his gaunt, handsome features. “No one ever listens, not until it’s far too late.” Aerin rose to her feet.

“I know about blood magic, templar. I also know there are mages out there who are strong enough to resist and who remain innocent.”

“I pray you are right, else we are all doomed.”

***

Cullen sat back down as they disappeared up into the chamber. “Fools,” he muttered. “Why can’t they see? Blood magic taints everything! No one is immune.”

“Ah, my pet. Did you enjoy meeting your new friends?” a husky voice called to him.

“Begone demon!” he snarled. Raising himself into a position to pray, he began to intone: “Maker, my enemies are abundant. Many are those who rise up against me. But my faith sustains me; I shall not fear the legion, should they set themselves against me… You have walked beside me down the paths where a thousand arrows sought my flesh.”

As he prayed, the demon mage smiled seductively, unfastening her robe, revealing a creamy expanse of pale, soft flesh, silky hazelnut curls of hair falling to her slim waist. Wrapping herself around his back, she bit his ear, soft as first, then hard enough to draw blood. “Come, my love. My patience wears thin. I offer you what no one else can. Love, pleasure, whatever else you desire. Succumb to me…”

The minutes dragged on. Cullen’s breath grew ragged as the demon drew out his most shameful thoughts and replayed them, agonizingly slowly through his mind. He grit his teeth and continued to recite the Trials. “You have stood with me when all others have forsaken me. I have faced armies with You as my shield, and though I bear scars beyond counting, nothing can break me except your absence. Maker, though the darkness comes upon me, I shall embrace the Light. I shall weather the storm. I shall endure.”

“Hmm, are we already tired of that mage? Solona, was it? Yes, it wouldn’t do to love a dead woman, would it? Let’s see. Oh, what do we have here? Yes, I think I like this form.” Hazelnut hair turned into the color of rubies. Fair skin that had never seen the sun darkened to a warm glow. Pert, rounded ears elongated to a point. Soft, green eyes brightened into a cobalt blue, with a thin band of gold. “Is this better, pet? Does this figure please you more?”

With a cry, Cullen pressed his hands into his eyes and practically shouted, “Though all before me is shadow, yet shall the Maker be my guide. I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond. For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light and nothing that He has wrought shall be
lost. I am not alone. Even as I stumble on the path with my eyes closed, yet I see the Light is here.”
Clucking her tongue, the demon slid her hands over the unwilling bulge in the templar’s pants.

“Ah! It seems this is the one then. Come, sweetling. Play with me.” She slowly untied the laces of
his pants, claws trailing against his skin. Cullen whimpered.

“Draw your last breath, my friends. Cross the Veil and the Fade and all the stars in the sky. Rest at
the Maker’s right hand, and be Forgiven.” The demon screamed. And vanished, along with the
barrier. They… did it? With a bang, the Harrowing chamber door flung open. The two Grey
Wardens descended, supporting an injured First Enchanter Irving. The elf from earlier extended her
hand to him.

“Everyone else that was up there is dead,” she murmured. “Your Knight-Commander awaits. Will
you come with us?” He gazed up at her brilliant eyes, his eyes clouded with shame, ignoring a
scowling Alistair. Taking his trembling hand, she pulled him to his feet with surprising strength.
“I’ve got you.” Another redheaded woman with a bow and quiver slung over her back took his
other side.

“Come on, Ser Cullen,” the archer smiled in a gentle Orlesian accent. The mage with them wisely
said nothing and instead, led the way. And so Ser Cullen left the chamber, completely and utterly
broken.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Cully Wully.

This is my favorite chapter so far, I think. Eventually, I’m going to go back and rewrite
the first few.
Back in camp, Aerin laid out her bedroll, sat down on it, and flopped down, sprawled out like a starfish. “Don’t you have a tent?” She glanced over at Leliana.

“No, the Dalish always slept under the stars. If it rained, we stayed in the aravels.”

“Oh. We’ll have to get you a tent then. It's far too cold to sleep outside. You’re welcome to share mine if you’d like until then. Body heat is always the best.”

“Oh?” she eyed the bard suspiciously. Leliana laughed her bell-like giggle.

“Don’t worry, I won’t make any attempts on your modesty,” she grinned.

“Well that’s no fun,” Aerin laughed, then sobered. “I’m glad Aedan helped convince Greagoir that the mages were their own. I can’t imagine killing all those people just ‘in case’. All those children.”

“If that templar had his way, all the mages would be annulled,” Leliana replied darkly.

“I can understand it though,” the other girl murmured. “Blood magic, torture. It’s an impossible thing to forget. The marks it leaves will last his lifetime.”

“You sound if you have experience with both.”

“Perhaps.” Aerin turned back to her pack. “What watch am I taking?”

“Would you mind taking the second watch with me?” Aedan walked over.

“Sure thing. Just wake me when it’s time.” Picking up her bedroll, she followed Leliana into her tent. Not sure if this is the best idea, but it’s a damn sight warmer. If she asks too many questions, I’ll just stab her. Laying down inside the tent, she slipped off her armor but left her boots on. Making sure her swords were with reach, Aerin wrapped her blanket around her and drifted off to sleep.

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A tongue licked her arm. “Mmrph.” Lick, lick. “Urrghh.” It moved to her face. “Fine, fine, I’m up.” Sitting up, she glared at Calenhad, who woofed softly, as to not wake her tentmate. Pulling her armor on, the girl fastened the brass buckles as she walked outside, shivering. Ducking back into the tent, she grabbed her blanket before going back out and sitting as close to the fire as possible without actually sitting in the fire.

“Any closer and you might as well just set yourself on fire,” Aedan stretched out on the other side of the fire, annoyingly just dressed in his armor and seeming content. Aerin scowled at him. “Not a morning person then?”

“No.” He laughed in a low tone, then waved at Alistair who was disappearling into his tent. Alistair paused for a second, brow creased as he watched Aedan move closer to Aerin. Sighing, he pushed open his tent flap and sat down. Of course. Mr. Leader and nobleman and oh I’m so smart and ugh. Stupid Alistair. Like you ever had a chance. Grousing to himself, he lay down to try and get
some sleep.

Back outside, Aedan sat next to the elf. “I’m not sharing my blanket with you, if that’s why you came over here.” Pointedly, she wrapped the heavy wool tighter around her small frame.

“Ferelden, remember? This is a balmy night.”

She shook her head. “You’re all insane.”

He grinned, then turned to stare into the fire. “So. Back in the circle. I know you don’t want to talk about it, and honestly you don’t have to tell me details. I saw the others too, in their dream worlds. Everyone deserves their secrets. But the place you were in… it was nothing like I’ve ever seen.”

The fire crackled softly, a log crumbling into embers. She grabbed a nearby branch and tossed it into the center, watching the flames lick around the dead wood. “How did you know it was me? I… know I looked different.”

Shaking his head, the warden replied, “I didn’t at first. There were all these people and I was so confused. Then I saw you. And your form flickered. From a redhead elf to a black haired human. Just… where were you?”

“Would you even believe me? It’s a ridiculous story.”

He shrugged. “We’ve got three hours to kill. And I like stories.”

Sighing, she shifted so she was cross-legged and remained silent for a minute. Then, “It’s called New York.”

“What happened to Old York?”

“Somewhere far across the ocean. Now hush, or I’ll stop talking. It’s a city, about twelve hours north of where I lived as a kid. Twelve hours by car at least. By horse, it’s probably a week or more, I don’t know. It’s… I’m from a country called the United States of America. I lived there, leading a perfectly normal, average, boring life with my parents until I was 11. Then, there was an accident. And I woke up here. In Thedas.”

Aedan frowned. “You’re not from Thedas? Another world? What’s a car?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure if it’s a parallel world or an entirely different planet or what. A car is… Do you remember the streets? And these big metal boxes people were in?” He nodded. “Those are cars. It’s like a carriage, except it’s powered by an engine, not a horse. And it goes much faster and farther than horses. We don’t have magic, we have science and technology. We build things, like ships that can carry thousands of people at once, or planes- metal carriages that can fly. We have devices that let you talk to anyone anywhere in the world instantly. We have medicine that can save people from so many diseases. Dying of old age is getting to be more and more common. There’s no such thing as darkspawn, or dragons, or elves or dwarves or Qunari. Or demons. Just humans.”

“Sounds nice,” he remarked wistfully. “No magic or demons or darkspawn.”

“Sounds that way, but shit still happens. We invented machines to kill. A bomb, do you have those here? Think of a really big grenade. That can kill 100,000 people instantly. And poison the land and the very air so that hundreds of thousands more die over the next several years. The last world war killed some 60 million people.”

His eyes grew huge. “Maker… how many people live in your world?”
“Not sure. Six, seven billion? Like I said, our medicine is good. People stopped dying as much within the last two centuries. But that created other problems.” Aerin sighed and leaned back. “It sounds terrible, but it was home. And honestly, where I lived, we had it good. Plenty to eat, relatively crime free. I never saw anyone die before I came here. Here, it seems death is everywhere.”

Aedan nodded. “Another world… It’s hard to believe. But how can I not? I saw that place you were in with my own eyes.” He breathed out. “So. You said only humans live on your world? But you’re…”

“No?” she grimaced. “I was human, when I came here. But I ended up in forced into a blood magic ritual that changed me into an elf. I don’t mention it to anyone, because honestly, who would believe me?”

“Maker’s hairy ball sack.” Aerin giggled at that. “Sorry. No, you’re right, no one would believe you. So the girl with the long black hair, that’s the real you?” She nodded sadly. “You know, elf you is absolutely gorgeous, but also terrifying.” Snort. “The human you, she’s beautiful too. She had a warmth to her, an inner glow.” He gave her a sad smile. “Is there a chance to break the binding somehow?”

“That girl you saw might not actually be me. I’m not really sure what I look like. It’s been awhile. And there is. It’s why I’m here actually. I help save the world, it starts me on the path to breaking it.”

“Who did send you by the way? You never said.”

“No, I didn’t.” Aerin smiled.

“Ugh, fine, keep your secrets, wench. Just… you’re on our side, right? I’d really hate to kill you. Mainly because I don’t think I could. You’d skewer me in heartbeat.”

Laughing, she shook her head, hair falling around her shoulders. “Yes, I’m on your side silly. I don’t want to see the world fall to the Blight anymore than you.”

“What will you do after?”

“Return to the clan I suppose. Ellana will be waiting on me.”

“That’s your sister?”

“Yes. Do you have any siblings?”

Aedan frowned at the fire. “One. Older brother, Fergus. He’s… I’m not sure where is. He was at Ostagar. I need to find him. He’s the new Teryn of Highever, after all.” A dark cloud passed over his handsome features. Aerin awkwardly patted his knee.

“I’m sure he’s alright. If he’s anything like you, he’s perfectly fine. Probably raising his own army with rag tag bunch of misfits,” she quipped lightly.

“Heh. You’re probably right.”

“I’m always right,” came the smug reply.

***
Alistair really should be sleeping. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t hear exactly what they were saying, but they were talking. For a long time. He was making her laugh. Trying to force his jealousy down, Alistair sullenly turned over. What does it matter anyways? Not like she would be interested in me. Just a poor, bastard warden, destined to die at an early age from the Calling.

***

The morning was bright, and surprisingly, not as cold as it had been. Spring was coming, the snow melting, turning the ground into mud and muck. The group quickly packed up their tents and belongings and set out east to the Brecilian Forest to try find the Dalish elves. Their newest companion, the circle mage Wynne, moved among them, offering to heal any injuries they had. A spirit healer is the best idea this place has come up with yet.

“Are these the only Dalish in Ferelden?” Alistair asked once they were on the road.

Aerin shrugged. “Clan Sabrae used to be here, but they were moving to the Free Marches to escape the Blight last I heard. There might be more in the Frostbacks or further south in the Wilds somewhere, I’m not too sure. They tend to stick to the borders of countries. Safer that way.”

“You always refer to the Dalish as ‘they’ or ‘their’ instead of ‘us’ or ‘our’. ‘Tis a most interesting tidbit, don’t you think?” Morrigan slowed down to glance at her. Aerin just shrugged again.

“Never really felt like I fit in.” She sped up to catch up to Alistair. “I would love nothing more than to punch her. You think anyone would care?”

Alistair guffawed. “I would pay such good money to see that. Or would pay, if I had any money. Let’s see. I have twelve coppers, a length of twine, and a lint ball in the shape of a bunny. Will that suffice?”

“Oh I do love bunnies.” Aerin grinned, eyes twinkling. “But the rest is rubbish. I’d settle for a kiss. One kiss, and I’ll let you watch me and Morrigan.”

“Ok, now you’re just making it sound dirty on purpose,” he complained. “Besides, someone might get jealous.”

Raising her eyebrow, she looked around. “Calenhad? He does seem quite jealous of my attention.”

“No, not Cal,” he groaned. “Him. I saw you two getting cozy last night,” he added darkly.

Him? Who is he- oh! She laughed brightly. “We were just talking, Alistair. Don’t tell me you were jealous? Besides, he doesn’t like me like that. He fancies another certain rogue.”

Alistair perked up. “What? He does?”

Nudging his eyes forward, she pointed, “Didn’t you notice? How he sticks as close to her as possible and hangs on her every elegant, accented word? It’s adorable. So, were you jealous?”

“Huh. No, I never noticed. And no. I wasn’t. Not much at least. Um. Oh, look, I think I see darkspawn.” He jogged ahead. She grinned to herself. He is rather adorable when he’s all flustered.

Up ahead, a woman stood in the middle of the road, wringing her hands in distress. Alistair reached her first. “Oh thank the Maker. We need help! They attacked the wagon, please help us! Follow me!” The group immediately ran off after her. Aerin and Morrigan and Sten followed, slower than the rest.
“I don’t like this,” Aerin muttered. “This place looks like a perfect place—” crash! - “for an ambush.” Spinning around to locate the source of the crash, she spied a huge tree that had been felled behind them. “It’s a trap! Archers on the hills!”

“Blood and ashes! Watch out for snares on the hills!” Leliana shouted back. *Fine, Aerin thought, I just won’t take the hills.* Running at the steep slope, she used the short roots sticking out between the rocks to hoist herself up to the top of the ridge. An archer fired a crossbolt at her. Rolling out of the way, she pulled a short dagger from her boot and let it fly at the enemy. With a dull thud, the dagger imbedded itself in the man’s lower abdomen. Twirling around, she slid out a sword and easily knocked an arrow out of the air. As the archer attempted to reload, she dashed forth, using her sword to twist the bow out of his hand, stepped to feint, then whipped her other sword out and around to stab him in the back. Going back to the first man, still lying there, writhing in agony with her dagger in his belly, she drew her other dagger and slit his throat, sparing him a slow, painful death. Picking up the dead man’s bow, she notched an arrow and shot two more archers across on the other hill with the remaining seven arrows in the quiver. *I really should practice this more.* The third went down courtesy of Leliana. Aerin jumped back down to join the fray. She danced through the assassins, blades singing as they cut through the air, blood flinging off the edges like a macabre paint brush. Jab here, swipe here, slice there. Soon enough, all the attackers lay dead or dying. Sten moved through the ranks to offer those still alive a swift death. Aeden stood in the center of the destruction, holding the lead assassin at sword point. The blonde tattooed elf lay on his side, wounded, and moaning slightly with the pain.

“I… what? Oh. I rather thought I would wake up dead. Or not wake up at all, as the case may be. But I see you haven’t killed me yet. Let me make this simple. My name is Zevran, Zev to my friends. I am a member of the Antivan Crows, brought here for the sole purpose of slaying any surviving Grey Wardens. Which I have failed at, sadly.”

“A Crow?” Morrigan quered.

“The Antivan Crows are a powerful order of assassins. Renowned for always getting the job done. Someone went to great expense to hire this man,” Leliana interjected. Aedan glared at the prostrate elf.

“Who hired you?” he demanded.

“A rather taciturn fellow in the capital. Loghain, I think his name was? I have no idea what his issues are with you. The usual, I assume? Threatening his power, I imagine. I was merely contracted to perform a service. Here’s the thing. I failed to kill you, so my life is forfeit. If you don’t kill me, the Crows will. I happen to like living, however. And you and your merry band are obviously the sort to give the Crows pause. So let me serve you, instead.”

Alistair glared at him. “And what’s the stop you from finishing the job later?”

Zevran considered it. “To be honest, I was never given much choice with regards to joining the Crows. They bought me on the slave market when I was a child. I think I paid my worth back to them, plus tenfold. The only way out, however, is to sign up with someone they can’t touch. I’d rather take my chances with you.”

Leliana cocked her head to the side. “What can you offer us?” Wynne stood back, arms crossed, silent in her disapproval.

“I have many skills, from fighting to stealth and picking locks. I can warn you if the Crows should attempt something more… sophisticated. I also know a great many jokes. Twelve massage techniques, six card games? I do well at parties, no?”
Aerin spoke up. “Take him.”

“You would trust him?” Aedan asked incredulously.

“He was a slave. He had no other choice. Sometimes, all we need is a way out. Someone to give us hope of a better life,” she replied softly. Leliana turned to sharply look at her. Aerin groaned. “Fine. I was a slave. I escaped, obviously. I know what it’s like to do things you don’t want to, kill people because your master commands it. I had the Dalish to protect me. He wants our protection. I say we give it. Plus, if he tries anything, I’ll stab him in the face.”

Her companions blinked, stunned. “Very well,” the warden acquiesced. “I accept your help, Zevran.”

“Excellent! And somewhere down the line if you should decide that you no longer have need of me, then I go on my way. Until then, I am yours.”

Alistair groaned. “If there’s a sign we were desperate, I think it just knocked on the door and said hello.”


“It’s your funeral, warden. Or maybe our funeral.”

The tattooed elf leered up at the women. “I wasn’t aware such loveliness exist among adventurers, surely.”

“I take everything I said back. We can leave him here. Or I can kill him. Can I kill him?”

“And shutting up now.” Zevran looked down meekly from where Aerin stood, running her hands over her dagger. Sighing, Wynne kneeled down.

“Alright, child, let me heal you so we can get moving.”

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“So you were a slave too?” Aerin glared at the offending elf. She was acutely aware of her companions edging closer, curious to hear this story.

“If I say no, will you go away?” she gritted her teeth.

“Apolologies. I know it can be a sore subject. I was just curious. Most slaves do not fight so well. Unless you were a Crow. But I don’t recall ever seeing your lovely face around Antivan compound, no?”

*What to do, what to do. Fine. Whatever. They’d find out eventually.* “I was in Tevinter. Sold to a gladiator school as a child. I spent my younger years learning to fight, and my later years winning fights for the glory of my lanista. I escaped two years ago. Been living with the Dalish since then.”

“And I do not doubt that you were the best of the best. But, my curiosity is sated now. Much obliged, mi querida.”

Leliana snuck up behind her. “Do you think anyone is looking for you?”

“Maybe. No way of telling unless my former master put up fliers with my face on it or something. He might not expect me to be this far south.” She fidgeted with her braid.
“Well, you’re with us now. So you’ll be safe from him. Now, the bandits and wolves and undead and assassins and abominations and wolves and demons and darkspawn. That’s a different story.”

“Thanks, Alistair. I suddenly feel so much better.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi Zevran! *waves* Hmm. I wonder if Caius knows where Aerin is...
The Brecilian Forest was much older than the woods she was used to, with a hint of magic that permeated the trees and soil. It made the hair on the back of her neck tingle. Stopping in a large clearing, they paused to get their bearings. “Maybe today we’ll find them,” Wynne said. “They must be around here somewhere.”


“I thought elves were supposed to be skilled trackers,” Sten remarked.

Zevran turned to face the large man. “I’m good with cities. Nature, not so much.”

Aerin just shrugged. “I make a horrible Dalish. The master hunter told me so. But honestly. I think we’re being watched.” Brandishing his sword, Alistair glared at the treeline. “No, not that way.” She rolled her eyes as he sheepishly lowered his sword. “Mmm, it’s gone now. I may be able to track it a bit. I’m not the best at it, but it’s worth a shot.”

Aedan nodded. “I’ll come with you. Morrigan, Zevran, let’s go. Rest of you, stay here and make camp.”

“Aren’t you just taking me for my astonishing good looks, or my pointy ears?”

“Ears. Now move it.”

The group followed Aerin as she cautiously crept forward, pausing every few minutes or so to listen. When they reached another smaller clearing, she put the bow she was carrying away and motioned to the others to do the same.

“Andaran atish’an, travelers. A Grey Warden, you say? How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

Many people go around claiming to be Grey Wardens, then?” Aedan snarkily shot back. The elven scout glowered at him.

“I suppose not. I shall bring you to our Keeper. Follow me.”

“Keep your weapons sheathed and touch nothing,” Aerin warned. “Let’s go.”

***

The camp was familiar. The only things different were the aravel sail colors- dark brown. This encampment looked a bit more permanent, too. And… were those halla in a pen? Curiosity peaked, Aerin left the others with Keeper Zathrian and strode down the hill to the where an older woman stood by the pen with a solitary halla.

“Andaran atish’an, sister. I am Aerin, of Lavellan. I came with the Grey Wardens.” She leaned
over the fence to gently nuzzle a nearby halla’s nose.

“Aneth ara. My name is Elora. I’m a herder for our clan. Or master herder now, I suppose. Our master was killed during the last werewolf attack so I’m the only one with any sort of knowledge, poor as it is.. I’m sorry our clan is lacking in hospitality. The werewolves have reduced us greatly.”

Creators have mercy. Actual werewolves. “I fear this one has been bitten. She’s too agitated for me to understand. The curse may not affect her as it does it, but it would still be lethal. And it may prove contagious to the other halla.”

“Is that why you have them penned up? To protect them from the werewolves? I thought it odd when I first saw it.”

Elora leaned against the top fence rail and laid her chin against her hands in despair. “Yes. It’s strange. I can find no wound on her, but if she’s truly ill… then I will have to put her out of her misery. I wish I could just get her to calm down.”

“May I try?” Aerin stroked the drooping halla’s forehead. “Our master showed me some tricks with our herd. That man could have gotten the halla to do a synchronized waltz, I swear.”

“Waltz...? Ah, yes, I would be grateful if you could do anything.” Pressing her forehead to the halla’s, she murmured a soft melody and gently stroked the sides of her soft neck. Staying like that for a few minutes, Aerin felt the tension gradually drain out of the halla. Elora drew in a sharp breath of air.

“Yes! That’s it, she’s calming down.” Holding her hands out to the halla, the herder closed her eyes. “Ah, I see. It’s her life-mate who is sick, not her. He was bitten on his leg during the attack. I did not realize another halla was injured. I will be able to prevent the sickness from spreading to the rest now. Ma serannas. I am truly grateful.” Aerin smiled and patted the halla.

“My pleasure.” She turned to go back to the main camp and noticed Zevran standing there.

“You truly have a way with dumb beasts, bella. This is why you fancy Alistair, no?” Glaring, she defensively stalked up the hill.

“Halla are not dumb. They are elegant and graceful and intelligent. And I don’t fancy Alistair.”

“But you don’t deny he is dumb, I see.”

Rolling her eyes, she continued to where the others were gathered at the edge of the camp. “He’s intelligent. Just painfully awkward and shy. I guess that’s what happened when you’re raised sheltered in a chantry. Hey, Aedan. Question. Are unicorns real?”

Morrigan scoffed. “‘Tis a children’s tale.”

“Didn’t ask you, swamp thing. So werewolves and dragons are a thing, but unicorns are where this place draws the line. So not fair.”

Aedan grinned and nudged her. “No unicorns in New York?” he asked softly.

“Not a damn one. Where are we going?”

“To find the original werewolf, Witherfang, and bring back its heart so that Zathrian can create a cure.”

“How storybookish.”
“Isn’t it though?”

***

These woods were creepy. Werewolves were even creepier. The oppressive miasma of dark magic that wound its way through the air wasn’t helping either. Aerin picked up the pace. “Sooner we find this Witherfang, the better.” She glanced behind. “What the- Aedan, are you seriously picking flowers in a werewolf infested forest?”

He smiled sheepishly and tucked the tiny white wildflowers into his pocket. “Um… They smell good?”

Zevran slapped his knee, chortling to himself. “Ahhh, true love. Or lust. Infatuation. It does not care for silly things such as curses and the high liklihood of death and dismemberment.”

Aerin and Morrigan both rolled their eyes, then frowned at each other. Turning away from the disturbing camaraderie, the elf paused. The path led out past a waterfall, but there were three figures standing under the spray, blocking the way. The sounds of metal sliding out of scabbards whispered behind her.

“Another of the Dalish, come to put us in our place. You speak to Swiftrunner. I lead my cursed brothers and sisters.” A feral growl. “Turn back now, tell the Dalish you have failed. We will gladly watch them suffer the same curse we have suffered for too long. They will pay!”

“Fuck fuck fuck, talking werewolf.” Aerin backed up a pace, staring in shock. Aedan maneuvered to stand in front of her.

“Let’s just talk. We mean you no harm,” he tried pacifying the angry creature.

“There shall be no talk! Swiftrunner calls you to battle! Drive this invader from our midst!” The werewolves lunged. *Crap crap crap.* A fireball brushed past her shoulder and lit one’s tail on fire. Zevran ducked to the side, slipping behind the creatures to gain a better vantage. Aedan and Aerin crouched front and center, drawing the most of the werewolves’ ire. *These are so much faster than the other mute werewolves from earlier.* Aerin could only slice and nick, pricking away to create dozens of small lacerations on the beasts. She angled her swords to stab one through the leg. With a howl, the werewolf reared up, twisted in the air, and bolted for the woods. The other two abandoned the battle as well and retreated with their fellow.

“Well, that went well,” Zevran wiped off his daggers.

“Sure, let’s talk to the angry werewolves. I’m sure it’ll be fine, right guys?” Aerin mocked. The warden scowled.

“Didn’t you hear? They aren’t the dumb beasts the Keeper made them out to be. They’re very well spoken, for one. And they’re angry at that clan specifically for some reason. It doesn’t make sense. There’s more to it than what we were told.”

“Isn’t there always?” Morrigan swept by. “Let us not tarry. I do not wish to be in this filth any longer than I must.”

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The tree was talking. In rhymes. Aerin was so done with this place. “Are we seriously going to go find an acorn. In a forest. For a sentient tree?”
“It’s his baby. Come on, have a heart,” Aedan grinned. “He said the thief was to the east.” So so done.

They backtracked a bit to the west to ensure they hadn’t missed any clues. A peaceful campsite lay on a ridge, cozy and inviting. Her magical senses prickling, she spied a shadow flitting by at the edge of her vision. “Nope. Nope nope nope, everyone keep walking. Zevran! Don’t you dare touch that site. I don’t care what’s in that chest. Move it.” Forcing a yawn back, she herded the protesting group away from the mysterious, comforting camp and into another part of the woods.

It was less dense here, the path winding through a small dirt valley, trees high above on the ridge. As they rounded a corner, a lone werewolf crouched, pitifully moaning. The women hung back, reasonably wary, as Aedan and Zevran slowly approached.

“P-please, help- listen… I am not the mindless beast I appear to be. I am cursed… it burns in me! I was… of the Dalish. H-have you seen my clan?”

“Nope. Nope nope nope, everyone keep walking. Zevran! Don’t you dare touch that site. I don’t care what’s in that chest. Move it.” Forcing a yawn back, she herded the protesting group away from the mysterious, comforting camp and into another part of the woods.

“Your keeper, Zathrian, sent me here.”

“Then you seek Witherfang. I know of it, but… it is not what you think. No time to explain… My name is Danyla. My husband… he is called Athras. Please. Bring him this scarf I wear. Tell him I am dead.” At the warden’s nod, the creature huffed a sigh. “Thank you. He- argghh!” She screamed. “The curse… is fire in my blood! Please! End it for me!” Aedan stepped back, startled. Stepping up, Aerin unsheathed her dagger from her boot and knelt beside the pitiful former elf.

“Ir abelas. Ar lasa mala revas. Falon'Din enasal enaste.”

“Ma… serannas…” She drew her blade swiftly against the werewolves neck. The beast's eyes rolled up, her body twitching as lifeblood spilled out over the gray, mottled fur. With a heavy sigh, the elf stood up, cleaning her dagger.

“What did you say?” Morrigan asked softly.

“I’m sorry. You are free. Falon’Din’s blessing and favor go with you.”

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Further east, they came across a ramshackle camp. A small tent with the appearance of having been abandoned decades ago was erected to one side. In the center, near a small burnt out firepit, was a tree stump with a cave dug out below. Zevran poked a stick into the hole.

“Hold on you! That’s private property! Keep out, keep out!” A dirty, disheveled, and obviously addled man popped out of a nearby tree, staff swung onto his back, waving his limbs around. Morrigan wrinkled her nose.

“Ugh, the stench! He smells like Alistair.”

“He’s… dancing.” Aerin leaned her head to one side, observing the hermit hop around. “Excuse me… sir. We’re looking for an acorn. For a tree. A big, talking oak.”

“No! That is not a question. And if it be an answer, it be an answer to a question I have not yet asked. Have you no sense for the rules? Ask a question and you’ll get a question. I do so love to trade.”

“Be cautious. This is no ordinary man. I sense powerful magic,” Morrigan warned.
“Bollocks,” Aedan muttered. “Why can’t things ever be easy.”

“Sure you still want to get that acorn?” Aerin asked.

With a loud sigh, he slumped forward. “No. Yes. We’re here now, might as well. Look, old man. Uh. Would you like to ask me a question?”

The hermit perked up. “May I? Oh yes. I think I might. Let’s see. What is your name?”


“So you claim! They sent you, didn’t they? You’re trying to fool me. I’m onto you, just so you know. But it’s your turn now, ask away.”

Eventually, they ascertained that the hermit had the acorn and was willing to trade for it. He didn’t want coin, or any of the tonics they had on hand. Nor did he want any of the random amulets they had found along the way. Aedan pulled out a pretty painted stone. “This?” The hermit shook his head and hopped up and down.

Zevran pulled something out of his pouch. “What about this ring?” Aerin glanced at him questioningly. He grinned mischievously. “Found it at that odd sleepy campsite earlier.” She groaned at him.

“Ah, yes. I think that will do quite nicely.” Finally bidding goodbye to the man, all of them nursing a headache by now, they turned to the south but found their progress blocked.

“Tis a magical barrier. The forest itself bars our way.” The witch poked at the writhing fog with her staff. “Maybe the Grand Oak will know?”

The Grand Oak did know. Overjoyed to be reunited with his acorn, he gifted them an oak branch that would allow them to pass the barrier, the wood warm to the touch and seemingly alive. Aerin gasped as the sense of power flowed into her arm. Morrigan peered at it, marveling. “A powerful staff, indeed.” Aerin held it out to her.

“Would you like it?”

“Truly?” the other woman raised a delicate eyebrow, yellow eyes focused on the oak.

Shrugging, Aerin tossed the branch over. “You’d do better with it than me.”

“I… thank you.” She caressed the wood reverently, at a loss at the sudden kindness.

“Hate to break up the sweet bonding moment, but I think we’re here. Wherever here is.” Aedan pointed to the ruins up ahead, where another werewolf awaited them.

“Still you come,” the werewolf growled. “You are stronger than we anticipated. But you do not belong here, outsider. Leave this place! You are an intruder in our home. You come to kill, as all your kind do.”

Zevran muttered, “He’s not wrong.”

“Here Witherfang protects us. Here we learn our names and are beloved! We will defend Witherfang and this place with our lives! Fall back to the ruins. Protect the Lady!” The werewolves disappeared into the ruins, howling.

“Well. Shall we follow them into the dark, foreboding ruins of doom then?” Aerin kept her swords
at the ready as she pushed her way into the entrance. She gaped. The crumbling palace, for she was certain it couldn’t be anything else, was huge. The ceiling arched far above their heads, the late afternoon sun shining through the broken windows. She could feel the age of the stone, bearing down upon them.

Morrigan was just as awed as she, although she attempted to hide it. “The ruins certainly look Tevinter, but are filled with elven trappings. How very odd.”

“So, the elves once lived with the Tevinter humans? Or the Tevinters built this place for them? I never heard of such a thing.” Zevran examined a fragile bit of wall, causing it to collapse and the elf jumped back with a yelp. Skeleton archers poured out of the alcove. “Oh. Undead. How lovely.”

The further below they traveled, the colder it got. And the more the halls were covered in cobwebs. “Gods, how many spiders live here to have created all of these webs?” Aerin gingerly stepped over an exposed tree root, taking care to duck under another web.

Aedan gave a low chuckle. “Have you never seen a giant spider?”

“A WHAT? How giant are we talking about here?” she squeaked.

“Something similar to that, no?” The other elf was pointing down the hall at-

“Venhedis. Kaffas! Fen’Harel ver na! Balls of bloody nug humping shit mother fucking-” The spiders laid dead. Her companions laid doubled over, laughing so hard they were crying. Aedan had to lean against the wall, clutching his stomach, to keep his balance. “I hate all of you. So much.” She edged carefully past the dead creature, heading toward the far doorway.

“Hey, Aerin, catch!” Something hairy and black flew at her. With a final shriek, she fled the room.

***

“You want me to jump into that?!” Fucking werewolves, dragons, crying spirits, revenants, a mind speaking phylactery, and now this place wants me to jump into a dark pool of mysterious water. She gave Aedan a panicked look.

“Here.” He tied his belt to Aerin’s waist. “I won’t lose you in there, promise.” She closed her eyes and breathed in shakily.

“You owe me. Chocolate. I don’t care if it doesn’t exist here. Find it. Fucking puddle of doom.” The warden chuckled.

“It’s an Antivan delicacy. I’ll find some for you, promise.”

“Right.” With a soft splash, Zevran jumped in first. Less than a minute later, he popped back up.

“It’s a tunnel. The exit isn’t too far away.” Firmly shutting her eyes, she let Aedan lead her into the water. Chocolate. Just think of chocolate.

***

“The Lady believes that you may not be aware of everything you should be. She means you no harm, provided your willingness to parley in peace is an honest one.”

“Then take us to your Lady.”
The group stood in front of the Lady of the Forest, a beautiful woodland spirit, that had been bound here. “All this suffering for one man’s revenge.” Aerin shook her head sadly. “It’s a sad tale, but it needs to end. The guilty ones are long since dead. These men are innocent.”

“Do you suggest we let the creatures kill the elves then? I’ll admit, I did not think you had it in you.” Morrigan.

“Creators, no! This curse was begun by one man. It can be ended by the one as well.” Aerin turned to Aedan. “We’re bringing Zathrian back here, right?” He grimly nodded.

“Unconscious if we have to. We shall return, Lady.” Taking their leave through the shortcut that had been opened, they found Zathrian, lurking in the first room, waiting on them. Morrigan barked a sharp laugh.

“He wishes to see if we did his work for him. Is that not why you are here now, sorcerer?”

Growling, Aerin swung her sword to his neck. “There are many things you have kept from us, Keeper. You will come with us. Now.”

“Aerin.” She forced her arms back to her sides, jerking back behind Aedan, glowering in rage. “Won’t you at least consider talking to them?”

The Keeper scoffed. “Their nature is unchanged, they are savage beasts still. They desire nothing but revenge. You-” he pointed at Aerin and Zevran- “You are elven. You know what it is like to have injustice thrown in your face. Their crimes could not go unanswered!”

Aerin wiped her face, exhausted. “We do know. But the ones who committed those crimes, terrible that they were, are long dead. Now only innocents suffer, on both sides. Just… talk. That’s all.”

“Very well. It has been many centuries now. Let’s see what the spirit has to say.”

***

No one spoke as they stumbled back into camp, late that night, and just collapsed by the fire, beyond the point of exhausted. Leliana spoke in a soothing, low tone to Aedan, following him discreetly into his tent. Zevran passed out where he was, while Morrigan dragged herself to the opposite side where her tent lay. A strawberry blonde head poked into her field of vision, obscuring the stars. “Rough time then?”

Aerin held up her hand, ticking things off on her fingers. “Werewolves. Dragon. Walking skeletons. Spirits. Ancient arcane horror revenant things. GIANT SPIDERS. A pool of despair and nightmares. And one fucking centuries old elf that was the cause of it all.” Alistair winced.

“Damn. That’s… a lot. Are you okay? Probably pretty tired, huh?”

She just stared at him. “Yeah. I am. But I’m too keyed up to sleep now. Will you stay with me? And talk?”

He smiled. “Are you sure you want me? To talk that is. I uh, I can’t imagine I have many interesting things to say.”

Shrugging against the dirt, her eyes smiled. “Doesn’t matter. Just like hearing your voice.”

“Well, alright then.” He settled in beside her. Sitting up briefly, she scooted closer and rearranged herself so her head was on his lap.
“Is this okay?”

_Thank the Maker for the firelight_, he thought, feeling his flushed cheeks burn. He managed to squeak out a high pitched “yes”. _Very manly, Alistair_. Cautiously, he brought his hand up to her hair. She shifted so she could loosen the tie holding the braid and combed her fingers through the waves. Forcing himself to swallow over the lump in his throat, he tentatively stroked her hair, holding up a lock to watch the firelight dance over the deep red sheen. “So. Um. Ahem. Uhhh… Um. Hmm.”

She giggled. “Tell me about your childhood.” So he did. He told her about growing up in Redcliffe, falling off barns and running loose with the dogs. He told her about getting sent to the chantry and how he broke his mother’s amulet, the only thing he had left of her. He went on about learning to be a templar, about how half the initiates thought he was stuck up and the other half looked down on him because he was a bastard. How he was good at the training but hated being a templar, and how grateful he was when Duncan conscripted him. He talked about the Grey Wardens, the increased appetite that took him by surprise and the nightmares that came along with it. He rambled on and on about Duncan, and how good of a man he was, and how much he missed him. She laced her fingers through his free hand and brought it to her chest.

“I’m sorry, Alistair. He sounded like a wonderful man.”

“He was. Have you ever lost anyone?”

“Everyone I ever knew when I was 11. It was a long time ago though.”

“Oh, that was… Maker I’m an idiot. Here I am, going on and on and you lost…” She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

“It was almost a decade ago. I’ve made my peace. Yours is still fresh in your heart.”

He shook his head. “How are you so strong? I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone quite like you.” Yawning, she closed her eyes and gave him a tiny smile.

“Because I had no other option.”

Chapter End Notes

**HOW ARE YOU A MASTER HERDER AND YOU DIDN’T KNOW A PURE WHITE HALLA WAS BITTEN. THERE ARE LIKE SIX OF THEM.** Only reasonable assumption is that she’s not a true master. Pfft.

I have so many issues with the pool of doom. What makes the characters think, hey, I’m in an ancient temple filled with werewolves and thousand year old spirits trapped in vials and walking skeletons and fucking shit, wearing 70 lbs of solid metal armor, let me just jump into this pit of despair and see what happens? *sploosh* Also, e. coli.
The road to Denerim took about two weeks. The group passed the time by mostly getting to know one another, talking about everything under the sun, and bantering back and forth. Morrigan spent most of the time antagonizing Alistair, or scouting ahead as a crow. Sten spent his time mumbling about cookies after Leliana bought some from a passing merchant. Zevran alternated between flirting with Aedan, Leliana, Aerin and Alistair. Wynne had automatically assumed the role of group parent, which led to Alistair convincing the older mage to darn his socks somehow. Aedan desperately tried to keep the peace between his companions; Aerin didn’t envy him that. And during the lulls in conversation, their bard told stories. On this day, Leliana was in the middle of a daring tale about Ser Aveline, thrilling her rapt listeners and one enamored Grey Warden. Alistair and Aerin brought up the rear, both contentedly strolling along in the spring morning, as a mischievous smirk seized hold of her.

“Alistair. Question. So if you grew up in a chantry, does that you’ve never…?”


Shoving him into a nearby shrub, she laughed. “Stop making fun of me! And jellied ham sounds gross.”

“Make fun of you, dear lady? Perish the thought. Well tell me: have you ever licked a lamppost in winter?” he drawled.

“I don’t usually make a habit of sticking my tongue where it’s not welcome,” she responded dryly. He threw his head back and laughed.

“Touché! Well, uh, no, I’ve never really had the pleasure. Not that I haven’t thought about it, of course… well, you know.”

“That’s so cute!” she exclaimed.

“Cute, she says!” he threw up his hands in defeat. “Well, hearing it from a beautiful woman does make me feel luckier, I’ll say that.”

She idly twisted her hair around her fingers and frowned slightly. “You think I’m beautiful?”

He grinned. “Of course you are and you know it. You’re ravishing, resourceful, strong, witty, and all those other things you’d probably hurt me for not saying. Uh oh. What did I say?”

“Oh, it’s… nothing, really.” At his chiding concern, she continued, “It’s just that… I didn’t do anything to earn my looks, you know? They were just pretty much given to me. So I’m not entirely comfortable with my appearance. It’s mainly just brought me a lot of negative attention in the past that stirs up a lot of… distasteful memories.” A voice rose up in her head- With this visage we’ve crafted for her, she’ll be even easier to sell to the magisters. Stomping it out, she continued, “Plus, appearances can change so quickly. I mean, what if an enemy carved up my face and I ended up with a giant scar across my nose? What if I lost an eye? What if I caught on fire and burned? I’d rather be lo- admired for the person I am, not what I look like.”
He took her hand. “I think I can understand that. But to me, the person you are inside just makes you that much more attractive. I mean, look at Morrigan. She’s the opposite. She’s an attractive woman but her harpy soul makes her hideous- please don’t ever tell her I said that,” he finished under his breath. Giggling again, she affectionately punched his arm. He didn’t let go of her hand. Ducking to hide the blush that had crept across her face, she bit her lip and smiled.

“Alistair.”

“Yeeees?”

“Thank you. For just being you. I really enjoy you. I mean, having you. I mean, your company. Having your company.” She coughed. A huge grin split his face.

“I was just thinking the same thing. Things could have been so much worse, you know? I’m so grateful you’re you, and that whoever sent you, sent you. Instead of some other super warrior. Wow. That sounded much better in my head, I promise. Um. Here.” He reached back into his bag, muttering and shifting things around. “I wanted to give this to you.” He handed her a single red rose, somehow uncrushed and still a vibrant red.

Taking it with an astonished look, she gently ran her fingers over the soft, velvety petals. Then, she smirked. “A rose? This your new weapon of choice then?”

“Ha! Yes! Watch as I thrash our enemies with the mighty power of floral arrangements! Feel my thorns, darkspawn! I will overpower you with my rosy scent!” He swung an imaginary sword around, parrying with the air. Her laugh echoed through the crisp air. Maker, that’s a lovely sound. He knew he was acting a fool, but if it made her laugh, anything was worth it. Even attracting Morrigan’s ire, as he just had done. Ignoring the mage, he smiled back at Aerin. “I picked it in Lothering. I remember thinking, ‘how can something so beautiful exist in a place with so much despair and ugliness?’ I couldn’t leave it there. The darkspawn would’ve just come and killed it with their taint. So I’ve had it ever since. In a lot of ways, I think the same thing about you. That’s been your whole life, hasn’t it?” Fighting the sudden lump in her throat, Aerin looked away. To her shock, tears were forming in her eyes. “I want you to have it.”

Clearing her throat, she looked down at the rose in awe. “And what would you have in return, ser?”

“Return?” He seemed perplexed by the very notion. “Not a thing. I just thought, I’ve been doing all this complaining. But you, you voluntarily left your clan, where you were safe, and comfortable, and you’re out here with us fighting all sorts of demented things, walking all over Ferelden, and you haven’t complained once. Except about spiders. Which is understandable, don’t get me wrong. I wanted you to know what a rare and wonderful thing you are, amongst all this darkness.” A sob choked her. No one had ever given her anything without expecting something in return. Even the Dalish expected her to uphold their history and reputation, Erival had given her gifts in hope she’d bond with him. Ellana, maybe. Her parents years ago, yes. But this was different. Does he really see me for my personality? Would he mind the fact that I have a lyrium tattoo from blood magic on my body? Would he care I’m not who he thinks I am? Ugh. Too early to decide. What do I say? Just thank you? It’s not enough. She resorted to humor, blinking away tears.

“So, does this mean we’re married now?”

“You won’t land me that easily, woman! I know I’m quite the prize, after all, dry your tears.”

“Thank you, Alistair. No one’s ever given me a gift like this before.” She brought the flower to her lips and smiled. He felt his neck grow hot. Actually, everything was growing hot. His palms were sweating, why were his palms sweating, there was snow out here still. Rubbing them on his pants,
he ran his fingers though his hair.

“I’m glad you like it. Now if we could move right on past this awkward, embarrassing stage and get right to the steamy bits, I’d appreciate it,” he chuckled nervously.

She glanced around. “Right here? Fine by me. Never did it in snow before. Off with your armour then.” She reached for her fastenings. He stumbled a few steps.

“Oh! Haha, damn, bluff called! Saw right through me.” His heart threatened to break his ribcage and strangle him. His palms weren't getting any less sweaty. Oh great, now they’re starting to shake too. Real manly, Theirin, he scolded himself. Looking up at him through impossibly long eyelashes, Aerin flashed him a sultry smile.

“Oh, was it a bluff? Too bad then.”

*Oh. OH.*

“Well, It didn’t have to be a bluff. Maybe when we’re back at camp some night, in a tent.”

“Who needs a tent?”

“But what if some monsters come along while we’re… canoodling? How embarrassing! Or maybe I’m just a big coward. Who needs a tent, for… stuff.” A nervous giggle broke through. “I’ll, uh be standing over here. Until the blushing stops. Just to be, uh, safe. Right.” He slowly backed away before turning and breaking out into a run to catch up to the rest of the group. Leliana looked back at her with a curious expression. Aerin just giggled.

I’m officially smitten, I think. Giggling like a teenager with her first crush. Actually, this is my first crush. Damn. Maybe this isn’t a good idea. After all, we’re gathering an army for war. Anyone could die at anytime. The thought of losing any of her new friends sobered her up. The Orlesian bard dropped back to walk along side her.

“Aerin watched Zevran and Aedan tease Alistair, the poor templar’s ears turning even redder than they had been. The sight was already so familiar to her, just after a few weeks. How could I ever leave them all behind? “Leliana, do you… care about Aedan?” A sweet smile sprang to the redhead’s lips.

“I do. He’s a good, honorable man. And quite the romantic under it all. Did you know he found me my favorite flower after I briefly mentioned it one day? The scent reminds me of my mother. He found it—”

“In the Brecilian Forest. So that’s why he was picking them. I yelled at him, you know. Wasting our time, literally smelling flowers.” Wynne had come to Alistair’s defense and was scolding the assassin and noble warden now. “Do you ever think that maybe, this isn’t a good time for a relationship or romance or whatever this is? I mean, look at us. Living in tents. Most of us have no home to call our own. Fighting darkspawn.”

Leliana linked her arms through Aerin’s, who, to her credit, didn’t flinch this time. “When would be a better time, hmm? Yes, we are at war. And any one of us could die today. That’s why you must be open to love. That way, if you or he does die, you can live with no regrets. How would you feel if Alistair died and you never got to tell him how you felt? Love is the greatest gift the Maker has given us. All He wants is for his children to be happy. I know you don’t believe in the Maker, my friend, but it’s still stands. If Alistair makes you happy, don’t fight it. There are enough things to fight in our lives, yes? Don’t let your own heart be one of them. You both are good people, who deserve whatever happiness you can find with each other. So adorable,” she cooed. “You know, he asked me the other day how to woo a lady.” Giggling, she added, “He started the conversation
asking if I was female.”

Aerin snorted a laugh. “That sounds about right. I scared him off earlier I think, with my talk of
sexy times. Poor man is going to be permanently red between me, you, and Zevran.” Both girls
giggled again. Judging by the state of Alistair’s face now, and the grins of the two men, apparently
Wynne had given up defending Alistair and joined the others in tormenting him.

Alistair cast a glance back warily. “What are you two giggling about?”

“Uhhh… darkspawn?” Aerin offered innocently.

“Right. Darkspawn. So funny them darkspawns.” He glared flatly at them, sending the girls off
into another fit of laughter, clinging to each other to keep balance. After a mile or so, both had
regained their composure. Leliana turned to Aerin.

“Do you like shoes?”

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Denerim was just as brown as the rest of Ferelden, to Aerin’s disappointment. She had been hoping
for a pretty place like Starkhaven had been. But it was still better than Minrathous, she decided. At
least Denerim didn’t put on airs; it was real. Really brown. With lots of dogs. That smelled wet.
Morrigan flew off before they reached the gate, not wishing to associate herself with “the rabble
filth”, as she so eloquently stated. Zevran slipped away as soon as they arrived, under the pretense
of finding out if more Crows were after the Grey Wardens. “Curious,” Aedan remarked. “I didn’t
know the brothel was the best place to start looking for rumors. Then again, maybe it is. Right. So
I’m going to Genitivi’s house to poke around, see if he’s there or if he’s left any leads. Is everyone
coming?”

I’d like to pop in to introduce myself. Unless you need me?” The other warden shook his head.

“Um. Aerin? Would you mind coming with me? I don’t really know what to expect and… I’d like
you to be there, if you’re willing.”

“Of course. Is there a place we can meet up later?”

Aedan pointed across the marketplace. “Over that way, there’s a place called the Gnawed Noble
Tavern. Let’s all meet there around, say, dusk, then? Sten, Wynne, are you accompanying us?” The
Qunari stoically nodded along with the mage. “Alright then. Good luck, Alistair.”

Aerin followed as the former templar drifted along the edge of the market, muttering to himself.
“Let’s see, near the alienage… there’s the alienage… so this house? Or that house? Oh, that house
there, I’m sure of it.” He stood in front of a nondescript shack, just like the rest in the row, staring
with wide eyes. “Maybe this isn’t a good idea. We could… leave, I suppose. We really don’t have
time to pay a visit, and… Will she even know who I am? Does she even know I exist? My sister.
That sounds strange. Sister. Siiiiissster. Now I’m just babbling. Maybe we should go. Let’s go.
Let’s just… go.” Words poured out of his mouth as he wrung his clammy hands. Turning around
abruptly, he reached to pull Aerin’s arm to drag her away when his hand met with empty air.
Where? Oh. She had marched right up to the door and was knocking. Right. Don’t be coward,
Alistair. She tucked her hand into his and offered him an encourage smile that all but blinded him.

“It’ll be fine, Ali.” Ali. He rather liked the sound of that, from her. And so when his sister opened
the door, he, Alistair, had the world’s stupidest grin plastered on his face.
“You have linens to wash? I charge three bits on the bundle, you won’t find better. And don’t trust what that Natalia woman tells you either, she’s foreign and’ll rob you blind.”

He blinked. “I’m… not here to have any wash done. My name’s Alistair, and well, this may seem strange but… are you Goldanna? I think I’m your brother. Our mother, she was a serving girl in Redcliffe Castle, before she died. Do you know anything about that?” His hopeful, sweet face waited expectantly at her reaction.

Rage flashed across her worn face. “You! I knew it. Them’s at the castle told me you was dead, died alongside mother. I told them the babe was the king’s, and they gave me a coin to shut my mouth and sent me away! I knew they were lying!”

“I’m sorry, I… didn’t know that.” Stunned sorrow infused his expression. “’The babe didn’t die. I’m him… I’m your brother.”

“For all the good it does me,” she retorted. “You killed Mother, you did, and I’ve had to scrape by all this time! That coin didn’t last long, and when I went back, they ran me off!”

“None of that is Alistair’s fault,” Aerin snapped, eyes flashing.

“And who in the Maker’s name are you,” she sneered. “Some tart following after his riches?”

Aerin laughed, an ironic, bitter thing. “Right. All of the riches that come with being a Grey Warden, sleeping on the road, and fighting darkspawn.”

“Oooh, a prince and a Grey Warden? Well who am I to think poorly of someone so high and mighty compare to the likes of me? I don’t know you boy,” she spat. “Your royal father forced himself on Mother, and took her away from me. I’ve got five mouths to feed, and unless you can help with that, I’ve got less than no use for you.”

Stammering out an apology, Alistair was at a loss of what to say. The elf at his side stepped up, seething in fury. “Listen here, you two bit harpy tramp. All Alistair wanted from you was to find his family, to know he had someone out there still that might welcome him. He’s been alone his whole life, do you understand that? At least you knew your mother. He didn’t even have that! So before you spew your hateful venom to the last person in this world who deserves it, remember the world doesn’t revolve around your greedy, gold digging, pathetic ass.” Breathing deeply, she gave the hag a scathing glance over, her expression reading that she clearly found the human lacking. “I hope the rest of your life is as pleasant as you are. Bitch. Let’s go, Alistair. All she wants is your money.”

“Right. Seems that way, doesn’t it? Don’t know why I even came.”

“I don’t know why you came either, or what you expected to find. But it isn’t here. Now get out of my house, the both of you!” Alistair pulled Aerin the door, ready to wash his hands of the situation. But she wasn’t done. Turning around to grab the other woman by her shirt, Aerin yanked her close.

“Fen’Harel ma halam. Faciem durum cacantis habes.” Aerin hissed. Shoving the washerwoman away, she swept out with the regality of a queen and slammed the door so hard, the house two doors down shook. They walked, or stomped, as was the case for Aerin, down the alley. She muttered a combination of curses in Tevene, Elvish, and whatever other language she could think of under her breath. “I can’t imagine under what sun where that- that- thing would ever be related to you!”

Trudging along, he grimaced, incredulous at what had transpired. “This is the family I’ve been
wondering about my whole life? That shrew is my sister? I guess I was expecting her to accept me without question. That’s what family does, right? I feel like a complete idiot.”

“Hey!” Aerin whirled on him. “No. You are not an idiot. Your so-called sister is a money grubbing twat waffle piece of trash. And you don’t need her. Besides. Sometimes the family you choose is more loyal than blood will ever be.”

He smiled. “I suppose you’re right. I just don’t understand how she could be so… so…” Sighing, Aerin reached up to cup his stubbled cheek in her slender palm.

“Oh, Ali… Everyone in this world is just out for themselves. It’s a lesson you’ve been spared from so far, but you should learn it. I wish you didn’t have to, but… Setting the bar too high for other people just sets you up for disappointment.”

He leaned into her caress, lost in the moment. He laid his much larger hand over hers. “And you? Are you just out for yourself?” His tone was light, but his blue eyes were serious.

Drawing back her hand, she wrapped her arms around herself. “I have been. It’s the whole reason I’m here. I was promised something in exchange for my assistance…”

“But?”

“But… now I see it’s the right thing to do. Even if that promise was reneged, I would stay. In a way, it’s still looking out for myself.” She gave him a lopsided grin. “After all, if the world falls to the Blight, I’m screwed anyways.”

He chuckled. “You never know. Miracles happen. Maybe you find yourself a small, tropical island by yourself where the darkspawn can’t reach. Can darkspawn even swim?”

“I bet they smell horrible.”

“Probably. Wet hurlock. Blegh. Oh. What did you say to her? Before we left? The first was an Elvish curse, right? I recognized the Fen’harel part.”

“Umm…” she twirled her braid around her fingers, looking down at the dirt path. “Yes. Dread Wolf take you.”

“And the second? Sounded Tevinterish.”

Snort. “Tevene. I said… You have the face of a man with severe constipation.” Alistair stopped, stunned into silence. Then-

“HAHAHAHAHA!” He fell on the ground, howling with laughter. Aerin blushed furiously, only getting redder as townspeople and merchants turned to stare. “Oh, sweet Andraste! That’s the best thing I’ve ever heard. I could kiss you!” He stood up, wrapping his broad arms around her, and swung her into the air. She let out a very undignified yelp, just as he pressed his lips to her cheek in a loud smack. “You’re brilliant!” he crowed. Setting her down after a few more spins, he realized he had his arms around her. And he kissed her. Oh, Maker. “Uh, I… T-that was, I mean, I didn’t-, um…” He went to draw away, but she kept her arms wrapped around him. He suddenly wished he didn’t have all that bloody armor on, so he could feel her arms holding him. Tentatively resting his cheek on her head, he murmured, “Thank you, by the way. For coming with me. And saying all those things. I’ve never had anyone defend me like that.”

“I’m just sorry you had to deal with her. She doesn’t deserve you. You deserve so much more, especially after everything that’s happened to you. I don’t know how you’re still such a good
person after all that.”

“What can I say, I’m an eternal optimist. Besides, I could say the same about you.” She pulled away, smiling gently up at him. He traced his fingers, rough from the years of swordplay, down her cheek. Aerin felt her heart begin to race. She licked her lips. Alistair inhaled sharply, watching her pink tongue dart out between her dusky, full lips. “I… Hey look! The Wonders of Thedas! Arl Eamon once bought me a miniature golem doll, here when I was young. Really young. Come on, let’s go see!” He practically leapt away from her, grabbing her wrist at the last moment and dragging her inside the dusty shop. “Oh wow, look at it all! Where do you think they get all this stuff? Do you think they, um, have any miniature golem dolls? We should check. I’m going to go look over here. Way over there.” He rushed over into a far corner. Aerin was left standing in the entrance, blinking in confusion.

Was he about to kiss me? Did I want him to kiss me? Did he change his mind? Gazing past the relics on the shelves, she turned the same three questions over and over in her mind. I think he was about to kiss me. I’ve never kissed anyone. Anyone I wanted to, I suppose. And I do want him to kiss me. Why did he stop? Maybe… he’s just being awkward and shy? That’s normal for him. Right? Or maybe he realized this isn’t a good idea? Or he doesn’t want… an elf? Is it because I’m an elf? Starting to panic, she pushed her way out of the front door into the street. Breathe, breathe. This isn’t the time for this. The bell tied to the door tinkled as it opened and shut. The handsome warden stepped onto the street next to her, still vaguely pink but calmer than before.

“Um, sorry about running off like that. I just get really nervous sometimes, you know? I’ve never felt… this way about anyone before. It’s a bit confusing, to be honest. And I don’t know what you really expect, or even if you feel the same way, or if I’m just babbling on and you’re actually disgusted with me.” He talks with his hands a lot. Bigger gestures when he’s nervous.

“It’s okay, Alistair. I’m new to all this too.” She gathered her courage, thought here goes nothing, and leaned up quickly to press a small kiss to his rough cheek. “And definitely not disgusted. Quite the opposite, I should think.”

“Oh!”

“This is… unfamiliar to us both, right? So maybe we just… take it slow? See what happens?” He grinned.

“I can do that.” Bowing grandly, like a nobleman to a queen, he took her hand and pressed it to his soft, warm lips. “My lady. Would you care to take a turn around the city with me?”

Giggling, heart still lodged in her throat, she gave her best formal curtsy. “Ser Knight, ‘twould be my pleasure.” Tucking her arm through his, he covered her hand with his, wandering off to spend the rest of their afternoon discovering the rest of what Denerim had to offer them.

Chapter End Notes

I giggled like a teenage girl the whole time I wrote this. Still giggling, in fact. I never get tired of this scene in the game.
“Haven. That’s where Genitivi’s research was leading him. Something isn’t right here. Again. Why would someone kill his assistant? It doesn’t make sense.” Aedan stared morosely at his mug of ale.

“The entrance to Orzammar is on the way to Haven,” Leliana sipped from her glass of wine. Aerin tried not to physically recoil from the glass. She despised wine. The smell reminded her of Tevinter, of the parties where she had to serve the nobles their wine, the feel of the rich liquid as they deigned to feed her from their cup like a good little pet, the heady taste as they forced their tongues into her mouth. She gripped her fingers around her cup of mead, the taste refreshingly unfamiliar, the wood smooth and worn to the touch.

“Bah,” Aedan grumbled. “With our luck, they’ll want to us to do something too. We’ve lost enough time as it is. I don’t know how much time Eamon has left.” He glanced over at Alistair, who stared sullenly into his own ale.

Wynne pursed her lips and tapped her fingers on the rough table. “What if we split up? Do both of you need to be there to present the treaties to the dwarves?”

Alistair sat up straighter. “No, just one of us.” The other warden nodded thoughtfully. “It could work. I could go to Haven, Aedan can go to Orzammar.”

“Would save time,” he murmured. “Alright. If you’re okay with it Alistair, then I’m game. Wynne, would you go with him? I don’t have a good feeling about what’s up there, and you’re the best healer we’ve got.”

“Of course, Aedan. I wouldn’t mind at all.”

“Aww, you do care!” Alistair took another gulp of ale. “Maker, this stuff they serve here is horrible.”

“Only the finest swill in Denerim, my friend,” Zevran cheered his glass.

“I think I would like to come as well, Alistair.” Leliana patted the pouting Aedan on his cheek. “I’m sorry, my love. But to possibly be the ones to find Andraste’s ashes! Think of it. It is a sight that would mean so much to so many.”

“Fine,” he muttered. “I’m assuming you’re going with him too, Aerin?”

“If he wants,” she tried to be nonchalant, but the smile on Alistair’s face and the knowing grins on everyone else’s face told her it was futile. His hand gripped hers under the table.

“Of course I want you with me. I’ll always want you with me,” he softly murmured. “So that means Sten, Morrigan, and Zevran will go with you to Orzammar?”

“Should be a good group,” Aedan mused. “Zevran be his sneaky self and stealth around in case something happens, and if the dwarves are uncooperative, I can just get Sten to sit on them. That should work, right?”

Sten crossed his arms. “I do not think that is the wisest course of action, warden.”
Leliana frowned. “Please don’t antagonize the dwarves, my love. They’re a proud, noble people. And some breed nugs. Oh, the darling things. I’ve always wanted one as a pet you know.”

“Nugs? As pets?” It was Wynne’s turn to frown. “That doesn’t sound… very hygienic.” As the women debated the finer points of nug pet care, Aerin felt her eyes grow heavy. Yawning, she leaned against Alistair’s pauldrons.

“I think somebody’s sleepy,” he called in a sing-song voice.

“Right. It’s three weeks to reach Orzammar, and then another 5 days past that to reach Haven. Better get some sleep, all of you. Come on Cal, get up from under the table, boy. Bedtime.” The dog happily trotted after his master to their room.

Aerin stretched. “You know, this will be my first time sleeping in real bed since… I was 11, I suppose.”

Alistair gently pushed her towards the hall. “How old are you anyways?”

Spinning around, she paused a few inches from his face. He halted, next exhalation frozen in his lungs. She reached up her hand to touch his face, leaned closer in and… booped him on the nose. “Rude. Asking a lady her age.” His breath left him in a rush. “Let’s see. I’m 19 now. Turn 20 in… next month actually. Solace is next month, yes? What about you?”

“Oh? I’ll have to find you a gift then.” Patting him lightly on the cheek, she stopped in front of the room she was sharing with Wynne and Leliana. He waved the offer away.

“Oh, no no no, you don’t have to do anything of that sort, really. Well, hopefully your first bed in almost nine years lives up to your expectations. And is lice and flea free.” She turned to stare in horror at him.

“Kidding, kidding! Sort of. The Gnawed Noble is one of the better inns, so you should be fine.” Glaring at him, she yanked open the door, startling Wynne, and stalked inside, immediately wrapped her hair up into a scarf, making sure every strand was covered before tying it off. “Goodnight Aerin!”

“Bugger off, Alistair.”

“Heh, bug. You’re cute when you get all irritable, you know that? You get this little knot right between your- oh never mind,” he broke off as she firmly shut the door in his face. “Sweet dreams, love,” he whispered softly to the closed door.

***

Summer had come to Ferelden, the longer days punctuated by a constant, cool breeze and the warm sun, putting everyone in a good mood. Or as a good a mood as some of them got. Namely, Morrigan. Even Sten seemed happier. One could really never tell. Aerin happily swung around the new veridium shortswords that she had looted from bandits earlier that day, testing their weight. So of course, on such a perfect day where everyone was content and at peace with the world, Wynne and Morrigan thought it the best time to debate the treatment of mages.

“Do you truly believe that the Circle of Magi is a leash? You would prefer a world where young mages were slain by the ignorant for their talent? Taught to fear their abilities?” the older mage placidly walked, watching as Alistair and Sten took turns throwing a stick for Calenhad to fetch.
“That is what the Circle teaches. You fear your abilities, instead of reveling in them.” Morrigan sniffed.

“Believing ourselves to be superior over other men is what led to the Imperium... and the darkspawn. Let us say that the circles did not exist. What sort of a world would you envision for mages? Would you advocate a return to the days of Tevinter of old?”

“I advocate nothing. Nature dictates that the strong survive, if they have the will.”

“So you prefer a life of hardship and fear, so long as you believe you aren't tethered and free to do as you wish.”

“The Circle is no place of safety. 'Tis a place of subjugation.”

“ Is it? It is by no means perfect, I agree, but consider the alternative. At least other mages can understand our struggle. We can help each other. Aerin, child, you said you were from the Imperium? What is your stance on this?”

Grimacing, the elf gazed up at the sky. “It’s... hard to say. I’ve seen the worst of mages. Abominations, blood magic rituals, the power the magisters gorge themselves on. But the Circle... that wasn’t right either. Those mages were terrified of themselves and their abilities. It’s no wonder most weren’t strong enough to survive. And being locked up, unable to have a family or choose what you want to do in life, always subject to the will of the templars and chantry- that’s basically slavery. No freedom at all.” Looking down, she kicked an errant pinecone. “I get the fear though. There has to be a balance.”

Morrigan hummed. “The ordinary people will always fear mages. ‘Tis the way of life.”

Calenhad brought the stick back to Aerin, who leaned down to pick it up. “Ugh, it’s all slimy, Cal! Here, fetch. Yes, people fear magic. It’s natural to fear what they don’t understand, isn’t it? And by keeping the mages locked away, the people will never understand it. Magic is a tool, just like any other weapon. I mean, if you showed someone fire who had never seen it before, they’d probably be scared shitless. And if you kept the fire always out of reach, only showing it to them when it was destroying homes and lives, they would continue to be afraid of it. But if the fire was always there, a constant part of their lives, and someone else showed them the usefulness of it- how to use it to cook and keep warm and create light- they’d eventually come to understand and respect it. And it wouldn’t be a fearsome thing.”

Wynne smiled. “Ah, but in your scenario, that person would be able to learn to control the fire themselves. Would it be the same if they had to rely on others to control it for him?”

“If they had faith that the one controlling the fire knew what they were doing. And the only thing that would create such faith is time and experience. And, yes, abominations will always be a risk. Even with fire, accidents happen. But we still use fire, do we not? Because it burns a house down, no one says ‘oh, I just won’t use fire ever again.’ We are careful instead, treating it with a healthy respect and making sure that the people in charge of the fire are sufficiently trained and confident in their abilities. The same goes for magic. The people just don’t treat it with the respect it deserves yet because they don’t understand it, for they have not been given the opportunity.”

Morrigan’s brow creased. “That... may be the most well thought out response I have heard yet. Logical and sensible. I like it. Although I believe the time when the common drabble accept that magic is to be respected is far off.”

“I believe if you refer to them as ‘drabble’, that time will remain far off,” Aerin replied dryly.
“Magic exists to serve man’,” Aedan chimed in. “So when you say respect…”

“I mean just that. Respect. I can respect someone and still desire for them to not rule over me. And vice versa. Just because someone is my liege, does not mean I respect them. Respect is earned.”

“So you are confident in your abilities then?” Wynne asked.

“I have been well taught,” Aerin acknowledged. “I know the extent of my skills and I do not press them recklessly. I know the dangers of the Fade and possession and am well equipped to protect myself. I do not fear become an abomination as long as I am careful. Just as I do not fear stabbing myself or another with my own sword as long as I am careful.”

“So what about blood magic,” Zevran curiously looked at the mages. “Where do they factor into this?”

“They don’t,” responded Aerin flatly. “Nothing good come from blood magic. Using the life force of others?”

Morrigan smirked. “Ah, but what if a blood mage only used her own blood? Or only uses the blood others by their consent?”

“Fine line. People are inherently greedy. Give them power, and they want more. There might be a few blood mages who could resist the call for greater power and restrict themselves to their own blood. But I would bet everything I have that those types are few and far between.” Alistair shuddered.

“Can we not talk about blood magic please? I already have enough creepy nightmares, thanks.”

"Does our use of large words strain your head overly much, Alistair?"

"No, I understand perfectly. I know large words. Magic is not a large word anyways. Five letters. So there."

"I could agree with you, but then we'd both be wrong."

Ignoring Morrigan, Leliana slipped her hand into Aedan’s and rested her head on his shoulder. “I think your idea sounds lovely, Aerin. A world where mages are free of the circles.”

“Not just running loose everywhere, I hope,” her lover chuckled. “Uh, no offense Aerin.”

She snorted. “Right. No, I think templars are still useful. Just not as mage hunters or overseers. More like… the city guard, I suppose. They patrol and keep the peace, always there if you need them. But certainly not anything like a templar stationed inside of every mage’s home, which is pretty much what the circle is.”

Aedan snorted. “I’m sure Alistair would be fine with guarding you.” The former templar blushed. Smiling, she wrapped herself around his arm.

“My own personal guard. How lucky I am!” Aerin flung a hand over her head dramatically. “Protect me, ser knight!”

Grinning, he flourished a low bow. “Your wish is my command, dear lady.” And with that, he picked her up in his arm, tucking one arm between her back and rucksack and the other under her legs and set off sprinting down the road. Laughing, she wrapped her arms around his neck.
“Alistair! What on earth? Put me down!” she cried out between giggles. Once they were far enough ahead, he set her down gently. “What was that for?”

With an impish smirk, he replied, “You said protect you. I was protecting you from the rest of that dreadful conversation. And I whisked you away to here. A place away from them where we could have a better one. We could talk about puppies. Or our favorite colors. Or cheese! What’s your favorite cheese?”

***

They reached the end of the North Road and Lake Calenhad, meaning they were only three days from the path that would lead Aedan Cousland and his group up to the entrance of the dwarven kingdom of Orzammar. The path they were on had been snaking its way higher into the base Frostback Mountains, and the elevation changes had brought about a dip in temperature. Snow was visible not that much higher up even though it was the middle of summer. Shivering, Aerin turned to the clearing off the highway where the group had decided to make camp. Unrolling her length of oiled leather, she set about constructing her tent. In the distance, a lone howl echoed across the valley. She shivered again.

With a lazy flick of her fingers, Morrigan ignited the campfire, motivating Aerin to hurry to finish her tent as fast as possible so she could soak up the heat. *I should’ve been a lizard. Or maybe a dragon. Then I could just sit in the fire.* It was a quiet night. Supper had been eaten and everyone was off relaxing. Sten stretched off to the side, slowly moving through his conditioning forms. Aedan and Leliana sat cuddled up on one side of the fire, talking to Zevran, who was regaling the pair with tales from his Crow days. Wynne had pulled out her needles and yarn and begun to knit, while Morrigan was off to the far side of camp, as usual, nose buried in a book she had picked up somewhere. Aerin ducked out of her tent, scanning the camp for a strawberry blonde head, sauntering over to where he sat, attempting to fix a hole in his sock.

“Alistair. Maybe it would be easier to fix if your sock wasn’t stiff as a board with grime. That’s disgusting.”

He pouted. “There hasn’t been much opportunity to wash them. Plus I only have three socks now.”

“Three? What happened to the others?”

A shrug. “Cal seemed to like them.”

“Darling, I think Cal probably thought it was a possessed dead animal and killed it.”

“Oh no! You think? Should we have a funeral for them then?” He shot her that charming lopsided grin. The one that always made that odd warm, tingling feeling settle in her belly and gave her the urge to touch his lips. She cleared her throat.

“How, no. I think your Maker will understand. Here.” She passed him a small parcel, wrapped in plain, undyed linen and tied with twine. “I know you said your birthday was at the end of Justinian, and I didn’t know exactly what day, so… here. Happy birthday.”

“For me? Really? Wow! I don’t know what to say.” He turned the package over in his hands. She nudged his leg.

“Well, open it first, and decide if you like it.” With a boyish smile, he unwrapped the linen and gaped. Three little statues lay nestled together along with a leather cord. One statue was made of stone in the shape of a dragon, another was a carved wooden robed woman, and the last, a shiny
little pride demon out of onyx. He reverently ran his fingers across the smooth surfaces, catching
the leather cord. The cord was attached to a small, white stone with a shimmering, golden rune
etched onto the surface. “It’s a cleansing rune. It should give you an extra advantage over
darkspawn. It’s not much, but it might keep you safer. Do you like it?”

Opening and closing his mouth several times, he gave up on finding the words. Grabbing her hand,
his face locked onto hers, begging her to read everything he felt for her in his eyes. “Words,” he murmured. “Never really got the hang of them. But this- this is… perfect.”

Her eyes shone, the blue and gold reflecting the firelight and making it appear like her eyes were
made of burning sky. “I tried to find a golem doll, but no luck I’m afraid. I did have a back up gift,
in case you didn’t like them.”

“Oh? Is it something risque and naughty?” His pitiful attempt to leer at her induced giggling. *How
can someone so awkward be so charming?*

“Unfortunately, no. Just another bit of jewelry I thought you might like.” She pulled a golden chain
from her pocket.

“Is that? Maker’s breath. That’s my mother’s amulet! Why isn’t it broken? Where did you find it?”
Eyes as large as saucers, Alistair cradled the necklace in his hands.

“I… might have been snooping around the Arl’s study when we were in Redcliffe. Looks like he
fixed it for you.”

He shook his head with disbelief. “But… why?”

“Perhaps you meant more to him than you think. He may have had a horrible way of showing it,
but I think he did care about you.”

“I… suppose he could have. We never really talked after I left for the chantry.” He held the amulet
closer to his face, as if the tiny charm could tell him its secrets. “I don’t even know how to begin
thanking you. I thought I’d lost it to my own stupidity. No one has ever given me a gift like this.
Any gift, really, but this… I’m not used to people listening when I talk,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Hmm? Sorry, did you say something?”

“Oh, ha ha, you’re hilarious.”

With a victorious smirk, she took the amulet from his hand. “May I?” As he turned away from her,
she slid her arms around his shoulders, breathing in his earthy and masculine scent as she drew the
chain behind his neck and fastened it. After he swiveled back around to face her, she grabbed the
rune and wrapped the cord around his right wrist, tucking it inside his sleeve, finger stroking where
his pulse steadily beat. “There. Safe and sound.” Suddenly embarrassed, she pulled back and self
consciously began playing with her hair, sliding the tie off her normal braid and shaking it out,
intently staring down the fire. Everyone else had slipped off to bed some time ago, assuming that
Alistair and Aerin had volunteered themselves for first watch.

Leaning back on his elbows, he watched her comb through her hair. “So, our grand camping
adventure. Will you miss it when it’s over? You know, the running for our lives, constant struggle
to find food, near brushes with death, all with the blight looming over us?”

She smiled up at the night sky. “Brings a tear to my eyes just thinking about it.”
“I know it… might sound strange. I mean, we’ve only known each other for what, not even five
months?” Laughing nervously, he sat up, idly playing with the dragon statuette in his hands. “But I
like you. Like, like. Um. What I mean is… I’ve come to care about you. A great deal. Maker.
Why is it every time I’m around you, I can’t think straight and I feel as if I’m going to explode?”
He buried his face in his hands and groaned.

With a gentle smile, Aerin perched on her knees and sat back on her feet in front of him and laced
her slender fingers through his larger hands and squeezed. “Take your time,” she murmured. “I’m
not going anywhere.”

Thusly encouraged, he took a deep breath, still not daring to meet her eyes. “Maybe it’s because
we’ve gone through so much already in such a short time. Or… I don’t know. Maybe I’m
imagining it. Maybe I’m fooling myself. Am I fooling myself? Or do you think you might ever...
feel the same way about me?”

“Alistair.” Her voice was low, reverberating through his chest like a prayer. Her hands gently lifted
his chin, her eyes sparkling. “I already do.” Aerin waited with bated breath, silently begging him to
kiss her.

His eyes crinkled as a slow smile spread across his face. “So I fooled you, did I? Good to know.”
Cradling his hand against the back of her head, he pulled her closer as she reached up to cup his
cheek. Suspended for a breath, they stared, lost in this space between spaces. Aerin’s tongue
slipped between her lips to wet them, and Alistair knew he couldn’t resist a second time. Bridging
the distance, he closed his eyes as his lips met hers. A small gasp escaped her before she relaxed
into the kiss, small and innocent it was. After a few seconds or an eternity, he wasn’t really sure
which, he pulled back and worriedly looked away. “That… wasn’t too soon, was it? I know we
said we’d take it slow and…”

Aerin slide over and straddled herself across his lap, gently taking his face into her hands and tilting
it so he was staring straight at her smirk. “I’m not sure. I need more testing to be sure.” A throaty
laughed escaped him as he wrapped his arms around her back and hugged her close.

“I think I can arrange that.” Her lips descended on him firmly, with the added note of hunger
driving this kiss. Aerin’s head grew fuzzy, the chill of the night slipped away, the pain from her
armor digging into her legs vanished, leaving behind only her warden. Alistair. His rich, masculine
scent, pine and cinnamon and woodsmoke, filled her lungs, the scratchiness of his stubble and the
feel of his body, though separated by layers of silverite and hardened leather, overwhelmed her.
She wasn’t sure if the pulse of her heart pounding in her throat and ears would kill her. Nudging his
mouth open a little more, she slipped her tongue along his lower lip, gently biting the soft, chapped
flesh. He rewarded her with a groan that sent a spark directly into her warming belly. His strong
hands ran along her thighs, digging into the muscles, causing her to moan in response, grinding
against his legs, feeling a twitch against her leg. “Maker, Aerin, slow down.” His voice was low
and rough. She had never felt like this in her entire life. It took all her self control to pull herself
back, both of them panting, breaths fogging in the cold night.

“Oh, gods, I’m so sorry!” A wave of humiliation washed over her. What was I thinking, grinding
against him like that like a whore? Oh wait. I was a whore. She tumbled off his lap into the dirt
next to him and scrambled back.

“No! No, it’s okay, really! It’s just… a little faster that what I was expecting, is all.” His smile was
reassuring, even though the rest of him looked extremely flustered. “Like I told you before, I’m
new at all of this,” he gestured. “Chantry mouse, remember?” He patted the ground next to him,
motioning for her to come sit. Still red from embarrassment, she hesitantly scooted over before
snuggling under his arm and resting her head against his cold metal breastplate.

“Alistair, there’s something you should know,” she murmured. “Back in Tevinter… as a gladiator. After I won a match, my master, well… He would sell me. To the highest bidder for the night. I was basically a whore. A well trained one, at least, I suppose. The things I was forced to do…” She shuddered, starting to pull away. He pulled her closer instead. “Anyways. I wanted you to know that. And also, that I’ve never been with anyone of my own choosing. So while I know the… mechanics of everything, this… relationship thing we’re doing is new to me too.” He shook his head, and her heart sunk.

“I don’t know how after all you’ve been through, you’re still so good. And strong. And everything else that makes you wonderful.” Oh! Smiling into his chest, she tapped his armor.

“The world has enough evil in it without me adding more. Plus, I had my sister, Ellana. She kept me sane. Not an easy job, for sure, but she managed it. Without her… I would’ve been lost years ago.”

“I’ll have to thank her then, when this is all over.” She craned her neck to look up at him.

“You’d come with me? To meet my clan?”

“If you wanted me to. I’m pretty sure I’d go anywhere with you. Except Orlais. Maybe not Orlais.” As she giggled, he leaned down to press a sweet, chaste kiss to her forehead. Unable to shake the stupid grin on either of their faces, they decided to just finish the rest of their watch in contented silence, at peace with their part of the world.

Chapter End Notes

More fluff and drabble. I refuse to write the Deep Roads.

Thanks to everyone so far who’s left comments and kudos! This started out as an exercise just for myself to get back into writing, so I’m super psyched to see how many others enjoy it as well. Totally unexpected. <3
“Help! Someone, HELP!”

“DARKSPAWN! EVERYONE UP!”

Aerin bolted straight out of her tent, barely pausing to grab her swordbelt, bow, and quiver, patting her boots to make sure her daggers were still secure. Alistair, who was on watch, was already running towards the sound. Leliana and Wynne stumbled out of their own tents, joining Aerin as they raced towards the sound of the scream.

There were four hurlocks, three genlocks, and one emissary down at the bottom of the hill, chasing something under the light of the waning moons. The other two women fell back, casting their ranged attacks as Aerin plunged into the fray to fight alongside Alistair. A flash of bright yellow caught the corner of her eye. That’s. Really bright. Putting it out of her mind for now, she fell into the familiar rhythms of battle, targeting the emissary first. Slash, block, jab, twist, choppy chop chop. Leliana cried out behind her. A hurlock’s arrow had embedded into her shoulder. Wynne pinned down the retreating darkspawn, casting a cone of ice, freezing it to the ground, letting Alistair shield bash it into miniscule fragments. Aerin caught the last remaining genlock with a thrown dagger into its leg, then pounced on it, crossing her swords as she smoothly beheaded the foul creature. Alistair was already on the ground next to Leliana, hand wrapped around the arrow shaft.

“Brace yourself,” he commanded. The bard grit her teeth as the warden broke the arrowhead off and jerked the wood out. Screaming in pain, she threw her head back, Wynne’s hand already hovering over the wound, pouring healing magic into it. Alistair examined the arrow. “Not poisoned, thank the Maker. Wasn’t there someone else out here?”

Aerin glanced around. The yellow streak from earlier, where... “There!” Hidden behind a boulder, she saw a pale head. “Hey, it’s okay now, you can come out.” Hysterical sobs floated out from behind the rock. The elf slowly walked over. “Mistress? It’s ok, the darkspawn are dead.”

“Don’t touch me! What were those things? What the hell are you?!” She must have hit her head, poor thing… Aerin walked to the other side of the rock. Shit. It was a woman, probably in her mid-twenties. Long, pale blonde hair, cornflower blue eyes. And wearing blue jeans, pink sneakers, and a bright yellow zip-up hoodie. “Well, fuck.”

Alistair walked over. “Did you find someone? Are they ok?” Glancing down, Aerin noticed the angry red slash against the woman’s thigh. “Wynne, we need you over here!” The mage walked over and leaned down next to the young woman.

“No! Leave me alone!” Aerin sighed.

“We need to get you back to camp. It’s not safe out here. We have a fire there, you can get warm. And we can fix your leg up, ok? And answer whatever questions you have. But we need to move.” The stranger stared at them with unbridled fear, then shakily nodded. “Is it okay if my friend carries you?” Another nod. “Alistair, could you…?”

“Right. Up we go, then.” Gently reaching for the woman, he frowned at her clothes. The top was
soft and thick, like nothing he had ever seen before. Not to mention her pants or shoes. Aerin wrapped her arm around Leliana’s good side, supporting her. The healing magic and blood loss had left her groggy. She helped the bard get settled in her tent, taking off her leather tunic and helping clean around the wound. Patting her hand, Leliana gratefully murmured her thanks before slipping into the Fade. Back outside, the stranger’s pants had been removed, and Alistair was trying to look everywhere besides at her half naked legs.

“There you are, Aerin, Alistair is useless. Can you help clean this off?” Wynne handed her a cloth. “Don’t just stand there, lad, go fetch the poor woman a blanket.” He darted off. Aerin dabbed at the gash, frowning at the edges of it that were turning black. Wynne softly prodded the wound with a tendril of magic.

“What is that! What are you people doing to me!?” The woman tried to scramble backwards, but winced from the pain. “Where am I? There’s not any mountains anywhere in Nebraska. I don’t understand!”

“Nebraska? Is that where you’re from?” Alistair wrapped the blanket around the shivering woman, still taking care to look anywhere else besides her legs. “I don’t recognize it, I’m afraid. Your clothes are very… peculiar.”

She violently shook her head, tears flinging from side to side. “No, no no no. Is that a real elf? What were those things? Why does that look like magic? Where am i?”

Wynne looked up. “Have you never seen a mage before, child? Or elves?”

“Of course not. They’re not real! This is a dream. It has to be.” She threw her head back. “Oh. My. God. There are two moons.” Trembling, she burst into more heaving sobs. Finished with her leg, the older mage patted her on the back.

“There, there my dear. You must’ve had a fall. Let me check your head and I’ll-”

“I didn’t fall! Please. Just… tell me where I am.”

“You’re in Ferelden. It’s a country.” Alistair’s tone was similar to what one might use to a frightened animal, low and soothing. “We’re on the King’s Highway, along Lake Calenhad, at the base of the Frostback Mountains, about four days to Redcliffe Village.” With mournful, swollen eyes, she looked up at them, finally taking in their armor and primitive camp. Emitting another high pitched wail, she curled into herself and began sobbing anew.

“Let her rest for a bit,” Wynne suggested, her own voice exhausted. “Maker knows I need it myself. I’m definitely not a spring chicken anymore. The girl… I think she’s in the beginning stages of the taint. I’ll check her again in the morning.” With a nod, she headed off to her own tent. Aerin sat down in front of the fire, running her hands over the woman’s discarded jeans, the fabric so familiar and yet foreign at the same time.

“It’s so odd, isn’t it? And her jacket. I’ve never seen anything dyed that bright before. And to think she’s never seen an elf before. Or the moons. What do you think?” Aerin was silent. How did she get here? Are there more? How many more? Four, five? Maybe dozens? Are we being brought here for some reason? Or just slipping through the cracks? Is there a way to go back? Would I go back?

“I’m... sorry. I should’ve thanked you earlier. It’s just... this is all...so…” the woman was sitting up again.
“Weird? Tell me about it,” Alistair gave her his most charming smile. “I’m Alistair, by the way. Grey Warden. This is Aerin Lavellan. And you met Wynne, the older woman, and the other redhead is Leliana.”

“Jennifer. Jennifer Reiter. This isn’t Earth anymore, is it?”

“Earth?”

“The planet?”

“Umm. The whole land you mean? We call it Thedas. There’s Ferelden, Orlais, the Free Marches, Nevarra, Rivain, Antiva, Tevinter, and the Anderfels. Oh and Par Vollen. There’s other places beyond the sea and to the west of the Hunterhorn Mountains and the Donarks, but no one really knows. You said Ne… Nebala? Nebanske?”

“Nebraska. It’s part of America. Well, United States of America. I feel like I’m in some Lord of the Rings movie set. What were those things that attacked me?”

“Darkspawn. Tainted creatures. They usually stay underground, but we’re in the middle of a Blight, so they’re all up here, attacking everything in sight. Lord of the Rings? What’s a movie set?”

“None of this makes sense,” she murmured.

Aerin spoke up for the first time. “How did you get here? What do you remember?” Her voice was harsher than she intended, and Jennifer blanched.

“Um… I was going to the store. Parked my car, went to grab some stuff for supper. I was walking across the street and… I don’t remember? I think maybe an accident. I’m not sure. I’m sure my boyfriend is missing me though. I should’ve been home hours ago. I need to get back.”

Alistair ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m sure you do, but it’s late now. Let’s just get some rest, and we’ll figure it out tomorrow, yeah?”

Aerin motioned at him. “Go get some sleep Alistair. I’ll take watch. You’re more than welcome to use my tent, Jennifer.” Thanking her, the girl shuffled into the tent. She’s going to have a hard time getting comfortable on that thin bedroll. Gods, what is going on? I wonder if the rest of the group will believe her story. Guess we’ll find out. I wonder if there is a way back. Would I even go? Everyone there probably thinks I’m dead. I wonder if time has passed normally there. I could ask her what year it was there. Np, I can’t go back, even if there was a way. No one there would believe me. And if they did, I’d probably be locked up in a secret lab somewhere, government running experiments on me. Is that even a real thing? I wonder if my binding would hold if I went back? I would lose my magic probably. Could I be human again? Is that the end of the long journey Asha’bellanar talked about? Will someone find a way to send us back? Is going back the answer to my freedom? That thought chilled her. Would she go back, leave all of this, leave her sister? Whatever this was with Alistair? This whole thing is f*cked up.

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“Do we really believe her?” Alistair glanced over were the woman called Jennifer, who was from Nebraska, America, Earth, not Thedas, was picking at the roasted nug, trying not to grimace.

Leliana shook her head. “She’s never heard of the Maker and Andraste, or the Fade, or darkspawn. She was shocked at seeing two moons. She didn’t think elves or dwarves and magic were real. And her shock is genuine. I can usually tell when people are lying. Not to mention her clothes. Those
materials. I’ve never seen the like.”

Wynne sighed. “I’m not sure it matters, sadly. The girl has the Taint. It’s definitely set in. It doesn’t seem like it’s spreading fast, so it’s probably the wasting sickness version. She only has a few months, maybe a year at most.”

“Maker. You’re right, I can feel it. Very faint right now, but it’s there. What should we do? We can’t take her with us to Haven, can we?” Alistair watched the woman, sadness clouding his eyes.

“There’s a small village marked here-” Aerin pointed at the faded map she had unrolled- “a day away. We can take her there, might be a small chantry we could leave her at for now. When we’re finished in Haven, we can get her and take her to Redcliffe, figure out what to do.” The rest nodded at that plan. Picking up the foreign pants, she walked over to Jennifer.

“I mended these for you. Probably more comfortable for you than a pair of our leggings.”

“Oh! Thank you,” Jennifer tried not to stare at the elf’s ears, but it was really, really hard. She stood up, swaying slightly. “My leg feels much better, thank you Wynne. I think it might be getting infected though.” The veins around the wound were darkened, glowing brightly against her pale skin.

Wynne walked over, helping the girl to change. “I’m sorry, dear, but we can’t do anything about that now. We’re going to take you to a nearby village to see about getting some more help. Is that alright?” She nodded.

They had to slow down their pace immensely. They passed the path to Haven within the first two hours, but continued south. Leliana, Alistair and Wynne passed the time asking Jennifer about her world. The woman told them everything she could think of about the government, travel, computers, cell phones, medicine and healthcare, wars and weapons, space travel, television, music, and movies. Aerin was shocked at hearing some of the things.

“Cell phones that take pictures and play music? Movies created entirely by computers? How much time must have passed? She still couldn’t work up the courage to ask what year it had been.

“Oh! You must sing us a song!” Leliana insisted.

“Um… alright. Let’s see.” She began singing in a nice, steady tone something that sounded rather pop-ish. It was a catchy tune, by someone she called Taylor Swift. “That’s one of the new songs. Every generation has it’s own style of music,” she explained when she finished.

“Your generation must be very strange,” Wynne remarked. Jennifer smiled.

“I can sing an older song. This was one of my mom’s favorites. If I should stay, I would only be in your way…” The forgotten melody wrapped itself around Aerin’s heart. “Oh! This is one of my favorites. A newer musician did a version that’s really good a few years back.”

“Well I heard there was a secret chord, that David played and it pleased the lord. But you don’t really care for music, do you? Well it goes like this, uh. Crap. I forgot the rest.” She grinned sheepishly.

Aerin took a deep breath.”It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall and the major lift, the baffled king composing Hallelujah. Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah.” Everyone stopped in their tracks, turning to stare, openmouthed. She closed her eyes and continued. “...Baby I've been here before, I've seen this room and I've walked this floor, I used to live alone before I knew you. I've seen your flag on the marble arch, love is not a victory march. It's a cold and it's a
“broken Hallelujah.” Her last chorus of hallelujahs faded into the air. She touched her face. *I’m crying*…?

“Aerin…? What- how?” Alistair stared at her, brow creased. “Are you from… Nebraska, too?”

She turned to continue down the road, pointedly avoiding their faces. “My mom used to sing that to me when I was little. My dad was more partial to Billy Joel. No one… no one knows about this. And I’d prefer to keep it that way.” The rest of them stumbled over themselves, rushing to swear themselves to secrecy. “Fine. I’m holding everyone to that. Aedan knows, some of it, by the way. He… found me in the Fade. I was dreaming I was back in my home world. I was born and raised in South Carolina. It’s the same country as Nebraska,” Jennifer nodded, hope lighting up her eyes, “but on the other side of the country.”

“How long have you been here?” Jennifer asked softly.

“Nine years. It was September when I left. 1997.”

“It’s the year 2006.”

Aerin paused. “That sounds weird.”

Leliana’s eyes bore into Aerin. “But Jennifer said she had never seen elves before.”

 Oops. Dammit. “There are only humans where we come from, yes.” The Orlesian raised her dainty eyebrow. “Ugh. Tevinter. Blood magic. That’s all I’m going to say.”

“You’re human?” Alistair’s brain was in overload. “So, do you even look like… this?” Shock, and some other emotion she couldn’t identify was written on his face. She cringed.

“No.” And then she felt silent, her heart screaming at her. *Of course he cares what you look like. He likes you because you're beautiful in this form. He wants Aerin, the elf. Not me. Not… whoever the hell I am. I don’t even know. I can’t even be mad. I don’t want me either.*

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The tiny hamlet had no chantry, but there were two lay sisters who agreed to take Jennifer in. The group decided the best course was to pretend the woman had amnesia for now, and to keep her origin a secret. They had found a dress for her to wear in a wagon that fleeing refugees had abandoned, wrapping up her original clothes to ensure they stayed hidden. Aerin had barely said a word the rest of the way there and back to the trail to Haven, lost in the torment of her own mind.

“You should talk to her, Alistair.” Aerin had taken point, walking ahead of the group up the path to the small town that was Haven. Alistair and Leliana trailed behind. He had been wracking his brain, thinking of what to say for the past two days. But everytime he came up with something, he discarded it. None of it felt like it would help. He'd probably just make it worse.

“I don’t think she wants to talk, Leliana. She barely acknowledges anyone. She probably just wants to be left alone.”

“Oh, Alistair. She’s scared. Being alone is the last things she wants, believe me. She probably is feeling very lonely and unsure right now.” He stared at Aerin’s back. *Unsure? But she always seems so confident in her choices. Unwavering. I wonder what she really looks like. I wonder if there’s a way to reverse it? What would she even be scared of?*

Looking over at Leliana, who just shooed him away, Alistair sped up to where Aerin led. “Hey,
Aerin, um-” She threw a hand back in a silencing motion.

“A guard, at the top of the hill. Odd for such a small village, don’t you think? Let’s go.” She spoke quickly, unwilling to give him any opening.

“Oh. Right. We can talk later then… right?” The look she shot him was indecipherable.

“Sure.”

Chapter End Notes

PLOT TWIST. Dun, dun DUNNNNNNN! Apparently, the writing muses felt I had too much fluff and not enough angst.
Something was very wrong with this village. It seemed innocent enough at first, but there were odd things scattered throughout and everyone was on edge. The idea of a Revered Father confused Leliana. The way the guard called them “lowlanders” made Alistair think they were related to the Avaar. The kid playing with the fingerbone disturbed Wynne. Aerin just wanted to stab things.

“Should we be poking around people’s houses?” Alistair looked around nervously. Leliana gave him a sweet smile.

“How else will we figure out what’s going on, hmm? What the- is this… human?” A altar lay to one side of the room, covered in blood only a few hours old.

“Used for food preparation perhaps?”

“Does meat bleed that much, Alistair?”

“I’m just trying to be optimistic. The other explanation is slightly more disturbing.”

Wynne shuddered. “This village is not what it seems. Let’s go back outside.”

Aerin slid her swords out of their scabbards, feet widening into a guard stance. “Someone’s coming.” Several men ran over the crest of the hill, into the clearing where the companions stood. They appeared filthy, ragged, gaunt, and very angry. With a war cry, the men descended on the group, fists swinging, intent on the kill. “Dammit! I can’t kill unarmed men!” One of them pulled out a small dagger. “Oh. That helps.” She ran him through. “Welcome to Haven, I guess.”

“This is what we get for poking in people’s houses!” Alistair pulled his sword loose from a dead archer’s body. As they continued to make their way up into the village, armored warriors and even a mage ran out to meet them. “What is wrong with these people? Is it just me, or are these warriors getting stronger the more they bleed?”

Shaking her head at the corpses now littering the village, Aerin pointed at a nearby shop. “Let’s see if anyone’s in there that can answer our questions.” There was no one in there, save a few decaying bodies of Redcliffe knights hidden in the back room. With not a single other soul around to interrogate, they traveled further up the path where a decrepit chantry stood in the grim, pale sunlight. A mage in robes eerily reminiscent to an old Tevinter style stood before the townspeople, preaching to the gathered crowd, their eyes raised in a frenzy of adoration and fervent belief. The man caught sight of the travelers.

“Ah, welcome. I trust you have been enjoying Haven so far?”

Leliana glowered at him. “You killed the knights from Redcliffe. We saw the bodies!”

The Revered Father/mage crossed his bulky arms. “You see, brothers, what happens when we let outsiders into our village? They have no respect for our privacy-”

“Told you so,” Alistair muttered.

“They will tell others of us, and then what? You do not understand our ways. You would bring war to Haven in your ignorance. We have a sacred duty; failure to protect Her would be a greater sin.
All will be forgiven. Brothers, defend Her!” The Father Eirik grabbed his staff, leveling it at Leliana.

“Fucking cultists,” Aerin muttered. “Kaffas. We should have asked them about Brother Genitivi first. Now what?” She stood among the bodies in the aftermath, rifling through the dead Father’s pockets. Holding out a bronze medallion, she passed it to Alistair, who was hovering nervously over her, like he wanted something but wasn’t sure what. “Looks important.”

The warrior examined it, shrugging. “Hold on to it for now. Let’s look around for any other clues.”

“Like a false wall?” Leliana asked with a playful smirk. She pressed a section of roughly hewn stone, causing the wall to slide away, revealing a side chamber. Gasping, she ran inside. “Wynne, come quickly! He’s injured.” A thin, scholarly man lay on the cold floor, hands pressed to his leg.

“You don’t know how glad I am to see someone not of this village,” he said gratefully.

Wynne examined the injury. “I can set the leg and ease some of the pain and swelling, but he’ll need rest to fully heal.”

“I don’t have time to rest,” he insisted. “The Urn is just up that mountain.”

“The Ashes are here for sure? We need them,” Alistair said, hope infusing his features. “The Arl is sick, poisoned on Loghain’s orders.”

“The Ashes will surely cure him,” Genitivi ardently remarked. “It lies in an ancient temple on the mountain, of which Haven rests in the shadow, built to protect the Urn. We’ll need the key to open it. Eirik has a medallion.”

Aerin pulled it out. “This?”

The brother nodded. “Yes, that’s that one. Take me to the temple, I will show you how to open the door.”

Aerin frowned. “You are injured. If there are more cultists, up ahead, we cannot guarantee your safety.” As the rest of the party chimed in in agreement, the man protested, insisting it was his life’s work. She shrugged, finally. “Fine. It’s your neck, scholar. Let’s go.”

Haven was shrouded in perpetual snow, despite it being midsummer. The air was thin, the high altitude making Aerin’s head pound, her stomach queasy, and her body fatigued. Not to mention she felt on edge thinking about Alistair and her. She knew the rest of the party was aware of the tension emanating from her and the way she was ignoring him. “This is going to suck,” she mused to herself. “I really hope we don’t run into anything too terrible. Definitely not at my best right now.”

The steep, icy path opened up to a fantastic vista, an ancient stone temple standing in the shadow of the snow covered mountains. From here, it was possible to make out the fallen arches and crumbling buttresses, but all in all, it was still holding.

“Th...
We need to go. Cultists to kill, ashes to find, arls to save?” Alistair snapped back to reality.

“Right. Look steady and keep an eye out for unstable walls. Last thing we want is to be caved in here or squashed like bugs.”

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The temple was in better shape the deeper they ventured, even though more cultists seemed to lurk behind every shadowed corner. “I guess the neverending winter and the mountain preserved a lot of this. I can’t believe all this is a thousand years old. Oh, I would love to spend a day here” Wynne peered at a few delicate scrolls on warped wooden shelves. “The chantry would be overly pleased to have these.”

“I don’t think anyone would mind if we borrowed a book or two,” Leliana giggled, carefully wrapping a few to stow in her pack.

“Looks like we’re descending into an older area, underground. Wait. Do you hear that?” Aerin paused, ears searching for the unfamiliar sound. “Like a growl, almost, but not. A squeak? Squeaky growl?”

Leliana notched an arrow to keep at the ready. “I don’t like the sound of that.” The carved, stone walls fell away into a roughly hewn cavern.

*Dragons. Actual, Void taken dragons. “Dragonlings!”*

Grunting, Aerin swiped at one’s wings, feeling almost sad when the pony sized lizard squeaked in pain. “Dragonlings? As in, baby dragons? As in, there’s a larger mother somewhere nearby?” She gulped.

“Drakes ahead!”

“What are those?! Please tell me those are the adults.”

Alistair nodded. “Adult males, yes. Now the females…” Aerin groaned. Her head was still killing her and she was still dizzy. Rubbing her head, she wiped her blades off.

“Fine. Sure, why not.” There were several eggs in this room. *Should we smash them, or…? I feel kind of bad killing unborn babies.* Wynne set the eggs on fire. *Well then.*

“Stop! You will go no further!” A deep voice called out, several men moving to block their passage. “You have defiled our temple, spilled the blood of the faithful and slaughtered our young!”

Cocking his head at the chainmail clad man, Alistair’s eyebrow twitched upwards, “To be fair, they all attacked us first. Not a single one stopped to even greet us. Very poor manners, you know. Maybe if they were nicer and less stabbity stab stab, they’d all still be alive.”

The man’s face grew an angry, mottled red. “Silence! You will tell me now, intruder, why you have come here!”

Leliana cast a glare that told Alistair *stop antagonizing the dragon lord.* “We have come here for the Ashes of Andraste.”

“You did all this for an ancient relic? The prophet Andraste has overcome death itself and has returned to Her faithful in a form more radiant that you can imagine! She has revealed Herself to
us! We are Her chosen! To arms, my brethren!” he screamed.

“I hate cults,” Aerin informed her companions. “Also, dragons. And caves.”

“We’ll add it to the list, dear,” Wynne agreed as she cast a shimmering barrier around the rest. Finding herself face to face with the leader, she smirked.

“How do you even know Andraste is real? Maybe she’s just a myth. Maybe her new form is just a dumb, simple beast,” she taunted. In his fury, his swings grew wilder, screaming curses upon her. “Do you think she left the Maker? How sad he must be, all alone then? I have met many fools during my life, but you, ser, are the absolute limit.” With a roar, he lunged at her, right as a wave of dizziness hit her body. Shit. She stumbled, allowing her opponent to find an opening in her armor and slice her skin. Gritting her teeth, she hissed at him in Tevene. “Vishante kaffas!” Summoning her old friend the flame, she pushed all her pain and hurt and everything that had been tormenting these past few days away, far down into the depths of her soul that was already near to bursting with the repressed emotions. Finding someone else from her first home. Her affection for Alistair.

“His unease at finding out her face was not her own. It was making her weak, unfocused, things she could not afford. She needed to let it all go. She had spent too long running from the person she truly was, the person she had been forced to be. But now she had a choice. Taking a deep breath, her vision cleared, the searing pain in her side a distant memory. Giving the man a cold smile, she bared her teeth. “Your last mistake, human.” Dancing in a complex whirl of veridium, her blades unerring found the chinks in his armor. Jab here, graze there, stab here, and twist. With a sharp cry, he fell to the ground, her sword swill buried in his upper thigh, dark blood soaking his leathers.

“She will rend you limb from limb. You will kneel in the dirt at her feet before She rips your heart out,” he jeered. Snorting, she raised her other sword to his throat. Leaning in, her gaze glittered like ice as she twisted the embedded blade in his leg, making him scream.

“I was once called Seraphina, Victorem of Minrathous. I was forced to kneel my whole life. I am no longer that person. I bow to no one.” With that, she slammed the tip of her blade into his exposed throat. Withdrawing her blade, she grabbed an oiled cloth she noticed sticking out from his pocket, wiping off the grim from her blade as she noticed her companions staring apprehensively at her.

This is who I am. Who I must be. Schooling her features into the blank face she had worn just a few short years ago, she turned away. “There’s the exit. Let’s go.”

The cold mountain air seared her lungs as she gasped. A huge shadow passed over the mountain path, wind picking up the dust and debris, blowing into their eyes and hair. “Maker, Aerin, what’s wrong with you? What happened back there?” Alistair and the rest caught up to her. Ignoring the question, she pointed.

“Take cover!” The shape passed over them again, the roar reverberating through the ancient hall.

“Dragon,” Leliana breathed. “One of the high dragons, if I’m not mistaken.” The giant beast settled on a ridge overlooking the valley. “I think we should be able to sneak by.” Using the fallen arches littering the path, they cautiously made their way across to the temple entrance. It reminded Aerin of the pictures of Petra she had seen long ago, a building facade built directly into a mountain. Even after all these years, it was magnificent to behold. The stone door swung open with remarkable ease, the dimly lit room ushering them inside. Lit torches lined the wall. Aerin frowned. Magic torches? Or has someone been here recently? Glancing ahead, she noticed a man dressed in outdated armor standing in front of the single exit.

“I bid you welcome, pilgrim.” His voiced echoed eerily through the chamber. “You have come to honor Andraste, and you shall, if you prove yourself worthy, to be determined by the Gauntlet. Before you go, I see the path that led you here has not been easy. Tell me, Alistair, knight and
warden… You wonder if things would have been different if you were with Duncan on the battlefield. You could have shielded him. You wonder, do you know, that you should have died, and not him?” Aerin jerked back to stare at the Grey Warden, startled. He lowered his eyes. “I… Yes. If Duncan had lived and I had died in his stead, everything would have been so much better. If I just had the chance, maybe…”

The specter turned to Wynne. “You are ever the advisor, always ready with a word of wisdom. Do you wonder if you spout only platitudes, burned into your mind? Perhaps you are only a tool to spread the word of the circle and chantry. Does doubt chip away at you?”

She gave him a slight smile. “You frame the statement in the form of a question, and yet you already know the answer. Yes, I do doubt at times. Only the fool is completely certain of himself.”

Looking at the bard, he continued. “Why do you say the Maker speaks to you, when all know He has left? He spoke only to Andraste. Do you believe yourself Her equal? In Orlais, you were someone. In Lothering, you feared you would disappear as a drab sister. When your brethren criticized you, you were hurt, but you also reveled in it. It made you special, and you enjoyed the attention, though it was negative.”

Leliana was taken aback. “You say I made it up for… for the attention? I did not! I know what I believe!” she indignantly insisted. Aerin braced herself for what came next.

“You… There is suffering in your past- yours, and that of others. You have committed a great number of atrocities, killed many innocents. Was your life worth more than the others you slew? Would you turn back, given the chance? Or will you continue down the path you have set for yourself into darkness again? Do you not fear for your soul?”

She stood, firm and resolute. “I did what I had to do to survive and to keep my sister alive. I regret the deaths I caused, but not the outcome. As for my soul…” her heart felt like it was being crushed alive, “that was lost to me long ago. I am who I was made to be.” The Guardian did not react.

“The way is open to you. Good luck, and may you find what you seek.” Aerin marched through the now open door. Spirits lined the hall in tidy little alcoves, speaking in riddles for the party to solve. Drifting along behind the rest, she barely listened to Leliana and Wynne debate the answers, lost in her own mind while Alistair carefully watched her, a concerned expression marring his forehead.

_Say something Alistair. Obviously something isn’t right. You care about her, go comfort her! What do I say?!_ He wracked his brain, trying to force his mind to come up with the magical words that would make her eyes light and up and her smile grace her face again. He hadn’t heard her laugh in days, since before they found the Nebraskan. He missed it. Missed her small hand laced in his fingers, her soft lips against his skin, her giggles echoing in his ears, her scent of lavender filling his nose as she lay against his chest by the campfire. He missed everything that made her, her. The woman in front of him was not his sweet Aerin.

“Last one!” Leliana exclaimed, as the far door clicked open. Aerin was the first through the new door. Suddenly, she wished she was not. Her mother stood in the doorway.

“Not this again. Leave me, demons,” she snarled. The thing that looked like her mother sadly shook her head.

“I am no demon, child. I am part of you, and the Gauntlet. You have suffered much since leaving home.” Aerin’s stoic expression faltered. “You wonder if you had not fought, if you had not rebelled, if you could still be home, safe, unmarred. You worry your last words to me were angry
ones and you will never get a chance to repair the damage wrought.” Vision suddenly blurry, she closed her eyes. “You have suffered enough, daughter. It is time to leave that behind. Be the person I know you can still be, the person you were raised to be. It does not do to dwell on past regrets. Time moves on, as should you.” Fists clenched at her side, tears streaming down her cheek, Alistair reached out and wrapped his arms around her, hesitantly at first, afraid she would pull away. She stiffened for a moment, then lay her head against his chestplate. And sobbed. Everything was so unfair. How can I even be that person my parents imagined I could be? That person was full of life and innocence, full of dreams and aspirations and a future. What future do I have here? Alistair’s arms tightened around her some more, while Leliana gently pat her hair, murmuring soothing things under her breath. Wynne stood off to the side, sending a gentle wave of healing into her tired body.

“Of course we care,” Alistair whispered into her ear, Aerin realizing she spoke those last words out loud. “I care. I... I love you, Aerin. The person I’ve seen and gotten to know these last few months. Human or elf, it doesn’t matter to me. I love your strength, your independence, your loyalty, your smart mouth—” she snorted graciously—“everything about you. I love you.” Arching her neck to look up into his eyes, the color of a winter sky, she smiled, a real, heartfelt smile that reached her eyes. Tracing her fingers down his cheek, she used her other hand to pull his head down to hers.

“I love you too, Alistair.” He sharply inhaled as their lips met, sweet and innocent at first. He cupped her head and tilted it to the side, slanting his mouth over hers to deepen the kiss, teasing her full lips open to taste her more thoroughly.

“Ahem.” With a start, they yanked themselves apart, having completely forgotten that Leliana and Wynne were both still standing their in the ancient hall, smirking. “As thrilling as watching you two make up is, I believe we need to get a move on,” Wynne remarked dryly. Alistair and Aerin’s faces both burned.

“Ahem.” With a start, they yanked themselves apart, having completely forgotten that Leliana and Wynne were both still standing their in the ancient hall, smirking. “As thrilling as watching you two make up is, I believe we need to get a move on,” Wynne remarked dryly. Alistair and Aerin’s faces both burned.

“Ah, right. Um. This way,” she squeaked, all but running away. A huge grin suffused Alistair’s features and he was certain that nothing else that could possibly happen in this temple would wipe it off for the rest of the day. Even the creepy spirit dopplegangers didn’t even affect him much, although he did feel bad striking the evil nebulous Wynne down.

“I’m so sorry, Aerin! I shot you in the head!”

“Leli, that wasn’t me. It’s fine.”

“Did you set me on fire, Wynne?”

“You deserved it, Alistair. I saw you stab me in the stomach. Very rude, if you ask me.”

It took them an hour to figure out the floating tiles, mainly because Alistair was apparently afraid of heights and refused to get near the edge to stand on a marker.

“Alistair, I swear to the gods, if you don’t stand right here and not move, I tell Morrigan you’re secretly in love with her.” He hurried to stand

“That was fun! Let’s do it again!” Leliana clapped her hands.

“No.”

A line of fire burned across the open room, blocking their way to a massive staircase leading to a shrine. Everyone, save Aerin, gasped. “By the Maker, it’s... it’s the Urn of Sacred Ashes! That’s it! That’s really it!” Alistair jumped up and down like an overly excited, metal puppy. A plain altar
with almost illegible, worn down script stood before the fire.

“Cast off the trappings of worldly life, and cloak yourself in the goodness of spirit. King and slave, lord and beggar: be born anew in the Maker’s sight. Um. When it says cast off your worldly life, is that a mental thing or a we’re all going to have to get naked thing?” Aerin glanced up at her companions. Leliana had a huge grin on her face, Wynne looked slightly perturbed, and Alistair hid his face in his hands. “Right. Time to strip then.” As everyone turned away to disrobe, Aerin couldn’t help but sneak a glance at Alistair. The nobles in Minrathous had been all slender muscles, tanned skin, and elegant, smooth limbs. Her warrior was the exact opposite. Scars littered his fair skin, untouched by the sun. His broad back and shoulders flexed as he pulled his tunic over his head, muscles dancing underneath the surface, begging to be touched. His legs were sturdy, his arms solid, his backside all but chiseled from stone, the product of years of his warrior's training, wearing plate armor, and hefting a heavy sword and shield. She was aware she was all but drooling, but she couldn’t look away. A giggle to her left finally drew her attention and hormones back to the present. Leliana and Wynne, both naked as the day they were born, were watching her ogle the man with great amusement. Her bard friend winked at her.

“I must say, I do envy you. That physique… C’est parfait, non?” The girls giggled, all unconcerned with their nudity. Aerin had been used to bathing with the other slaves and Dalish for years. Alistair stood across the room, back to them, refusing to turn around. As the women walked sedately through the fire, the heat warming their skin not uncomfortably, Alistair shuffled sideways through, like a crab going to pray at Andraste’s shrine. Aerin tried to repress a giggle and failed, ending up snorting as she cackled hysterically, slapping her thighs and clutching her belly.

“You have been through the trials of the Gauntlet; you have walked the path of Andraste, and like her, you have been cleansed. You have proven yourself worthy. Approach the sacred Ashes.” The Guardian appeared, oblivious to their undressed state, ignoring Aerin who was still trying to choke back her laughter. Inclining his head to the group, he again disappeared, along with the fire line. Alistair sprinted to his clothes, probably setting a world record for fastest dressed man, Aerin thought with another giggle.

Falling into silence, they approached the shrine. “I... I thought it was a legend. I didn't believe...” Wynne bowed her head. "I could not have asked for a greater honor than to be here. I will never forget this feeling."

Alistair hung back behind the group, stopping on the last stair, examining the statue and Urn from afar. "I didn't think anyone could succeed in finding Andraste's final resting place... but here... here She is."

Dropping to her knees, Leliana whispered, “I... I don't know what to say… I never dreamed I would ever lay my eyes on the Urn of Sacred Ashes... I... I have no words to express..."

Three pairs of eyes looked expectantly at Aerin. She snorted. “A world full of magic, a centuries old elf, and dragons, and you want me to be shocked about thousand year old ashes? Nope. Come on, grab a pinch and let’s go.” The women shook their head at her irreverence, but Alistair just grinned.

“That’s my girl. Hey, anyone want to go kill that dragon?”
I've currently written 14 chapters ahead of this one and I'm screaming. This story has taken a completely different turn that what I envisioned. Aerin is very opinionated.
“Why did we decide to fight that dragon?” Alistair groaned. Wynne’s glare bored holes into his head. *If looks could kill, Alistair would be a roasted nug.* They had finally made it back to the King’s Highway, having had spent a total of five days in Haven and the Temple. The last day was dedicated solely to recovering from the dragon fight. She had the worst of the damage, being right under the dragon but in flexible leather armor. Three broken ribs, a fractured tibia, and a burn across her lower left arm. Everyone else had only minor lacerations and burns. Wynne had all but exhausted herself healing Aerin, her mana not yet fully recovered from the battle, to the elf’s chagrin.

“I’ll be fine, Wynne. Go, rest.”

“Young lady, if we don’t get that swelling down, it could push your newly set bones back out of place. Alistair, make sure she doesn’t budge from this spot.” And he did. Wouldn’t let her even feed herself. She was sure it was retribution for making him stand on the tile in the bridge chamber. *It is kind of nice to be waited on like this,* she admitted to herself. No one had taken care of her like this in a long, long time.

Sitting down gingerly in front of the fire, Aerin set to work removing her armor. At her fourth attempt to undo her buckles, she grudgingly let Alistair help. “This is not what I had in mind when I pictured you undressing me,” she informed him. He chuckled.

“Oh? This is exactly what I had in my mind. You, helpless in my arms, willing and compliant.”

“Helpless? I will kick you,” she weakly tried to raise her uninjured leg, but that put too much pressure on her healing break and she gave up.

“You can kick Alistair after you’ve healed,” Wynne called calmly from the other side of the fire. Aerin grumbled under her breath. Armor finally off, she breathed a sigh of relief, feeling the cool breeze trace along her sweaty skin, clad only in a loose tunic and leggings. The temperature had raised as they made their way back to the road, and it finally felt like summer again. Leliana was bent over the campfire, turning the spit loaded with the ram she had shot earlier. It smelled heavenly after eating nothing but dried rations the past few days. Haven didn’t have many options as far as wildlife, most creatures having been scared away by the dragon. They would pick up Jennifer tomorrow, then be in Redcliffe by the start of the week. Hopefully, Aedan and the others would join them soon. And if the Ashes worked, they could heal Arl Eamon and things would finally be on track.

Alistair brought Aerin her portion of the ram, sitting close to her as they ate. “So, I feel like we should talk. That’s a thing couples do, right? Wait. Are we a couple? I mean, I know we kissed a few times and I know we told each other we love each other, but does that mean we’re… together and stuff?” He spoke quickly around mouthfuls of ram, making it hard for her to understand what he was saying.

Laughing around her own food, she swallowed. “I would hope that we were together if we were in love,” she teased. “And you’re right, we should probably talk.” Her face grew sober. “I’m sorry for those first few days after we left Jennifer and got to Haven. I just… had a lot on my mind.” He nodded. “And… I mean. I’m looking for a way to become human again,” she spoke barely above a
whisper, staring at her food. “I won’t look like this anymore. I don’t know if you…” His face fell.

“Maker, you didn’t think- that I wouldn’t care about you if you didn’t look like this, did you?” She turned her face away sheepishly. He set his food down. “No. No no no no no. Aerin, look at me. You’re beautiful right now, yes. But I’ve seen other beautiful women. Leliana is quite pretty, as is Morrigan.” She stuck her tongue out at him. “Mature. Point is, I’m not attracted to any of them. I fell in love with you and the person you are. I mean, one day I’ll probably lose all my rippling, manly muscles and Maker forbid go bald. Would you love me any less then?” She pretended to consider it. “Hey, you.” Giggle, Aerin shook her head. “Right then. Like I told you before. Human, or elf, red hair or purple, I love you, silly woman.” She threw herself into his arms. Or tried to. In reality, she lifted one leg, hissed in pain, and instead leaned over to awkwardly pat his arm. Grinning, he shifted himself until they were facing each other. Kissing her lightly on the nose, he continued in a low voice, “I am a lucky man.”

“Alright, you two, get some sleep. I’ll take the first watch.” Leliana smiled at them. “Alistair, you should help Aerin to her tent.” Winking, she turned to clean up the remains of supper. Alistair blushed.

“Right then, tent, here we go.” Letting her lean on him, she limped to her tent, settling herself down gingerly on her bedroll. Grabbing an elfroot poultice, the warrior gently lifted her shirt, blessing the dark tent that was hiding his beet red face, so he could replace the bandage around her ribs. Rolling up her leggings, she did the same to her leg. Sighing in relief, she leaned back.

“Will you stay with me tonight?” He hesitated, searching for words. “No, not like that. I know you’re not ready for that.” She smiled gently at him. “Just sleep next to me. If you don’t mind, that is.” Reaching to brush away a stray lock of her hair, he nodded.

“Of course, love.” He stripped his armor off, carefully piling it by the entrance of the tiny tent. Ducking back outside, grabbing his own bedroll out of his tent, he came back in, arranging it next to her. It was the first time they had been this close without all the armor between them, dressed as he was in a light short sleeved shirt and cotton pants. Curling up next to him on her uninjured side, she rested her head on his arm, cheek pressed against his chest, listening to his heart. “This is nice,” Alistair whispered as he stroked her arm.

“Mmm.” Within a minute, she was asleep.

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Twirling her staff overhead, she slammed it into the ground, releasing a few energy bolts to swirl around her body. Conjuring a few targets, she aimed a Stonefist spell at one, crushing it into dust, before spinning around and freezing another.

“Well, this is preferable to the darkspawn dreams but kind of odd.” Alistair stood in her clearing, blinking. Dressed in a crisp white long sleeve shirt tucked into black leather pants with a dark red sash for a belt, he looked like a pirate of some sort. Dashing. “I’ve never seen you use a staff. Enough practicing. Come here you.” He reached for her, grinning. He thinks he’s dreaming, Aerin realized. Examining the man, she decided it was him and not a demon- no hint of sulphur or a tinge of yellow in the eyes. Somehow Alistair had gotten pulled into her dream. I must’ve been more tired than I thought.

“Hello, love,” she purred in response. Walking over to him, hips swaying, she wrapped herself around him, pulling his head down for a long, deep kiss. His warmth and scent, campfire smoke, cinnamon, and the almond oil he used for his armor, threatened to overwhelm her. He nipped her bottom lip, forcing a low moan out of her. “Where are you learning all this?” she breathed.
“Copying you mostly. Also, Aedan and Leliana have been enjoying making out in front of me recently. Zevran talks a lot too. A lot,” he murmured against her. Laughing breathlessly at that, she stood on her tip toes, running her tongue up against the outer shell of his ear. Alistair hissed, pulled her hips closer, grinding against her so she could feel the growing bulge in his pants grind against her stomach. Oh, he’s sensitive here. Testing her theory, she gently nibbled on his earlobe, swiping her tongue up. A groan rumbled through his chest and his fingers dug into her hips harder as he pressed searing, wet kisses against her slender throat. Pulling open the neckline of her shirt, he continued down, sliding his rough hands under her loose shirt against her naked back. Feeling her control start to slip, she pulled back.

“Ali… Ah! I thought you- ohhhh- wanted to take this slow?” she gasped out. His right hand had crept around to her stomach to the soft skin there and inched up, teasing the underside of a smooth breast.

“Mmm… slow is stupid. ‘Sides, this is a dream,” he mumbled. Groaning, she pushed his hand down and grabbed it.

“Alistair. Look at me love. We’re in the Fade. You’re in my dream.” Confusion gave way as realization dawned on his handsome face and he jumped back, shocked.

“Maker! How? What? This is real? It’s really you?” He fought the rising blush as full awareness of the situation reached him, trying to surreptitiously rearrange his pants.

“As real as our Fade selves can be. You know I’m a Dreamer, right? I can pull people into my dreams somehow. I usually have more control, but I guess with all the stuff from the past several days plus getting injured, I was more exhausted than I realized and pulled you in unconsciously. Also, since you fell asleep close to me, our dreams were already close together. I’m not used to sleeping so close to anyone besides Ellana, and even with her, it’s been years since we shared a bed.” She raised her hand apologetically. “I can push you back out if you’d like. Or…” she lit up. “I can show you around. Where I’m from!”

His mouth fell open. “You can do that?”

Bouncing up and down, she nodded. “Yes! Ok. Here goes nothing.” The world around them spun in a riot of color. Slowly, a one story house with white plastic siding materialized, surrounded by a neat, green yard encased in a matching white, wooden fence. In the driveway sat a bright red Jeep and a beige, 4-door sedan. Purple flowers lined the concrete walkway leading up the navy blue front door. Other similar houses popped up in lines next to the white house. Alistair stared. He had never seen a house constructed out of whatever it was. And the surface they were standing on- he’d guess it was a road, but it was hard and black and seamless. Big metal boxes with seats lay off to the left. Some type of odd carriage? Where were the horses? He looked down at himself. His pirate outfit had disappeared, leaving him in shoes made out of a strange canvas with bouncy soles that tied up to his ankle, stiff, blue pants like Jennifer had been wearing, but looser, and a soft, thin pale blue cotton shirt with short sleeves. He kept rubbing the shirt. It’s so soft, he marveled. Aerin just in front of him. Or he thought it was her. Her hair was black and straight, and her eyes were a warm, rich brown. He smiled, pulling her under his arm as they gazed at the house.

“Is this what you look like?”

She shrugged. “I don’t really know. I know what I looked like when I was 11, but I haven’t seen myself since then.” Frowning, she examined her hair. “All I know is that my hair looks like this and my eyes are dark brown. Beyond that is anyone’s guess. I can show you my parents though. I favored my mom mostly. This is where I grew up. Come on!” Tugging his arm through the front door, she stopped just inside the foyer, lost in the memory. A floral couch sat on one side of the
living room facing a small TV. A beige wooden coffee table lay in the center of the room. Alistair followed wordlessly, mouth open, as she trailed through the house, showing him around. The kitchen was shiny, full of objects he had never imagined in his wildest dreams. A stove that worked without fire. A box that kept things cold and frozen. A machine that washed and dried your clothes. “This was my room,” she whispered, pushing open a door at the far end of a hallway. There was a small bed tucked against a cerulean blue wall, covered with a blanket decorated with pictures of a girl with a fishtail. “You don’t have legends of mermaids in Thedas?” she asked in disbelief. Taking him into another of the side room, they entered an office of sorts. A dark wooden desk with papers strewn across the surface sat in a corner and matching bookshelves lined the wall. Alistair marveled at the books, at how thin the pages were and how uniform the writing was. “It’s not written by hand. No one really does that anymore. A few hundred years ago, a man invented a machine to print books. Our worlds used to be similar. People fought with swords, rode carriages and horses, knights wore heavy armor, there were kings and queens living in castles, and lords and commoners.”

“What happened?”

“There was a time when people started learning science, figuring out how the world works and why things happened, and they began inventing things. I think it was steam engine that really started changing things. I’m not really sure, it’s been awhile since I learned it. Here.” She pointed to a series of wooden rectangles on a shelf. “Photographs. Instead of paintings, a machine takes pictures. Like these.” Alistair stared, entranced at the glossy pictures, like someone had just frozen a moment in time and preserved it. There was a man and woman, both with the same hair and almond shaped eyes as Fade Aerin had, smiling lovingly at each other, hands intertwined behind the woman’s back, resting against her lacy white dress.

“You said you favor your mother? She’s beautiful.”

“Isn’t she though,” Aerin replied softly, stroking another picture frame she had taken down- her mom and her a year before she had disappeared. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, full and deep. Alistair felt like he had never been this close to anyone else in his life.

“This place is amazing. And you’re amazing.” Kissing her again, he smiled. “I think it’s time for my watch, but can we do this again? You can show me more?”

“I’ll show you everything.”

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It would be several nights before they met again in the Fade. The group arrived in the small farming village, ready to grab Jennifer so they could hightail it to Redcliffe, but a solemn lay sister met them at the modest house they left her at.

“I’m so sorry, but your friend passed on two days ago. The taint changed, and quickly overcame her, Maker rest her soul. She left a letter for you.” Aerin felt like she had been kicked in the stomach. She had found someone with whom she could reminisce, and keep the memory of her first home alive. And now it was gone, fading again. No. Now I have the Alistair to help me remember who I am. She turned the parchment the sister had given her over in her hands. It was a messily scrawled list of her full name, address, her parents’ and sisters’ names and contact information- “in case you or someone else manages to get back home, please tell my family”. She carefully wrapped the letter in Jennifer’s hoodie, opting to burn the rest. Those clothes would cause too many questions if found anyhow. It was easier to keep just the one thing hidden.

The atmosphere on the way to Redcliffe was much more sober, everyone filled with renewed
determination to end the Blight, no matter the cost. The taint ruined everything. By the first of the week, as planned, the group caught sight of Redcliffe Castle. Aerin grabbed Alistair’s hand, smiling. He shot her a nervous look in return. “Let’s do this.”

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Aerin was intrigued. She watched as Alistair went from the happiest man in Ferelden at seeing his uncle healed to the most frustrated man in the country. “He can’t seriously mean to make me king! Me! Of all people!” Aerin, Wynne, and Leliana sat in the library, perched on various chairs and tabletops, watching Alistair wear a hole in the plush, Orlesian rug, pacing back and forth in front of the cold hearth. “There has to be another way without letting Loghain take over and making me king.”

“Missive for you, ser,” a servant tentatively entered the room, bowing to Alistair, who very atypically just glowered at the elf. Aerin reached over with a chiding glance for her love and took the parchment, thanking the man.

“Who is it from?” Leliana asked. They had all had a proper bath and were dressed in comfortable, clean clothes for the first time in weeks, Wynne in her circle robes, Leliana and Aerin in simple yet elegant dresses provided by Lady Isolde, and Alistair in a freshly pressed embroidered tunic and loose pants. *He already looks the part of nobility*, she thought wistfully.

“Aedan and group. The dwarves have no king, so they’re having to go down into the Deep Roads to find a lost Paragon...? so the Assembly will recognize a new king. Only then will the dwarves be able to lend their aid. They’re expecting to be down there for at least six weeks. This letter is dated a little over a week ago,” she frowned. “That’s a really long time.”

Alistair stopped pacing. “The Deep Roads? Bloody hell. I should be with them. Aedan’s still new, and the Deep Roads are... well, safer now since all the darkspawn are on the surface, but still. Six weeks...”

“He has some things he wants us to check on in the meantime. Morrigan wants her mother’s grimoire, which is at Kinloch. Sten lost his sword around the area too, so Aedan wants us to poke around, see if we find anything. And he has a request for a dwarf that wants to join the circle to study? I thought dwarves couldn’t practice magic?”

Wynne pursed her lips. “They can’t, but they can still learn. It would be unprecedented, to have a dwarf at the circle. They do make some of the best runes and enchantments in Thedas.” Aerin perked up.

“Runes? Can the dwarves reverse a cast rune?”

Eyeing the elf, the mage shook her head. “It’s theory now, but in practice, it has yet to be done. Once a rune is cast, you must simply wait for the effects to wear off.”

Words drifted back to her. *It is possible to break the binding... The methods do not exist yet, but they will. Is this what she meant by it? Is this dwarf the start? “But all runes do wear out eventually?”* Aerin persisted.

“Most runes do, I daresay. It would have to be extremely powerful to last more than a few months before being recharged.”

Power. Her face fell. *That’s why it took so many sacrifices. So it would be permanent.*

“Aerin? You look like someone just killed your puppy and stole all your cheese.” Alistair walked
over to her, tilting her chin up. “What’s wrong, love?”

Tears filled her eyes. *I thought I was done crying over this.* Angrily wiping the tears from her eyes, she exhaled. “The glamour charm. It’s… a rune. Tattooed onto me, with blood and lyrium. Not my blood. The maleficarum killed four other slaves to provide the power.” Leliana gasped. Alistair’s mouth just gaped.

Wynne sat back, stunned. “I wondered about that. If it was a simple illusion, then when I touched your ears, I should have felt your real ears. But I didn’t.” Aerin frowned, trying to think of when Wynne touched her ears. “They actually crafted a new skin for you, didn’t they? The real you is sort of stuffed in there?” The elf nodded.


“Yes. I’ve learned to live with it though. No other real option,” she added flatly. “It’s like… constantly suffocating, with just enough air to keep you conscious. And my skin feels dry and tight all the time. That’s the real reason I want it gone. I don’t care much that I’m an elf. I just want to feel free again.”

“But why did he do it?” Alistair asked.

She stared vacantly at the floor, eyes tracing the floral patterns in the rug. “Human mages are illegal to keep as slaves. Elven mages are not. They didn’t know I was a mage at first. It manifested after I was bought.” Her warden knelt in front of her, grabbing her knees in his hands.

“I promise you, we will find a way to break this curse on you. No matter what,” he swore, his mouth set and sky blue eyes determined. She gave him a small smile and kissed his forehead.

“That’s why I came here, to help. Asha’bellanar promised I would find my release if I came to help defend against the Blight.”

“Asha’bellanar? The elven legend?” Leliana sat up straight. Aerin nodded.

“You’ve heard of her?” The bard’s emerald green eyes glinted.

“Oh, yes. That is just one of her many names, however. Others call her a Witch of the Wilds. Or Flemeth. Morrigan calls her Mother.”

Alistair sat back on his heels. “Well I’ll be a toad. What does that sneaky witch want?”

“For the world to not end, probably, ser toad,” Aerin teased. “We should leave tomorrow for Kinloch, go ahead and get these things done. Then maybe we’ll have time to relax a bit before the Landsmeet starts.”

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Leliana poked the injured man with her dagger. “You are no common bandit. Your armor and weapons are of fine make, and you have been well trained. Who sent you?”

The man coughed. “Don’t rightly know. Was told it would be an easy job. Kill the redhead girl, deal with the others as we pleased. Look, I’ve no real quarrel with you. Here, this house in Denerim is where I was supposed to go to collect my payment. Best I can do.” He held out a small scrap of parchment with an address scribbled across it.

Leliana took the paper. “Thank you. Now go.” As the mercenary scrambled off into the woods, the
bard fingered the small paper. “It’s Marjolaine. It has to be.” Fury, confusion and sadness flitted across her set face. “She needs to answer for what she done to me. It’s time to settle this for good.”

“Do you want to go now?” Aerin asked. “Or wait until we’re there for the Landsmeet?”

“It will keep for now,” the bard replied. “Will you come with me?”

“Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

Almost sexy Fade times. More sexy times to come.
Back at the castle, everyone settled comfortably into a routine. Aerin had written a letter back to Aedan, telling him that Flemeth’s grimoire was safe with them, and to check the merchants outside of Orzammar for a man called Faryn for clues to Sten’s sword. She also included a letter of acceptance from First Enchanter Irving and the Knight-Commander for the dwarf, Dagna. Aerin had tried to talk to Ser Cullen back at the circle while she was there, enquiring after his health, but had only received open hostility. It was clear he blamed them for the continued survival of the few mages left in the circle. The Knight-Commander had muttered something about how the lad was too high strung now and would do better with some distance. She hoped he would get help and recover, to live through an ordeal like that… the idea made her nauseous.

Life went on as they passed the time, waiting for Aedan’s group to surface from the Deep Roads. Wynne spent most of her days meditating or reading in the library, overjoyed to have new books to read. Leliana joined Wynne often in the library. When she wasn’t there, the bard could usually be found in the chantry, singing the chant along with the sisters, or teaching a few little village kids to shoot arrows at the straw dummies. Aerin would occasionally go with Leliana to the chantry just to hear her sing and to relax. “I’ll turn you into an Andrastian yet,” she teased her elven friend.

"Not likely."

Alistair and Aerin spent most of their time together, to no one's surprise. He taught her how to ride, or attempted to. He confessed it had been years, since he had left Redcliffe ten years ago, to be exact. They had picnics in the meadows surrounding around Lake Calenhad, sparred often, with Aerin attempting to teach her warrior to duel wield. “This is impossible,” he complained. “You’re like a damned sea serpent with your blades. I’m like a stunted druffalo, missing a leg, covered in molasses.” She laughed at that imagery.

“You’re just weighed down by all that metal. You’re already pretty fast. Imagine how much faster you’d be in leathers.”

“I’d pretty much be naked,” he grumbled.

“Ooh, now there’s a thought,” she shot him a saucy wink. Instead of blushing like he normally did, he glanced up at her under half lidded eyes with a slow smile. A sharp jolt of desire sent shockwaves to her core. Their kisses recently had been getting longer, deeper, and more intimate. Still, Aerin restrained herself, knowing he would tell her when he was ready. She would not rush him for anything.

“There’s a thought indeed,” he replied, voice a register lower than he normally used. She shivered. “Come, show me again that move. I’ll learn it yet.”

***
Aerin never wanted to leave Redcliffe Castle. It was peaceful here. Autumn had come to the Hinterlands, and the farms surrounding the village were busy with the harvest, songs drifting up from the fields as they worked. But word had finally come from Orzammar. The Paragon Branka had been found, and subsequently killed, the golems and some magical anvil destroyed. *No, not magic, dwarven technology,* she corrected herself. Bhelen had been crowned king and pledged the dwarves’ support against the darkspawn. Their tasks had been completed. Armies of Dalish, mages, and dwarves were gathering on the plains outside of Denerim, to prepare together for the coming war, while the nobles had all been summoned to the capital to choose a new ruler. Alistair was still frightened out of his wits that someone would make him king.

She stepped out of the copper tub, wrapping a fluffy towel around herself. Filled with melancholy, she pulled a soft chemise over her head, preparing for bed, while drying her hair off. *Alistair would make a fantastic king. I don’t really know anything about Anora, except her father is responsible for Cailan’s and the Grey Wardens’ deaths, as well as Arl Eamon’s attempted murder. Is she like him? Or is she a good queen? If he became king, we would… I don’t think we could be together anymore. Or do kings take mistresses here? Would I be okay with that? Seeing him with another woman, who will bear his children? But I would have him still. This is so fucked up.* She glanced upwards. “Can’t you give me this one thing? Just him. I swear I’ll never ask for another thing ever again.” A knock sounded at her door.

“Aerin? It’s me.” She sent a quick burst of heat through her hair, drying it instantly into soft, loose waves, a spell Wynne had just taught her the other day. *About time magic was useful for something besides evil nonsense.* She pulled open the door. “Hey! I, uh, know it’s late. Could I come in?”

Opening the door wider for him, she teased, “Isn’t that inappropriate? What will the servants say?” Grinning sheepishly, he ducked in. “Probably that I’m getting a head start on the typical kingly indiscretions,” he quipped sarcastically. Laughing, she pulled him into a hug. She loved it when he didn’t wear armor and she could feel him against her. Fitting perfectly under his chin, she snuggled into his chest, reveling in the feel of his arms around her. They stood there for a few moments, lost in the sensation. “I… don’t know what’s going to happen at the Landsmeet. Maker knows I don’t want to be king. I don’t want to lose you. You’re the best thing that has ever happened to me, you know that, right? It’s always duty though. It’s been ingrained in my head since I was old enough to walk. Duty to king, and country, and the chantry, and the Grey Wardens. All I have ever wanted for myself is you.”

“No matter what, Alistair, I love you. I would, of course, prefer for you not to be king but… I’ll understand if you have to be. You’d be a good king,” she smiled up at him.

“No. It won’t come to that. I’ll talk to Aedan, we’ll figure something out.” He dipped down to her mouth, slowly kissing her lips, tilting her head back and teasing her mouth open so he could taste her more. She clutched the thick muscles of his biceps, willingly opening herself further for him, feeling her heart begin to pound against his. Slowly drawing his bottom lips into her mouth, she gently nipped it, causing him to gasp and pull back. “Aerin, I… want to stay the night with you. If that’s ok. I know things might change soon. And regardless of the king thing, nothing in our lives are guaranteed. If the unthinkable happens and…” She raised a finger to his lips, shushing him. “It won’t.”

“But it might. No one knows. I really don’t want to wait anymore. I’ve… never done this before, you know that. I want to be with you. I’d like to say I threw caution to the wind at least once.”

“Well,” Aerin said, “at least you waited until we have a bed.” Grinning, she pulled him close. “We’ll go slow,” she whispered. “Don’t be afraid to tell me what you want. This is sort of new to
He laughed in a husky, low voice. “You. I want you. For as long as you’ll have me.”

“Forever then.” He looked down at her like she was Andraste herself. Grabbing his shirt, she tugged it over his head. Running her fingers all across his chest, dipping down the hard ridges of his stomach, she marveled at his physique, feeling the muscles flex under his skin, brushing the light dusting of hair across his chest. His breathing grew shorter. Taking her fingertips, she lightly scraped across a nipple, smirking at his sharp inhalation. She repeated it on the other side.

“Alright, you minx,” he growled. Ooh. She stood there frozen at the sound. “May I?” he whispered, a handful of her thin nightgown in his hands. Wordlessly, she nodded. He slowly pulled it off her, drinking in the sight of her standing before him. Tawny, smooth skin covered her, no breastband or smalls to obstruct his view. His mouth suddenly dry and filled with cotton, he tentatively reached a hand up to her. “Is it alright if I…?”

With a sultry smile, she reached for his waistband. “You can touch me anywhere you please, love.”

“Ooh, anywhere?” He grinned. “Then what about…” Her golden blue eyes widened.

“Don’t you dare, Alistair Theirin.”

“Ah ha! Both names. I’m in trouble now! Too late!” With that he attacked her sides, tickling her mercilessly, catching her before she hit the ground as she laughed hysterically.

“Alistair! Ahh! I swear if you don’t stop, I’m gonna-” He tossed her on the bed.

“Do what, hmm?” an impish smile covered his face.

Smiling indulgently, she laid back on the sheets, stretching out, and sinuously arching her back. He stared, frozen in place, emptiness abruptly taking his mind over. “Pants off, lover.”

“Right. Pants.” Alistair had never removed his clothes faster in his life. Then, he realized belatedly, he was standing in front of her. Naked. As was she. He gulped. Fears raced through his mind. What if I do this wrong? What if I’m not enough for her? What if- oh. She was staring at him, mouth slightly open, biting her lower lip, looking for all the world as if she wanted to devour him. Leaning up to rest on her knees, she shuffled closer to him, tangling her hands in his soft, coarse chesthair, running her fingernails up and down his arms, across his stomach, scratching his nipples gently. Coming even closer, she wrapped her arms around him, pressing her small, pert breasts to his skin, and reached up to gently bite his ear. His hardening member twitched against her stomach. Smiling to herself, she did it again, feeling him slide his hands down her back to grab her firm bottom. She sighed softly into his ear. Leaning back, she smiled at him.

“Breathe, Alistair.”

He let out a huge exhale. “Right. Sorry. It’s just that I’m a little, um nervous. And hot. Is it hot in here? Because-” She pulled him down next to her, giggling.

“What would you like to do? Would you prefer I show you pleasure now? I can use my mouth or hands, whichever you prefer?” He closed his eyes.

“Actually, can I just… touch you? And you can tell me what you like?” She stared at him. “Or… that was the wrong answer, wasn’t it? Maker, Alistair, you’re an idiot.”
“No! No, you’re not an idiot. Um.” She self consciously slipped under the sheets and pulled them over her. “I… don’t know what I like. I was taught how to give pleasure to the men and women who… paid for a night with me. But beyond that, I don’t know anything about me.” Tugging at the sheet, he gazed down at her as she chewed on her bottom lip, looking away. Cupping her face in his large hands, he smiled sweetly at her.

“We’ll just muddle through it together then, shall we?” His eyes were bright, the normal pale blue darkened to the color of a mid-afternoon summer sky, drinking her in as he gently ran his calloused fingertips across one breast, using his fingernail to scrape it gently like she had done to him. A small gasp was his reward. Thusly encouraged, he slowly lowered his head to the pebbled flesh, tentatively tasting her skin, drawing her nipple into his mouth and grazing it with his teeth. Another gasp, followed by a low moan. He brought one hand up to her opposite breast and began to roll the other nipple between his fingertips, causing her to cry out and jerk underneath him. Making sure it was a cry of pleasure and not pain, he settled down to continue his ministrations on her tender flesh, licking, sucking and gently biting her under she was writhing underneath him.

Reaching down to stroke him, she whispered, “Is this ok?” He nodded. “Lean back.” So he did, reclining against a pillow to watch her. She stared, transfixed by the sight of his member, the head already a deep purple, a few pearlescent drops of liquid leaking from the tip. She softly ran her fingers through it, using it to smooth her way down the rest of the shaft and back up again. He clenched his fists in the sheets.

“Uh, Aerin,” his voiced was strained, “I don’t think I’m going to last long like that.” She smiled. “I know. We have plenty of time though.” And with that, she lowered her mouth to him. Crying out, Alistair threw his head back, vision flooding with white hot light. She swept her tongue up his shaft, swirling it around the tip, wrapping her full lips around his girth, sliding it all into her hot, warm mouth. With one hand, she lightly stroked his tightening sack, teasing the wiry hairs and the soft skin underneath. His hands automatically reached for the back of her head, grabbing her hair into his fist, smoothing his rough palms down her arms, panting and gasping nonsensical words. With her name on his lips in a deep, raspy groan, the edge rose up and flooded his sensations, another swirl of her tongue and bob of her head pushing him over. Alistair let out a sharp cry, pleasure overtaking him as he burst into her waiting mouth, his pulsing shaft twitching against her lips, seed dripping from her lips. Swallowing it all, she gave him one final lick, causing him to twitch some more, before sitting up to smirk down at him.

“Maker,” he croaked after a minute, as his breathing returned to normal. “Have I been struck by lightning? I feel like there should have been lightning by now.” Laughing, she shook her head. “No lightning. Just me.”

“No lightning. Just me.”

“Just you, indeed,” he huffed. “Come here, just you.” He pulled her down to lay on her back beside him, turning over onto his side so he could see her. “How did I ever get so lucky as to have you for my own?” he murmured, tracing his fingers across her muscled abdomen. Sweeping his hands down her slight curve of her hips, he gently kissed her, reveling in the taste of his spend on her lips and ignoring her protests.

“You deserve so much more than me,” she replied. “But as it stands, for some reason you love me. And I will strive to be the person you think I am.”

“Know you are,” he corrected, pushing her knees apart. Obliging, she spread her legs a little further, blushing all the while. Grinning up at her, he teased, “Is my lady blushing? After all that?” She covered her eyes and moaned in defeat. Chuckling, he gazed at her core. “Maker, you’re soaking wet.” He gently drew a finger across her slick folds, feeling her shudder against him.
Tracing the line of her slit, he eased her open, covering his finger in her glistening arousal. He brought it up to his lips to taste, her eyes blown open and staring.

“Alistair, you don’t have to-”

“I want to, though. You did it to me and it was the most amazing thing ever. Won’t it be the same for you?”

“I, uh. Not sure?”

“Well if you don’t like it, tell me to stop, and I will, okay?” She nodded as he returned to her center, making himself comfortable on the bed. Watching her closely, he slowly licked up her sweet flesh. Her eyes flew open and she bit her lip, motioning for him to continue. He alternated, using the tip of his tongue, then the flat of his tongue, testing to see what she liked, relishing in the sweet, musky taste that was exquisitely her. Licking around the hard nub at the top that made her scream, and around the source of her arousal, making her moan. Slowly, torturously so, he slid a finger inside, watching as Aerin’s hands scrambled to find purchase and her neck arched back.

“More,” she gasped, “Please, Alistair.” Maker. The sounds she was making were obscene and he could feel himself starting to harden again. More what though? More... He slid another finger in, watching her sweet nectar drip onto the bed. Fascinated, he bent down to suck on her pearl, slowly sliding his fingers in and out. “Curl... your fingers. Upwards,” she instructed. He obliged, stunned as she threw back her head and screamed. “Don’t stop!” If there was one thing Alistair was good at, it was following orders. So he continued sucking and licking at her sweet honey, pumping his fingers in and out of her hot core, curling his fingers up each time to brush against a rough, swollen spot inside her. Faster, and faster as she demanded, her lover continued his ministrations until she felt herself break. Tight muscles clenched around his fingers, spasming as she howled her pleasure, her orgasm inundating all her synapses as her brain shut down and her vision exploded. “Stop, please stop, sensitive,” she gasped, blindly reaching for his hands. He withdrew, making a show of licking her fluids off of his fingers as she watched from hazy, lidded eyes. “Gods, Alistair. Where did you learn to do that?” He grinned triumphantly.

“Zevran, actually. Gave me a full lesson on what to do and how to pleasure a lady. And a man. Multiple times. Without prompting.” She breathlessly laughed.

“Come here and kiss me,” she commanded. Complying, he crawled up her flushed body to take her mouth into a deep kiss, the proof of his arousal pressing into her hip. “Do you...?” She motioned downward. He nodded enthusiastically, no hesitation this time. He positioned himself over her and guided himself to her entrance. “Go slow. You’re, uh, rather large, and I need time to stretch.”

With a cheeky grin, he replied, “Yes ma’am.” Pressing the tip to her slick core, he braced himself on either side of her shoulders and torturously eased in, inch by inch. A low hiss echoed from Aerin, as she felt herself stretching to accommodate his girth. A pained expression flitted across Alistair’s face. Fully sheathed inside of her, he shivered. “Maker. This is perfect. Are you okay?” Wrapping her legs around his hips, she nodded, tilting herself to pull him in deeper.

“So full... Make me yours, my love.” Needing no further encouragement, he slowly withdrew before sliding back inside, that same delicious torment causing her skin to tingle with electricity. “Alistair...” she groaned. Grinding his pelvis against her clit, he slid out again, and without warning, slammed into her, making her scream. Freezing in place, he shot her a panicked glance. “Do that again,” she demanded hoarsely. Relieved he hadn’t hurt her, he obeyed.

Over and over, his taut hips pounded into her, instinct taking over as he found his rhythm, burying her face in her loose waves, the smell of her and sex clouding his mind. Aerin dug her fingernails
into his back, raking them down his flesh, moaning and praising him into his ear as he thoroughly claimed her. This was all so new. Before, in Tevinter, sex was about control, domination, humiliation. Retreating into her mind, leaving only her body for her ‘partner’ to do with as they wish, emotions numb- that was how she survived, endured. But with Alistair, it was the opposite. She wanted to be in the present with him. Wanted to watch him, watch as his jaw tightened and his eyes fluttered shut, watch as the candlelight gleamed off of the thin sheen of sweat on his stomach, watch as he twitched and jerked against her. She needed everything about him, like he was suddenly the air and she was drowning. This wasn't just sex. It wasn't the taking she was familiar with. This was a joining of equals, her pleasure just as important, if not more so than his own. Feeling the coil of desire in her belly tighten and burn, she blindly reached her hand down and circled her throbbing clit with her fingertips. Once, twice, she screamed his name, her orgasm slamming into her and spreading like fire through her veins, bright stars scattering across her eyes. Feeling her come apart underneath him, her walls violently clenching around him, Alistair finally let his own pleasure overtake him. Tucking his head down into the curve of her neck, he roared in her ear as he felt himself spurt hot, heavy ropes of his seed deep within her belly, his member twitching in release. Utterly spent, he collapsed on top of her.

They lay like that for several minutes, catching their breaths, sweaty bodies pressed against each other, their combined fluids mingling between their legs and dripping onto the sheets. Aerin patted his back. “Ali, love, I need to breathe.”

“Oh! Sorry!” He slid out of her, jerking back and tumbling backwards onto the floor.

“Alistair!”

“Owww… I’m okay, I’m okay.” He got up, rubbing the back of his head, giving her a sheepish grin. She launched into a giggle fit.

“I love you,” she smiled once she regained her composure. She got out of bed, wet a cloth and tossed it to him, using another to clean herself off. Climbing back into bed, she patted the spot next to him. His face lit up, as he realized she wanted him to stay. “Well, of course I want you to stay,” she snorted, very ladylike. “You didn’t think I’d ever let you leave me, even for a minute, did you?”

“Mmm,” he hummed against her head. “That will make bathroom breaks veeeery awkward.” Laughing again, she curled herself around him. “Have I told you I love you today? I have? Well it won’t kill you to hear it again, will it?”

“I love you too, Alistair. I just wish… our future was a little bit more certain.”

“Hey. Look at me. I’ll tell you one thing, I don’t intend to let you get away if that’s what you’re thinking. King or no king, I’ll find a way to make it work. I don’t intend to do anything to jeopardize us, trust me. You’re the first woman I’ve had, and if I have my way, you’ll be my last.” His gaze was fervent upon her, eyes shining with determination. It was a good look on him, she decided.

“I believe you. Sleep now. There’ll be time for all that later.”

Chapter End Notes

First smut. I'm gonna go bury my head in the sand now and scream in embarrassment.
“Don’t you realize you’ve been smiling for hours now?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You’re the one being ridiculous. Since the last time you and that fool, Alistair, shot glances at each other. He must be pleasant enough in bed, for I cannot imagine anyone enduring his conversation.”

Aerin just dreamily smirked. Morrigan shook her head, unable to help the small smile that crept across her face.

“It’s true. You have this glow about you, so shameless.”

“I am not glowing!”

“Oh course you aren’t. Leliana’s just seeing things again, isn’t she?” the bard patted Aerin’s head patronizingly. A small pink head popped out of her sack and squeaked at her. “See, even Mister Schmooples agrees!” The elf glared at the traitorous nug and groaned. Up ahead, it appeared as if Zevran and Aedan were giving the same treatment to Alistair, judging by the latter’s splutters and coughs and indignant tones. Turning back to look at her, his eyes softened when he noticed her watching him, a silly grin plastered across both of their faces.

“You’re doing it again.” Morrigan and Leliana were thoroughly amused at this turn of events. “Who knew the chantry boy had it in him,” the witch mused.

“I think it’s rather in Aerin than Alistair,” the bard snickered. Unable to help herself, Aerin burst out laughing. They had been on the road to Denerim for a little over two weeks now, facing small bandits of rogue darkspawn and the occasion pack of opportunistic bandits, but for the most part, the journey had been peaceful. Aedan and the others seemed slightly more worn down than the rest, from their time spent in the Deep Roads. All he would say about it was that it was horrible, and he was not looking forward to ever going back. They had brought with them another companion, the equivalent of a walking, slurring, dwarven brewery, called Oghren. Aerin stayed far away from him and his stench. They all did, actually. He didn’t seem to notice. Morrigan had been overly thrilled to receive her mother’s grimoire and even spent some nights showing Aerin a few useful spells and tricks from it. Aerin had been apprehensive at first, but curiosity had won out.

“This spell… is effective immortality. You can store a piece of yourself in an object, and then with the right ritual, you can be restored to life even if you should die elsewhere. Fascinating.”

“That’s just creepy,” Aerin shivered. “Would you even be the same after?”

The witch shrugged. “‘Tis power. Would it mattered if you were the same?”

“So power is worth it, even if you lose yourself?”

“I… you make a valid point.”

Sten was also in a vibrant mood, or as vibrant as Qunari ever got. He was actually respectful to
Aedan and Alistair, grateful that the two Wardens were able to track down his greatsword, Asala. Also, Leliana had introduced him to cookies. Sten loved cookies.

Thus they walked into the capital of Ferelden, one drunk dwarf, one Qunari with crumbs all over his face and armor, two apprehensive Grey Wardens, two giggling redheaded rogues, two exasperated mages, and Zevran, who was ever his cheerful self. They had all been given their own rooms in Eamon’s Denerim estate, servants working overtime to air out the dusty, unused rooms, filling the mansion with light and the scent of fresh laundry.

After Aerin was freshly bathed, an elven servant slipped into her room, pulling out a dress for her to wear to supper and offering to pin up her hair. “What’s your name?”

“Laena”, the serving girl squeaked.

Giving her a reassuring smile, Aerin squeezed her hands. “Do you like working here?” The servant held out a dark green brocade dress, with long sleeves that slightly flared out around the wrists, a wide cut square neckline edged in silver scrollwork, fitted bodice, and full skirt. The bodice laced up in the back and the skirt was split in front, showing off the lacy cream petticoat underneath, and simple matching green embroidered flats were slipped onto her feet. Pulling up Aerin’s mass of loose waves, Laena smiled.

“It’s better here than the last place I worked, that’s for sure. The Arl doesn’t visit much, so we just mainly maintain the rooms in his absence. He is a good lord.”

“It’s a relief to see elves respected and well treated. I’m not really used to it still. I’ve not faced as much disdain towards myself in Ferelden as I have elsewhere.” Laena frowned.

“Oh? I can’t really say, as I’ve not been anywhere else but Denerim my life. It’s a simple life we lead, but I suppose we are content enough,” she replied hesitantly. “There, all done in time for supper. You look magnificent, my lady.”

“I’m no lady, Laena,” Aerin laughed. “You did a magnificent job.” The top half of her hair had been twisted and pinned up, allowing the bottom to tumble freely down her back and her eyes had been slightly lined with kohl. “Isn’t this too… fancy?” The serving girl’s eyes widened.

“You’re to dine with the Arl, my… mistress. And the prince!” Prince? Oh, right, Alistair. Expressing her gratitude, she left her room, trying to find her way back to the dining room through the maze of halls. Leliana skipped out of her own room, in a fitted, navy blue Orlesian style gown-longline underbust bodice, over a full, hooped skirt, and sleeves that puffed out to the elbows.

“Look at this dress, Aerin! Isolde sent a few here for me to wear. She’s such a dear. And these shoes!” Delicate, engraved silver heels adorned her slim feet. The bard pranced around the hall, delighting in her finery. “I must get you to wear one of these before we leave. You will look divine! Oh, I have just the one.”

Aghast, Aerin held up her arms, as if to stave off the other’s increasing enthusiasm. “Oh, no no no, too many puffs and frills for me. I like this one.”

“It’s very Ferelden. Well, at least Alistair will approve. Come along then.” Alistair did approve, as was evidenced by his wide eyes and gaping mouth as the two women walked into the dining hall. Aedan nudged him, grinning, before rushing to take Leliana’s hand. Alistair stumbled over his feet, skidding to a stop in front of Aerin, before clumsily bowing.

“My lady,” he brought her hand up to his lips, crooked smile on his own. “Shall we?” he
straightened, proffering his elbow.

“‘Twould be my pleasure, my prince,” she chirped, slipping her arm into his.

“Hmm. I actually think I like the sound of that,” he whispered, his gaze darkening with lust as he eyed her.

“Later,” she winked. “I’ll need help unlacing this dress after all.” He muffled a low groan as he slid her chair out.

“You’ll be the death of me, woman.”

Full, warm, and content with her friends, Aerin began to make their way with the rest to the library to discuss the upcoming Landsmeet. As they turned up the stairs, a servant ran up to Arl Eamon. “My lord, the regent is here to see you.”

“Loghain? Here, now? I was expecting this, but not so soon. Very well. Alistair, Warden Cousland, if you please.” Aerin trailed behind the men, studying the regent closely. He was a warrior, through and through. Like a war hammer, she thought. All power and no finesse. His sharp eyes found hers, narrowing. Another man stood next to him, and she inadvertently stepped back. He looks like that blood mage from the ludus. “Loghain, it is an honor that the Regent would find time to greet me personally.”

“How could I not welcome a man so important as to call every lord in Ferelden away from his estate while a Blight claws at our land?” the man replied, sarcasm and disdain dripping from his voice.

“The Blight is why I’m here. With Cailan dead, Ferelden must have a king to lead it against the darkspawn.”

“Ferelden has a strong leader- its queen. And I lead her armies.”

“Considering Ostagar, perhaps we need a better general,” Alistair glared.

“Grey Wardens. You have my sympathies for your order. It is unfortunate they chose to turn against Ferelden.

“We don’t accept the sympathies of deserters and regicides,” Aedan sneered, pointedly staring at the man to the regent’s left.

“Curb your tongue!” Loghain snarled. “This is my city, and no safe place to speak treason. Arl Howe here is loyal to his country, unlike some.”

“LOYAL?!” Aedan roared. “I demand blood rights! You murdered my family in cold blood, you conniving son of a bitch!”

“You have no rights. Your family surrendered them when I revealed them to be traitors to the king,” Arl Howe gloated. “As such, I am now the Arl of Amaranthine, Teyrn of Highever, and Arl of Denerim, after Urien’s unfortunate demise at Ostagar.”

“Why you-” Aedan began to lunge at the smaller man, but Alistair and Leliana rushed to still his hand.

“Enough! This is neither the time or place. I had hoped to talk you down from this rash course, Eamon. Our people are frightened, our king is dead, and our land is under siege. We must be united
if we are to endure this. You divide our nation and weaken our efforts against the Blight with your selfish ambitions to the throne.”

“I cannot forgive what you’ve done, Loghain. Perhaps the Maker can, but not I. Our people deserve a king of the Theirin bloodline. Alistair will be the one to lead our people to victory.”

“Expect no mercy from me then,” Loghain spat. “There is nothing I would not do for my homeland.” Turning on his heel, the large, older warrior stomped out of the hall, armor jarring against the stone.

“That went well,” Alistair muttered.

“He was not always like this,” Eamon sighed wearily. “I would never have believed he would do anything but what was best for Ferelden. Well, that was then. We need eyes and ears in the city. Loghain’s been here for months, all the roots of his schemes must begin here. Find the nobles who are in town for the Landsmeet, test the waters, see how many will support us.”

All of sudden, everyone felt very exhausted. Deciding to hold off on discussing the Landsmeet until after they poked around town a bit, Aerin shuffled back to her room. Slumping in her chair, she leaned back, legs spread in a very unladylike pose. I hate politics. And greedy snakes. And murdering little shits who remind me of fucking blood mages. Kicking her shoes across the room, she stood up only to flop face down across the plush bed. I miss the clan. Life was so much simpler there. I wish Ellana was here. Wait. No I don’t. Not in this viper nest. At least she’s safe up there, and when we stop this damn Blight, she’ll be even safer. Stuck in her turbulent thoughts, she didn’t hear the door open and close.

“Suffocating yourself won’t get you out of helping me find some nobles tomorrow.”

“I am literally the worst person to take to talk to nobles. Besides Morrigan. Actually Morrigan would be good. She could sneer with her elegant face and insult them all and make them feel like a slug. Or turn them into slugs.”

“And Oghren.”

“Nah, you could probably just get him to belch at people and force them to side with you that way.” Rolling over, she smiled up at Alistair. “Help me get out of this thing?”

“With pleasure,” he purred, reaching for the laces. “So Aedan and I talked. Figured the best way would be to separate into smaller groups and look around. Aedan is of course going with Leliana, Zevran is going to do his assassin stealth thing solo, Morrigan is turning into a creepy crow to eavesdrop around. We’re just going to set Oghren up at the tavern with Sten and have them listen in. Or Sten will listen in. Wynne’s staying here. Stubborn woman needs the rest. Sooo… that leaves me and you.” She gave him a mock groan of horror. “You’re hilarious, you know that? So lucky I love you.”

“Yes, I am.” Shaking her limbs free of her petticoat, clad only in a thin chemise, she pulled him close, feeling his warmth seep into her chilled skin. “Luckiest girl in all Thedas.”

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“The Queen? How are we sure this isn’t a trap?”

“We don’t, but we have no choice. Stealth is necessary. Her handmaiden can sneak a few of you in as soldiers, so take only those who will be able to blend in well.” Groaning in frustration, Aedan banged his head against the nearby bookshelf.
“This is a nightmare. Fine. Alistair, Leliana, Zevran. Sorry, Aerin, you’re too short and small to be a guard. And Sten's too tall.” She glared at the Grey Warden. “Hopefully, we’ll be back before nightfall, so you can check around town, see what you can find. Just be careful.”

Alistair paused to drop a kiss onto her head. “Don’t you dare get caught. Or hurt. You understand me? I don’t like this. Not one bit.” Crossing her arms tightly, Aerin bit her lip, foot tapping against the floor in consternation.

“I know, love. But we have to go.”

“I know.” She stood on her tiptoes to place a chaste kiss on his lips. “Be safe.” Watching them leave, she felt uneasy.

Should keep busy, take my mind off things. Double checking to make sure her armor was tightened and secure and her weapons were on her, she left Eamon’s estate and headed to the bustling marketplace.

The city itself was packed, the Landsmeet causing a massive influx of merchants, soldiers, and staff, plus the continuous trickle of refugees that were fleeing the southern, Blight ravaged lands. It was a riot of sounds and smells, and after having spent so long in the woods and on the road, Aerin began to feel panicky. Too many people. Need to get away. Darting to the other side of the marketplace, the crowd thinned out. Sighing in relief, she looked around, spying a heavy iron gate and a pair of guards.

Doesn’t look like the entrance to a noble’s residence. Hmm... Inching closer, one guard spotted her and called out, “Halt! The alienage has been quarantined under the Queen’s orders. No one is allowed in or out.” Alienage? Where all the elves live? Aerin hated the idea of the elves having to live separate from the humans. I want to get in there. Later, perhaps. Turning away, a tattered poster on a nearby wall caught her eye. “Don’t believe the lies, friends of the Grey Wardens assemble. The hidden pearl holds the key to resistance, the griffons will rise again,” she read. “Well, that’s not suspicious. A poster in support of Grey Wardens in a city controlled by a man who killed them all. Hidden pearl holds the key. Isn’t there a brothel called the pearl here? Is it really that easy?”

It was. Strolling through the dirty brothel, dodging the leers and gropes from drunk men sprawled across the hall, she walked up to a closed door and knocked.

“Password?”

“The griffons will rise again.” The door swung open, revealing a trio of armored warriors.

“Another Grey Warden supporter. Arl Howe will be pleased.”

Aerin raised an eyebrow. “Oh, a trap, how clever and original. Unfortunately, pleasing Arl Howe is not on my list of things to do, ever.” Pulling out one sword, she reveled in the sounds the veridium made sliding against the metal scabbard. “To arms, then?”

Swearing at her, the lead man yanked out his own sword. “Dead or alive, makes no difference to us, knife ear.” Her eyes narrowed.

“Such rudeness. Didn’t your mother teach you any manners?” Raising the blade to block his swing, she twisted her sword around his, easily disarming him, metal blade clattering to the ground. His eyes widened. She smiled sweetly. “Pleasure meeting you, ser.” Faster than he could react, the elf spun around, unsheathing her hidden dagger, then shoved it into his unprotected side where his armor joined, right up into his ribcage. He fell. The other two guards gaped. “Next?” Snapping themselves back to attention, they both charged her at once. Brandishing her second sword, she fought them off with ease, one attack carrying her into the next as she became a blur. Block, block, parry, swing, parry, duck, slash his hamstring. Spin, block, riposte, kick her in the chest. Strike
Pulling her blade free of the fallen female warrior, Aerin turned to the immobilized man, gripping his bleeding leg. Blade pressed against his throat, she watched as a thin line of bright blood oozed from the skin. “You get to live. Tell Arl Howe to cease preying against supporters of the Wardens. He has made powerful enemies. I would not want to be in his shadow for much longer.” Pulling back, she stalked from the room. Only to be caught in the middle of another brawl in the dining hall. Ducking, a chair flew over her head, splintering against the wall behind. Glancing at the culprit, her mouth dropped open. *Gods, that woman is gorgeous.* The unknown woman had warm, darkened skin, a mass of raven locks tied back with a bright red bandana, and a collection of gold chains draped around her neck. A cream colored corset displayed her ample assets, a matching high slitted tunic—*is she even wearing anything under there?*- flitted around her hips, and thigh high leather boots completed the look. Glancing at the drunken idiots the woman was fending off, the elf decided to join in, tension from her last battle still rolling through her blood. Kneeing one man in the groin, she grabbed him by the hair, jerking his head back as she punched him directly in his nose, hearing a satisfying crunch. Another man lunged for her—Aerin calmly sidestepped his clumsy fumble and struck his greasy head with her pommel, knocking him unconscious.

“Appreciate the help. Ooh, you’re a pretty one,” the stranger cooed. “Isabela, Pirate Queen of the Eastern Seas.” Aerin took her extended hand.

“Charmed, I’m sure. Fancy title there. Aerin, of Clan Lavellan.”

“Oh, Dalish? Funny, I don’t see much your people in cities.”

“I get around,” Aerin smirked. The pirate queen grinned.

“Can I buy you a drink? As a thank you, perhaps?” Isabela cocked one hip out to the side, and preened.

“Tempting, but I’m afraid I’ll have to pass for now. You know how it is. Things to do, people to maim and or kill. Maybe our paths will cross again and I’ll take you up on that drink.” Bowing to the beautiful pirate, Aerin swept out of the brothel. *Time to see what else I can stir up here.*

Chapter End Notes

You get 2 chapters in case you didn't want to read smut.
“Aerin, what is on your head, child?”

“It’s a crown, obviously, Wynne.”

“Why do you have a crown?”

“Stole it.”

“From who?”

“Loghain’s seneschal, apparently. I didn’t think Loghain needed it anymore. Plus, I needed practice my stealth skills. Did you know I have a title now among the nobility? Dark Wolf. I like it.”

Shaking her head at the young woman, who lay sprawled across a plush chair in the library, glinting crown askew on her ruby hair, Wynne gave up with an exasperated sigh.

The door flew open. “Aerin! Quickly! Aedan and Alistair have been captured!”

No. The world went cold as Aerin’s heart dropped out of her chest. “Where? How?!”

“We were overpowered when we were escaping Arl Howe’s estate. Ser Cauthrien,” Leliana spat, furious at their failure, “and two dozen guards flanked us. Zevran and I escaped. They’re in Fort Drakon.”

All Aerin could picture was the interior of a cramped cage on a ship, filled with two frightened, helpless little girls from years ago. She could smell the stench of fear and urine and iron, strong enough that for a second, she believed herself back there. “Let’s go. Now.” Aerin sprinted out of the room to grab her armor and weapons, trying to push down the oppressing wall of fear that had constricted her lungs, fighting through her tunneling vision, the other women close on her heels.

Arl Eamon caught them in the hallway, accompanied by a regal looking blonde woman.

“You can’t just rush into Fort Drakon. It’s the most heavily fortified prison in the country. You’ll be killed on sight!” The sounds were muffled, distorted, hard to hear over the roar of blood in her ears.

“Well, we’re not staying here to twiddle our thumbs either,” she snapped. “Leliana, where’s Zevran? We’re going. Now. Morrigan! You too.” As her companions jumped to obey the imperious elf, Aerin fumed, marching out of the door. “I told that blasted man specifically not to get caught. I swear I will skin him alive when I get my hands on him.” Anger. Anger is good. No time for being frightened anymore. I am not helpless any longer. Alistair and Aedan are not helpless. Continuing to rant the whole way, the group sped across the oblivious city to the tallest and oldest tower in Denerim. She just wanted to burn it all to the ground.

They crouched behind a low wall just outside of the main gate. Fort Drakon was massive. The towering walls were at least five feet thick and thirty feet high. Guards were stationed at regular intervals along the battlements, with even more just inside the gate and across the drawbridge that led inside. The beating of her heart was so Void-forsaked loud, she was afraid the guards would hear her ribcage rattling. The terror she had been holding at bay swamped her, leaving her paralyzed, now that she saw the fortress her beloved was held in. Please, Maker, Creators, God, if
you exist here, let him be okay. I can’t… I need him. “Two soldiers outside the gate. Eight more within range on the walls. Sixteen soldiers in the courtyard beyond the gate. No telling how many through the doors,” Zevran whispered.

Morrigan tapped her lips, thinking. “Aerin. Do you remember that spell I taught you a few weeks earlier? To cause sleep? I think we should be able to amplify it. If you lend me your power, I can create an area of effect spell large enough to encompass the whole courtyard, save maybe one or two guards.”

*A plan. Plans are good.* “Safer than just fighting our way through, and we don’t have time to search for a hidden entrance. Right. Anything you need. How do we do this?” Aerin turned to Morrigan.

“Give me your hand. Now, reach for the Fade, open your mind to me and… there.” The witch began casting, chanting in a low voice, a pale yellow energy gathering in her hands. “And…” she pushed it out over the guards, light mist settling over the yard. Synchronized, they all fell to the ground in a clatter of armor and stone. “Done.” The two guards just outside the gate were left standing, bewildered as to what had just occurred. Leliana quickly snapped an arrow into her bow, shooting one through the eye, barely pausing to restring a second arrow and downed the other before he could draw breath to shout.

“Effective,” Zevran clapped his hands in glee. “Shall we then, my friends?” Running up to the heavy wooden doors, both elves grabbed ahold of a thick, iron ring and pulled it open with a strength borne of desperation. Two armored men ran out, right into Morrigan.

“What the- get off me, fools!” The men skidded to a halt.

“Sorry, sorry! Please don’t turn me into a toad.”

“Alistair!” Shaking herself from her daze, Aerin launched herself at him, holding him in a fierce hug, trying to touch him everywhere to ensure he was safe and real, before starting to pound her tiny fists against his breastplate in relieved fury. “I can’t believe you! The one thing I said not to do!” She hit him two more times for good measure, before dragging him to her lips for a brief, deep, messy kiss. *He’s safe. They’re both safe.* “Let’s get out of here before more guards come.”

As they ran out of the courtyard, guards still snoring peacefully, the shouts of reinforces moving closer, Leliana glanced at her friend. “Aerin. Why did you have a crown on earlier?”

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Aerin and Leliana went out into the city the next morning, leaving their lovers behind to recover and discuss strategy with Eamon and Loghain. After speaking to a few nobles, and securing their support, the pair found themselves in a rather seedy looking back alley. Leliana tucked a scrap of paper away.

“This seems to be the place. Let’s see what awaits us.” The foyer was surprisingly well appointed, given the shambled exterior. Warm lanterns glowed on the wall, a rich, burgundy rug was draped across the stone floor. Two guards standing just inside looked them over once, then apparently decided they weren’t welcome, lunging at the two women. Aerin breathed, then summoned a flame in our outstretched hand, flinging it at their faces. As they screamed in agony, Leliana let an arrow fly into one helmet, Aerin snapping her dagger through the other’s unprotected neck. Not sparing a second glance for the dead men, the bard pushed the inner door open and froze.

“Ah, Leliana! So lovely to see you again, my dear,” a petite, brunette Orlesian smiled sweetly,
dressed in a simple, yet well cut gown, just barely concealing a nervous twitch of an eye. “Oh, you must excuse the shabby accommodations. I try to be a good host, but you see what I have to work with?”

“Enough Marjolaine,” Leliana seethed with barely restrained fury. “You framed me. Had me caught and tortured. And then sent assassins after me. I thought I would be free of you here, but it seems I am not. What happened to make you hate me so? Why do you want me dead so badly?”

“Dead? I know you, my Leliana. Those men were sent to give you cause to come to me.” Aerin snarled and took a step forward. Marjolaine’s pleasant expression fell, revealing the hard woman underneath. “In truth? You have information that can be used against me. For my own safety, I cannot let you be. Did you not think I did not watch my Leliana these years? I wondered what game you played at, living a peasant’s life in that chantry, sending no messages and speaking with no one. You almost had me fooled. Then, you left so suddenly. Tell me, what conclusion I should have drawn?”

Leliana barked a short, harsh laugh. “You think I left because of you? That I still have some… plan of revenge? You are insane. Paranoid!”

“She wants nothing to do with you,” Aerin hissed at the woman. “We have more important things to concern herself with than the likes of you.”

“Such a loyal friend you have here, Leliana. You look at her and see a simple girl, no? Do not be fooled, it is an act. She will use you.”

“I am not you,” Leliana declared.

“Oh, but you are me. You are a master manipulator because you and I are the same. We enjoy the Game, revel in the power it brings us.”

“Whatever, bitch,” Aerin tossed her hair back. “I think I’ll trust my friend over your word any day. It ends here.” She turned to face her companion. “You know she won’t let this go.”

“You’re right. Marjolaine, you have caused too much pain for too many. It’s over.”

Marjolaine gave a derisive snort. “You think to kill me that easily? I made you, Leliana. I can destroy you just as easily! Guards!” More armored men rushed from the side rooms. Six against two. Was this supposed to be a challenge? Grinning, she cleared her mind. I know this dance intimately. She lunged out with both swords, staggering a soldier, then gathered her mana and cast an ice spell out and around her, freezing two more. With a mighty blow, bringing her pommels down hard on the human icicles, she shattered one, whipped around and stabbed the other through the heart. Gaze snapping to the first stunned man, she lashed out, feinted low, and struck his neck high. Three down. Another fell to her left, arrow through an eye socket. Ew.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Leliana ran after the swish of skirts, Marjolaine sprinting through the back rooms. Turning back to the room, Aerin sighed.

“I don’t have time for this.” Pulling the Fade to her, she felt the hum of magic race down her skin, through her fingertips, sending out searing arcs of lightning into the metal armor of the two remaining guards, electrocuting them in their metal coffins. Aerin sprinted after her friend, sliding to a halt in the kitchen. Leliana stood still, dagger in her pale hand, blood dripping onto the corpse by her feet.

“It is done,” the bard whispered indistinctly, immobilized with shock. Aerin carefully approached
her from the front, gently taking the dagger away, cleaning it on a nearby towel. Taking her hands, she led the shaking bard out of the house, into the deserted alley. “It’s over,” Leliana murmured. “I killed her. Marjolaine.” She looked up at Aerin and broke free of her trance, slumping against the wall. “All this time… she thought I was plotting against her. She didn’t trust me, she- maybe she never did. She loved when she could control and use me, and then when she couldn’t, she wanted me dead.”

“No. That’s not love Leliana. Love is not self serving like that. It is what you have with Aedan, and me, and Alistair. People who would put themselves in harm’s way to see you safe, no matter what. Just like you would do for us.” Aerin hesitatingly reached for her shoulders, slowly bringing her arms up to hug her, patting her hair. “You are nothing like her, my friend. Not if you choose not to be. And you always have the choice. We are not who they made us to be. You and I, we’re so much more than mindless killers. I know that now. You and Alistair have proven that to me. You should take your own advice,” she teased. Leaning her head back, Leliana smiled tiredly. “You are right.”

“I keep telling people that. Maybe someday someone will actually believe me. Let’s return to the estate. Maybe those boys will have figured out what to do next.”

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“Anora said the unrest is the worst in the alienage and suspects Loghain have something to do with it. Here, the way’s open now.” Aedan led the group into the elven portion of the city. Aerin gasped. To call these houses would require a far stretch of the imagination. The dilapidated buildings looked like they would crumble at the slightest touch, patched together like a piece quilt of random boards and layers of tin until it resembled a shelter. A layer of filth covered almost every inch of the ground and walls and people. The people… the elves themselves were gaunt, broken, and terrified. So similar to the slaves in Tevinter. But they are free here! Citizens of this country. Why do they suffer like this?

“Are all alienages like this?” Aerin demanded.

Zevran nodded. “Actually, this is better than some I’ve seen. But the people here are afraid, for some reason. Maybe this illness that has seemed to sweep through them?”

This is better?! She was beyond outraged. These, these… humans, her mind viciously snarled the word, think that the elves are so far below them. I will never understand it. This has to change. A young man in his early 20s ran up to them.

“Oh, sir! It’s you! I never got a chance to thank you for rescuing me,” he bowed to Aedan.

The warden smiled. “Soris! I was only doing what any decent man might do. What’s going on here, anyways?”

“It’s a plague, or so they say. I’ve seen a few sick, but I don’t know how bad it really is. There are mages from Tevinter here, helping to treat it. Something strange is going on.”

The edges of Aerin's vision turned black and a wave of dizziness swept through her head. Tevinter. Mages. “Your chantry allows this?!” she demanded.

Taken aback by her sudden intensity, Soris stuttered, ”I- ah, suppose so? I’d expect templars here otherwise.” Alistair frowned at that. “So far only elves and refugees have gotten sick. I’m sure if someone important gets the plague, the alienage will burn.”
“They would do that?” Aerin’s eyes widened in shock as she began to pace. “Kill everyone here instead of helping to fix the living conditions and clearing out the illness?” Her shoulders slumped. “Of course they would. No one cares about a bunch of knife ears anyways. We need to do something. Is there anyone else that might know more?”

The man nodded. “My cousin Shianni. Look for the angriest woman in the alienage. Can’t miss her.” Walking away from Soris, Aerin glanced up at a huge tree in the alienage proper. Zevran came to stand beside her.

“It’s called the vhenadahl- the tree of the People. It is a symbol of Arlathan, I believe, strong roots in the ground to remind them of where they come from, and great branches reaching for the sky.”

“To give them hope of a better future,” Aerin finished, with a pang of sorrow. “They? Not us?” He shrugged. “I admit, I feel as if I do not have much in common with city elves.” He pointed across the square. “There’s something going on over there.”

“I can’t wait another day! I’ve got children at home,” a woman cried.

“Then go home! The best thing you can do for your children is to not trust these charlatans!” an angry red-haired elf shouted.

“Angry woman? This must be the cousin the man spoke of,” Zevran noted.

A well groomed man, dressed in Tevinter mage robes stepped out to placate the crowd. “Please, remain calm. We will help as many as we can today.”

“You’re helping us, are you shem? Like you ‘helped’ my uncle Cyrion and Valendrian? Helped them never to be seen again! Half the people you take to be treated are perfectly healthy!”

The mage sighed exasperatedly. “We’ve explained this before, girl. We cannot let any into the quarantine area so they can carry the plague back out to the rest of you.” With that, he turned back to the line of elves in front of him.

The elven woman gave a frustrated growl. Aedan cautiously approached her. “Excuse me? Are you Shianni? Your cousin, Soris, told me to find you.”

“Oh!” She whirled around to face them. “You’re the human who saved him from those dungeons! Thank you for that.”

He smiled. “It was my pleasure. So these mages…”

Groaning, she threw up her hands. “They say they’re here to help treat the plague. Funny thing is, all the people that they ‘help’ disappear.”

“That’s not true!” another elven woman insisted. “Both my nieces had the Tevinter spell cast on them, and they’re fine!”

“Then where are they? And Cyrion? And Valendrian?” Shianni countered. “These foreigners have taken dozens of elves into that house over the last few weeks, and none of them have been seen again. One of them was our hahren, Valendrian.” A pit began to grow in Aerin’s stomach. They wouldn’t… not in the middle of a crowded city. Would they?

“We’re going inside that house,” Aerin stated.
“They won’t just let you in,” Shianni glared at her, scoffing.

Shrugging, she turned to Zevran. “I feel sick all of a sudden. Don’t you, Zev? Looks like we need treatment.”

Alistair’s brow creased. “Aerin…”

“I’ll be careful, Ali. More careful than you and Aedan, at least.” Sticking her tongue out at him, she grabbed Zevran’s hand. “Come on.” Hunching over as she approached the mages, Aerin gave them a weak smile and what hopefully sounded like a feeble cough.

The mage gasped dramatically. “Hessarian’s mercy! How long have you been ill, dear lady? You should have come here days ago!” Either I look terrible, or they recognize me. Shit. “Take them inside.” He motioned to a guard to lead them into the nearby house. Blinking at the sudden lack of sunlight, Aerin glanced around. Only a couple guards stood in front of a wooden door.

“We’ve got two more,” one called. “No weapons allowed in the clinic, by the way. You can leave them here with us.” With only a slight hesitation, she handed him her two swords, Zevran doing the same with his daggers belted to his waist. Passing the weapons back to the other guard, he walked back outside.

“Right. This way.” Looking down at Aerin, the Tevinter cocked his head. “You look familiar, girl.” Giving him a blank look, she shrugged, coughing a few more times for good measure. “Oh well. In you go.” Roughly shoving them into another small room, Aerin’s nightmare was confirmed. A sturdy wooden cage sat in one corner, filled with several frightened elves. Not again.

Straightening, she turned. “Oh! It seems like I’m cured already! You must be miracle workers!” Kicking her leg up, she whipped her dagger out of her boot, shoving the heel of her hand up into the guard’s nose, then stabbing him in the back of his neck as he hunched over in pain. Zevran had pulled his own hidden dagger out, quickly dispatching the other guard in the room. A caged elf called out.

“Release us, please!” Reassuring the people, the two free elves turned to the rest of the room and the fallen humans, searching for the key. After a long minute, Zevran found it on a nearby desk, and opened the heavy padlock.

“Where are they taking the elves?” Aerin asked.

“Out the back alley,” the freed elf pointed.

“Look at this,” Zevran called. “A note. ‘Bring eight males and six females for the next shipment’.”

“Slavers,” she hissed. “I knew it. Right. Let’s go out the back.” Stopping in the first room to retrieve their weapons, they slowly crept outside, but found the back alley deserted. “Nothing out here. Let’s go back out and see what the ‘healers’ have to say.” Aerin strode back through the house and out the front, violent flinging the door open. “Huzzah! I’m cured!” The Tevinters whirled around to face her, a large vein twitching on one of the men’s foreheads. The buzz of magic filled the air. Reaching for the barrier she had been practicing recently at night in the Fade, she threw it up over the crowd. Sloppy, but it’ll do for now. A bolt of arcane energy jumped out at her. Throwing herself to the ground, she rolled over and sprung back up. A dagger whizzed past her, striking the mage in his thigh. “Thanks, Zev!”

“Of course, bella!” He ducked into stealth, springing a trap on an unsuspecting soldier, shoving his dagger into his ribcage. To her right, Aedan lifted up his shield, deflecting a ball of fire, before
charging the other mage. Alistair was behind her, the clanging of his sword clashing with another resounding across the clearing. Focusing on the first mage, she ducked another bolt.

“I know you, Seraphina,” he taunted. Aerin stiffened at the name. “Someone’s very eager to see you again. Oh, what he has in store for you.” Caius. Erebus. The names made her falter, just for a second. Just enough for an arcane bolt to slam into her back from behind, piercing her armor, lighting up her lyrium rune tattooed on her skin, sending molten lava racing down her veins. Someone screamed as she staggered forward. Hands gripped her waist. Another bolt raced towards her from the front in slow motion. Huh. It looks weird. Almost like… waves? Waves of… strings? Her mind drifted. A metal shield shoved into her field of blurry vision, holding against the projectile. The mage screamed, as a blonde, tattooed elf buried his daggers into his lower back. A brown haired warrior shoved his own sword into the mage’s chest, the life draining from his body. What happened? It… hurts… Caius. Erebus. They know where I am. No.

“NO!” she shot up, head bashing into Alistair’s nose. The man staggered back from the blow, cradling the tender cartilage. “Oh gods, Alistair, I’m so sorry!” Uncharacteristically, she burst into tears. He stared in shock at her.


“Slavers, we think. Found this note.” Shianni ran up to them, breathless.

“Maker! What happened? Some of the elves ran out, but I didn’t recognize any of them. Where are the others?”

“Here,” Aedan passed her the note Zevran had given him. “They’re shipping them, looks like.”

“Shipping people?” she reared back, horrified. “Shipping them where? How could they be taking them away? Wouldn’t we see them?”

“One of the elves mentioned a back alley,” the blonde assassin replied. “Perhaps we should take a peek around?”

“There are apartments behind the hospice. Maybe check there?” Shianni mused. “Is she okay?” Alistair cradled the still shaking elf in his arms.

“Love?”

“I’ll… be fine. Alistair. He knew my name. From Tevinter. They know I’m here.” His face paled.

“You should go back to Eamon’s estate. We can handle this ourselves.”

She shook her head vehemently. “No! I’m not letting them get away with this. I need to be here. I won’t be safe there anyways. Or anywhere. I’m not going.” Glancing up at Aedan, her lover pleaded with his fellow warden with his eyes.

“Sorry, Alistair. I’m not going to make her go if she wants to be here. Is that Leliana?” Sure enough, the bard jogged over to them and waved.

“Sorry, I just hated waiting around. I was doing some snooping around town and I caught wind of a rumor that Tevinter mages were here, so I figured some more backup would not be amiss. Aerin? Are you injured?” Aedan pulled his lover aside, muttering in a low voice. Leliana gasped. “Don’t worry my friend. They will not have you. Not as long as I draw breath.” Determined green eyes met hers.
“No, they won’t,” Alistair agreed. “Well, let’s get this over with then.”

Chapter End Notes

I've been looking forward to this bit.
The back alley was eerily silent. The five companions moved quickly through the rundown apartments, finding only a few terrified elves left that directed them to another locked door. “They took all of them, right out of their beds. Dragged them right out of here, tied together like pack mules,” one quivering man told them. “Through the landlord’s old office! Every few days they come back.”

“Looks like someone was getting ready to sit down to supper,” Leliana examined the small, sparse room they found themselves in. “This family must have left in a hurry. This exit is locked. Give me a moment to open it.”

The door swung open to reveal another alley, creaking apartments lining the sides. A Tevinter guard looked up sharply, puzzlement written across his brow. “What’s this? We weren’t expecting another shipment already- it’s her! Get her, and kill the rest!”

Zevran and Leliana immediately disappeared into a cloud of smoke, sneaking up behind the archers at the far side of the alleyway. Aedan and Alistair quickly rushed to the three melee guards in front, swords at the ready. Aerin stood, rooted to the ground. They’re after me. They want to take me back. They’d take my mind from me. Erebus… He’d… No. I will die first. Forcing her wooden limbs to comply, she gathered her mana, pulling deep into her will. Summoning a lightning storm, she flung out one sword, electricity dancing down the blade as she hefted it high and brought it down against the chestplate of a nearby man. The bright blue arcs violently clashed into his armor, his flesh burning with the electricity, before leaping to the next guard, and the next. All three fell to the ground, convulsing in paralyzed agony. The Grey Wardens quickly ended it for them with the sharp edge of their blade. The other two rogues walked back from where the corpses of two archers lay.

“Your casting is improving,” Aedan noted, impressed.

“Practice,” she muttered, resting her hands on her knees. “Sorry I froze like that. It’s… a lot to take in.”

“I’m sure it is,” Leliana patted her sympathetically. “Do you need a moment more?” Aerin shook her head. “Alright. The warehouse is over there, I think.”

As the rest of the companions moved toward the door, Alistair pulled her into a quick hug, dropping a deep kiss onto her. As their lips caressed each other, his hands tightened around her cheeks, holding her in place, she felt his promise. I will protect you. No matter what. The ragged back alley littered with corpses melted away, her fears forgotten, as her entire world became the man in front of her, standing solid and real. Anything that would be, could be, thrown at her, she would survive with him by her side. She knew it deep down in her soul. Pulling back for air, they breathlessly smiled at each other, still lost in each other's embrace. “I know,” she whispered. “I love you too.”
“No matter what.” He leaned his forehead against hers. “Let’s go inside.”

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“We were told there would be no interference from the authorities! We have dispensation to do our business here. Didn’t you know? The humans talk a great deal about how very wrong slavery is, but isn’t it funny how quickly the smell of gold overcomes such ideals,” the elven woman smirked.

“Silence! Step aside if you want to live,” Aedan growled.

“So be it. I will let Caladrius deal with you while I fetch the Regent’s men.” Watching them retreat, Aerin fumed.

“We should have just killed her. She’s an elf! And willingly captures her own to sell. People like that do not deserve to live,” Aerin spat, knuckles turning white from where she gripped her swords’ hilts.

“We will give those captured justice, Aerin. I promise.” Aedan pushed the door open. They stood on a second floor balcony, overlooking a large open room, heavy iron cages packed with cowering elves petrified with terror lined around the edge, surrounded by guards. And in the center...

“I am Caladrius. And you, I assume, must be the Grey Warden I’ve heard so much about. Have you brought me my little lost lamb?” That voice. Suddenly Aerin was 11 again, on the hills outside Hercinia, in a cramped iron cage carried on a rickety wooden wagon, curled against the cold bars, shackled to the other elves, thrown into a dark hold, standing naked in a stone bathing chamber, watching as a tall man inspected her to purchase.

“You.”

He smiled.

“Ah, so you are here! It must be fate, that I am the one here. When Loghain mentioned I should keep an eye out for an elf with your description and talents, I wondered. But it seems my reports were true. Your master is terribly hurt you abandoned him.”

“How did you even know who I was? I don’t look like her anymore.” Aerin ground the words out behind gritted teeth. Every muscle in her body screamed with tension, a rubber band stretched to its limit, ready to pounce or flee. Her pulse threatened to deafen her. Focus. I cannot lose here. I will not lose here.

“Lord Caius, of course. We are old friends. His experiment on you was of great interest to me. Ah, you brought the bastard who would be king with you as well.”

“Listen to that. A slaver calling me a bastard. I hope you know what you’re doing, getting her all riled up like this,” Alistair smirked.

“We shall see, hmm? Warden, I have heard of your attempts to erode Loghain’s support. It must be a difficult task, yes? Like washing away a mountain? Perhaps you could use some help.” Aerin growled, feral and low.

“Patience,” Aedan murmured softly, laying a hand on her arm gently. Raising his voice, he asked the Tevinter, “Don’t you have an agreement with Loghain?”

“More of an arrangement, really,” Caladrius drawled. “One that disappears the moment angry, armed intruders storm my abode. There was always a limit as to how long we would be able to
operate here. We’ve paid for many of Loghain’s troops, but once the Landsmeet is done, we become… inconvenient. So here is my offer. I will pay you one hundred sovereigns, as well as give you for a letter with the seal of the Teyrn of Gwaren upon it, implicating him in all of this. Then we leave a few days earlier than planned, with our profits and remaining slaves, unharmed. Oh, and Seraphina comes with us as well.”

“No.” Alistair’s voice rang out, forceful and vicious.

“She is not yours to keep, Your Majesty,” he replied, mockingly. “She is stolen property. There are laws for a reason.”

“She is her own person, she belongs to no one,” the warrior raged. Leveling his sword at the mage, he grinned. “You die here, slaver.”

“Pity,” Caladrius sighed. “It seems we will have to settle this the hard way then.”

“He. Is. Mine!” Aerin screamed, vaulting over the railing.

“Aerin! Fucking idiot girl!” Aedan yelled after her. “Get the rest of the soldiers! Keep them off of her!”

Lost in her own fury, Aerin swung almost blindly. A fireball caught her in her ankle. Hissing, she jerked back. I’m going to get myself killed like this. Focus. Exhale. Locking everything away, she pulled up the wall that she had always previously known. Let nothing in, let nothing out. I am just a tool, my purpose to destroy. To emerge victorious. Throwing up a barrier, his meteor spell bounced harmlessly off. “Seems you’ve learned a few new tricks, slave,” he hissed. “This time, you won’t have your little elf to be used against you. Blood magic will snake its way into your mind, destroying who you are, leaving behind only a compliant slave, grateful to her master and obedient in every way. I’ve heard of your deeds, Seraphina. How you slaughtered all those elves captured in the winter uprising. They were thrown into the arena unarmed, were they not? And you killed them all. Children, even! Imagine that. I also heard of the nobles who conquered you at night. There was one party that caught my attention. After you were made Victorem, yes? You were quite popular. And Magister Valdexen hosted a grand orgy, with you as the main spectacle. How many took you? Raped you while you graciously thanked them for their seed and attention? It will happen again. And again. But this time, you will not rage within your mind. This time, you will feel only honor for the chance to lick their spittle from the dirt. Or maybe not. Maybe Caius will just give you to that brute, Erebus, as his own plaything. He’s gone through so many, you know. Maybe you’re made of stronger stuff. Or perhaps… once we have you properly subdued, you can tell us where you littler ‘sister’ is. I think Erebus prefers younger girls anyways.”

Aerin screamed. She didn’t know for how long, seconds, maybe hours. Long enough that she felt her vocal folds begin to tear under the strain. Power bubbled up through her blood. Sight narrowed to a razor sharp focus. He cast again. Waves. His casting looks like waves. An old memory came to her. Waves can be canceled! She threw out her own fireball to match his. They collided in a burst of sparks, but his swallowed hers whole and continued barreling towards her. Cursing, she rolled to the right, a crate exploding behind her, barrier still shining strong. Wrong wavelength. Try again. Over and over, she cast the same spells as he, trying to find the right frequency to cancel out his magic. “A blood sacrifice! For power!” he screamed, slicing open a nearby guard, drawing the blood out into a maelstrom around him. There! He slammed a violent wave of fire and blood into her. Summoning her own fire, she raised it up in a towering wall and shoved it forward to meet the chaos. And his spell fizzled out. Winked out into oblivious, as if it had never been.

“NO! What have you done to my magic!” He drew up his remaining mana, flinging everything he had at the elf. But she had found the right frequency. Spell after spell died into nothingness.
Screaming in frustration, he fell to his knees. “Stop! I… I surrender.”

Aerin looked around. Apparently, the guards had all been killed with relative ease by her companions a while ago. They all stood around now, carefully watching the two duel. Aedan stepped forward. “Perhaps I should leave you to the mercies of these elves?”

“No! Please, hear me out, kind ser! Were I to use the remaining life force of these slaves here, I could augment your physical health a great deal!”

“You have lost your damn mind.”

“Then… I don’t suppose you would consider just letting me go?”

“Aerin? What do you think?” She stepped up to the cowering man, a wicked smile across her lovely face.

“I think…” she twirled a dagger in her hand. Driving it into his stomach, she twisted it violently. “I think he is a waste of air. No one will miss you, Caladrius.”

“He… will still… find you…” the Tevinter mage gasped out, bloody spittle flying from his mouth.

“Let him come.” With a final twist, the slaver fell dead to the ground. Aerin sat down hard onto the bloody stone, sightless eyes staring into hers.

*It’s over. For now. Caius is looking for me. I need to find him first. But first…* “Loghain. He invited those slavers here. He told them about me. Why?!”

Leliana sighed. “Probably to weaken Alistair. It was no secret you two are in love. He probably figured if he could remove you from the picture, it would throw off Alistair’s balance, enrage him, so it would be easy for him to goad him into doing something foolish.”

“He’d have been right,” Alistair muttered. “But slavers… Maker.”

Aerin took a deep breath, stood up, and faced Alistair. “You can’t let Anora take the throne.”

“What?! You want me to become king?” he was aghast.

“Yes. She can’t be allowed to rule. Look at this place. Not just here. The entire alienage. The poor. All the common folk. All of this! She has sat on her throne for years, the true power behind Cailan's crown, and did nothing. These people are dying! And the ones who live are not truly living, they are scraping the dirt just to survive! Her own father sells them to the Tevinter Imperium! They both deserve to die,” she snarled. The rest of their companions backed away, moving to the outer edges of the room to free the remaining elves and poke around through the papers left behind.

Alistair was silent, face unreadable. Then, “You think I would do better? I don’t know the first thing about being king! I wasn’t raised for this!"

“Maybe that’s why she and Cailan failed their people. Because they were taught that common lives, that elven lives mean nothing. They were bred for nobility and all the bullshit that goes with it. You know better. You know these people, lived as one of them. You know what it’s like to have no shelter to rest in, to be soaked to the bone, not a friendly soul in sight. To be be hopeless and cold and hungry. You will do better. You have to.” Her eyes shone with bright agony and fervent desire, the gold almost completely overtaking the blue. It was like staring into the sun. Alistair looked away, down at his feet.
“You know if I take that throne, then I… We…”

“I know Alistair,” she whispered softly, her fierce stance finally breaking down. “But is our happiness worth the lives of others?” He sighed forlornly, and pulled her into his broad arms. Safe, and sheltered. We could be happy. Run off, live as mercenaries and just travel through the world. Just me and him. She clutched her fingers into fists against his breastplate. “I love you, Alistair,” she gasped through her tears. “More than I have ever loved anyone. But I could not live with myself if I was selfish in this. Nor could you, I think.”

“Duty,” he muttered. “It’s always duty. Would that I could be selfish. Maker knows I wants to. Who knows? Maybe we can convince the Landsmeet that a secret human elven apostate would be great for national stability.” He pulled her away to gaze into her face, memorizing every detail. “I will wait. For you, I mean. Once you’re human again. Then we can be married.”

“Alistair. I’m a mage too. Even if I- you can’t… It might take years.”

“I don’t care about that. You, you are the only thing I have ever wanted. I can’t do this without you. Please.” His lips crashed down onto hers. Death, life, pain, hope fought for purchase in her soul. This, this feeling of being wanted and loved and safety and home, this is all she ever wanted. How could I ever let this go? The feel of his lips, slightly chapped, rubbing over her smooth skin, teeth gently nipping at her bottom lip, tongue delving deep inside to taste her- he was the other half of her soul. And she would fight heaven, hell, the Fade, and the Void to keep him.

“Yes.” She reached up, tenderly tracing her finger tip down his cheek. “Oops, I’m wiping blood on you. Sorry.” Pulling out a handkerchief, she dabbed at the mess.

“If you two are quite done?” Aedan’s voice teased. “We’ve got him. Loghain.” He waved a sheaf of papers around excitedly. “Documents authorizing the Tevinter slaver to remove the elves from the alienage, bearing the seal of Loghain Mac Tir. He’s finished. Alistair, why don’t you and Aerin go back and rest? And take these papers. We’ll finish up here.”

“Oh! Before you go. What was that you were doing to his magic, Aerin?” Leliana queried in a confused tone. “It almost looked like you were silencing his spells.”

“Oh, yeah, I saw that. It wasn’t anything related to templar skills,” Alistair added.

Zevran clapped his hands. “Oh, yes, it was such fun, watching him grow so frustrated.”

“I… I have no idea,” Aerin helplessly shrugged. Her body ached from the battle, and her head was pounding from the strain of using whatever new magic she had learned. “It happened earlier, when I was struck by the arcane bolt in my back. All of a sudden, things went fuzzy and… I could see the spells. Not like the actual form the spells took, but the strands that were woven into it, coming at me like waves. Like the individual threads of a tapestry, all lit up. And somehow I knew, if I could cast a spell with the exact same wave pattern, but in reverse, I could cancel it out. Took me a few tries, but apparently, it works.”

“Right where your rune is,” Alistair turned her around to examine her armor. “It burned straight through the leather.”

“Did it? I’ll need to fix it then.”

“Handy little tactic,” Aedan mused. “I’ve never heard of anything like it. Maybe Wynne or Morrigan would know? Anyhow, go and head on back, let Eamon know what happened. We’ll be along shortly.”
Nodding goodbye, the couple slowly left the house, walked back through the alienage, winding their way through the market, to the estate, not saying a word to each other, just enjoying the feel of her hand in his. *I am the luckiest soul alive. Everything that I have faced up to now, is worth it. For us.*

Chapter End Notes

MWAHAAHAHA TAKE THAT SLAVER!

Alistair and Aerin make me want to vomit, they're so sweet. Ah, young love.
Aerin glared at the assembled nobles, wishing she could light them all on fire with her mind. *Oh, wait. I can. Eh. Better not, to be safe.*

“What did the Orlesians offer you? What is the price of Ferelden honor now?” Loghain taunted.

Aedan stood strong, arms firmly at his side. “The Blight is the threat here, not Orlais!”

“There are enough refugees in my bannorn now to make that abundantly clear,” the Bann of the Waking Sea, Alfstanna Eremon, agreed.

“The south is fallen, Loghain. Will you let darkspawn take the whole country for fear of Orlais?” Eamon cajoled.

*He’s so paranoid. What happened to him to make him jump at Orlesian shadows still?*

“The Blight is indeed real, but do we need Grey Wardens to fight it? They failed spectacularly at Ostagar, and before that, asked to bring four legions of chevaliers!”

*Wait. He did all this because the Grey Wardens wanted to bring aid from Orlais? And he was afraid they wouldn’t leave? How blind is this man?*

“You sold Ferelden citizens into slavery to fund your war! And allowed Rendon Howe—” Aedan spat the name as if he could taste the vile slime upon his tongue—“to imprison and torture innocents!” The Ferelden nobles gasped and began muttering.

“It’s true! The things that were done to my son… some of them are beyond any healer’s skill.”

“There is no slavery in Ferelden! Explain yourself!”

A convincing expression of remorse crossed Loghain’s face, “There was no saving the alienage. Damage from the riots remained. Bodies were still rotting in their homes. There is no chance of holding it if the darkspawn come here. Whatever my regrets may be for the elves, I have done what was needed for the good of Ferelden.” It took all of Aerin’s willpower not to strike the man down on the spot. *How dare he?! Speak of the good and send innocents to the slaughter!* “As for Howe, he was responsible for himself. He will answer to the Maker, as will we all. But you know that, as you murdered him. He should have been brought in to the seneschal. There is no justice in butchering a man in his own home. As for the rest—”

“Oh? Then why did you send a blood mage to poison Arl Eamon?” Aedan snapped.

“I assure you, if I were going to send someone, it would be my own men. I would not trust an apostate.”

“Indeed? My brother tells me you snatched a blood mage from the Chantry’s justice. Coincidence?” Alfstanna crossed her arms, eyes furious and flashing.

The Revered Mother gasped. “The Chantry will not overlook this, Teyrn Loghain!”

“I will answer for whatever I have done later. At the moment, I wish to know what Warden
Cousland has done with my daughter. You took our queen by force, killing her guards in the process! Does she even live?” Oh, he’s convincing.

“I believe I can speak for myself,” a regal voice echoed across the throne room. Bastard’s gonna get it. Aerin resisted the urge to clap in glee at the tableau that was unfolding. “My father is no longer the man you know. This man is not the Hero of River Dane. This man turned his troops aside and abandoned your king as he fought at Ostagar. This man seized Cailan’s throne before his body was cold and locked me away so I could not reveal his treachery. I would already have been killed, if not for Warden Cousland.” The hall was silent, each noble a mirror image of shock and horror. The tension was suffocating. Every eye looked to Loghain to see what his defense would be.

“Anora? Has he poisoned even your mind, child?” The betrayal and disappointment etched on his face was very real. Aerin almost felt bad for him. Almost. “My lords and ladies! We Fereldens have proven that we will never truly be conquered so long we are united! Stand with me, and we shall defeat even the Blight itself!” It was easy to see how the man had wrested so much control. He was charismatic, forceful, and combined with his heroic past, it was clear the nobles adored him. Until now.

“South Reach stands with the Wardens!”

“Waking Sea stands with the Grey Warden!”

“Dragon’s Peak supports the Warden!”

“The Western Hills throw their lot in with the Wardens, Maker help us.”

“The Blight is coming, we need the Grey Wardens!”

One lone voice dissented. It was done. Aerin felt a wave of tension fall away from her, a breath exhaled that she wasn’t even aware she was holding. We did it! The civil war is over. Just like that.

“Traitors! None of you deserve a say in what happens here! None of you have spilled blood for this land as I have! How dare you judge me?!” the former Regent roared his fury.

“Enough!” Aedan bellowed. “Enough. Let us settle this honorably.”

Loghain gave a wry smile. “A man is made by the qualities of his enemies. Maric told me that once. I wonder if it’s more of a compliment to you or me.”

You, you druffalo faced nugget. You should feel lucky that Aedan doesn’t just let me turn you into a toad. Maybe a leech. I wonder if Morrigan knows a spell for that?

Bann Alfstanna voice rang out. “The duel will be fought according to tradition: a test of arms in single combat until one party yields. And we who are assembled will abide by the outcome.” Well, that’s ridiculous. Physical strength would matter more over fitness to rule? Fereldens. Pfft.

Aedan turned to his companions. “Who should fight? I know I would relish the chance. Alistair? You have as much right as I. Maybe more, since this is the battle for your throne.” Alistair nodded grimly.

“I will do it.” As Alistair unsheathed his sword and walked, head held high to face Loghain, all the companions bowed, one by one. He looks... like a king. Regal. Confident. Noble. He’s no longer the self-conscious boy I first met in Redcliffe. How we have all changed in a single year. Aerin could barely watch the duel, her chest tight with apprehension, pulse drumming in her head. The nobles were surprisingly silent, staring down the dueling men as the two decided the future of the
country. Loghain had the advantage of strategy and sheer power, but Alistair was more sprightly on his feet. When the old man would swing, Alistair would simply duck away. At this rate, all he has to do is wear him down. But the future king would not be content with such a lackadaisical win. With a mighty battle cry, Alistair threw his weight behind his shield and rushed Loghain, knocking the regent back. Arcing his sword up high, once, twice, he forced the Regent to lean backwards, letting the younger man lash out to kick the man’s knees in. With a grunt, Teyrn Loghain fell to his knees, Alistair’s sword even with his throat.

“I concede. It would seem that there is some of Maric in you after all. Good.” Does Loghain look pleased? A small smile flitted across his stern visage, memories of his old friend returning unbidden.

“Forget Maric,” Alistair snarled. “This is for Duncan.” Lifting his sword once more, the Grey Warden whirled around, feet stepping surely and evenly, muscles tensed as he held his blade high over his head, time slowing to a standstill… and the glint of metal struck soft flesh. The body of the former Teyrn of Gwaren, Regent of Ferelden collapsed in a bloody heap, the head rolling away to stop at the feet of the paralyzed Queen. It was done.

“Long live King Alistair!” The voices of those assembled rang out. The man they were celebrating paled, visibly shaken, and swallowed hard. Straightening his back, he gave his best attempt at looking monarchial, and nodded once. His eyes caught Aerin’s and crinkled slightly. She could feel an immense bubble of pride and love for the man swell in her chest. How I want to kiss him right now.

“Anora,” Eamon’s voice was surprisingly gentle. “The Landsmeet has decided. You must now swear fealty to our king, and relinquish all claim to the throne for yourself and your heirs. We must have unity.” Unsurprisingly, Anora refused to swear, furious at the death of her treacherous father. Hewasstill her father. I can’t imagine. Aerin would have volunteered to kill her, but Alistair chose to lock her up in a tower, just in case. Aerin wondered if they could find a dragon to guard the tower. “Your Majesty, will you address the Landsmeet?”

“Oh! Um. That would be me. Right,” Alistair cleared his throat. Leliana and Aerin raised their hands to their mouth to stifle giggles. His voice began cautious, unsure, but gradually gained confidence as he swore to protect his country and people, and stop the Blight, at any cost. He proclaimed Arl Eamon as his regent until the Blight was ended, and Aedan Cousland as the general of his armies. Aedan’s eyes widened in apprehension, Sten nodding with approval. Oghren swayed slightly and belched. “Everyone, get ready to march. We will be ready to strike against the darkspawn. It will take all of Ferelden’s strength, but we will end this!” He raised his fist in the air, inciting the nobles to rise and applaud their new king. Gazing out solemnly over his new subjects, he bowed his head, and lowered his fist to his chest. All gathered followed suit, bending a knee. All hail the King. Aerin smiled sadly to herself.

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Everyone gathered in the library, armor and weapons set aside for this one night, celebrating their victory. Eamon had broken out his wine and ale stores, and was off somewhere advising the new sovereign. Aerin sat off to the side, smiling at her companions’ antics. Zevran was balancing his dagger on his nose, Oghren was fighting invisible bees, Sten had a plate of cookies he had commandeered from a frightened cook, Morrigan sat idly swirling a glass of merlot, lost in thought and more contemplative than usual, Leliana and Aedan were just resting on each other’s shoulders and smiling contentedly, and Wynne was watching Aerin. She patted the chair next to her, motioning for the younger woman to sit. “You seem sad, child.”
“No, I’m happy. Alistair will make a wonderful king.”

“But it is not the future you hoped for.”

“Either of us,” Aerin spoke softly. “He wants to wait for me to break the rune’s hold, then marry me. But I don’t know how long that will take. And he’s king now, so he’ll need a queen and heirs right? Otherwise there will just be another civil war in another few decades. We might as well have just put Anora on the throne and be done with it.” She stared down at her mug of ale, barely touched.

“It is not an easy life either of you have chosen. Love is hard and ultimately selfish. And selfishness is something he can no longer entertain.”

“I know,” she whispered. "I can’t marry Alistair. I have to give him up. Gods. How do I give up the other half of my soul?"

Just then, the said other half strode into the room. Cheers erupted. Smiling at all the rest, giving a grand bow, he made his way to Aerin.

“There you are, love. Did you tell Wynne what happened with the slaver’s magic earlier?”

“Oh! I forgot.” Aerin turned to the mage. “Can you cast something simple? It’ll be easier to show you.” Amused, Wynne complied, bringing a small magelight to life, a tiny blue ball floating in her hands. Squinting her eyes, the elf studied the wavelength of the strands of magic, reversed them, and cast her own light. Wynne’s light winked out of existence. She gasped.

“How? You just… canceled it? With magic? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

Frowning, Aerin cast another ball of light and tossed it back and forth between her hands. “I can see the strands that are woven to cast. And cast something that is both equal and opposite, thereby canceling the original spell out. I think with practice, I might be able to just unravel the spell as well, snip the right strand, as it were, saving me the time of figuring out the correct frequency.”

“Frequency? You used that word before, but I’m not really sure what it meant,” Alistair asked. Wynne nodded.

“Oh, right, I guess you haven’t discovered soundwaves yet. Um. So back in my world, people discovered that sound travels in waves that look like this-” she sketched a wave in the air. “Magic looks like this to me, too. So if I cast a spell that’s the same wave height and length, but has opposite highs and lows, I can cancel it.”

The circle mage shook her head. “Be careful who you reveal that to, my dear. You will not make many friends with that knowledge being widely known. I can do some research for you when I return to Kinloch, if you’d like?”

“Oh, yes please.” Apologizing to Wynne, Alistair swept his lover away outside to the empty hall.

“So. They actually did it. Made me king. I don’t think it’s sunk in yet.” He combed his hand through shaggy hair that desperately needed a cut. “I don’t know if I can really do this. But I have to, right?”

“I have faith in you, my love,” she informed him, leaning over to kiss him against a faintly stubbled cheek. “Besides, you’ll have Arl Eamon by your side to advise you. And Aedan. And the rest of your friends to support you.”

“And you, right?” His eyes were bright and hopeful. Aerin felt her stomach clench.
“Of course, my love.” Snuggling into his chest, she hid her unease and guilt. *I can’t give him up. Creators forgive me.*

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Redcliffe had already been overrun by darkspawn. Houses burned, the sky raining ash, as people fled, screaming. The smell of smoke and burning flesh filled the air. Aerin ran into a flaming house, grabbing ahold of a young elven boy and his little sister. “Don’t let go of me!” She swung the little girl up into her arms, the boy’s arm firmly in her grasp, raising her arms to shield them. Leaping over a fallen beam, she stumbled out of the smoke, coughing. “Take her and run straight for the chantry! Don’t stop for anything!” Nodding frantically, the boy took off, all but dragging his sister in the dirt behind him.

“Over here! More headed for the castle!” Keeping her swords at the ready, Aerin sprinted up the hill, hard on Zevran’s heels. Yelling something in Qunlat, Sten charged a hurlock emissary, cleaving the monster in two with one blow. It wasn’t enough. The courtyard was overrun. Morrigan backed up to Aerin.

“Shall we?” Aerin grinned at the other mage. Grabbing her hand, Morrigan wove her spell. *To be able to see the strands…* Aerin watched in awe. Wynne’s magic wove in neat, orderly strands, much like the yarn the old woman loved to knit. Morrigan’s… was pure chaos, swirling like a dark, glowing tornado, a mass of snakes writhing intertwined to create a perfect storm. The strands tightened as the entire mass brightened, then imploded on itself, casting the entropy spell across the courtyard. All the darkspawn that the magic passed through fell, the life drained completely out of them. Aerin gaped. Turning to look at Morrigan, she was shocked to see even the witch’s face was stunned. “I… did not expect it to do that much damage. Your mana reserves and willpower are unprecedented.”

“Oh.” Aerin blinked. “I, uh… I’ve been practicing a lot. Every night, in the Fade. It’s all I do these past few months.”

“Andraste’s tits! Was that you, Morrigan?” Aedan jogged over, eyes wide at the widespread carnage that fanned out from the women.

“Us. More her than me, it seems,” Morrigan replied, arching an eyebrow. “‘Tis very curious.”

“My lord! You’re here, thank goodness!” A soldier ran up to them, hastily bowing to Aedan. “The Grey Warden Riordan and the Arl are waiting for you inside.”

***

“We’re in the wrong place?” Alistair exclaimed. “Damn it! Are we sure?” The clang of his metal gauntlet striking the stone wall reverberated through the main hall.

“Yes,” the Orlesian Grey Warden they had saved from Arl Howe’s dungeons glowered, frustrated with himself. “The bulk of the horde is heading to Denerim, they are maybe about two days from the outskirts of the city. I ventured close enough to listen in, as it were. I am certain. Also… The archdemon has shown itself. The dragon is at the head of the horde.”

“Maker’s breath!” Teagan gasped.

“Then we must begin a forced march to the capital immediately, with what we have,” Eamon responded decisively. “Denerim must be defended at all costs.”

“And only the Grey Wardens can defeat the archdemon,” Riordan added, looking at his fellow
wardens, something dark hiding in his gaze.

“Then we march,” Alistair declared. “Eamon, how long before the army can set out?”

“Dawn.”

“Then let’s get them ready. I won’t let all those people die without giving them a chance.”

The men nodded. Riordan cleared his throat. “If you both,” indicating Aedan and Alistair, “could meet me before you retire, we have Grey Warden business to discuss.”

***

The library at Redcliffe was exactly 419 paces long by 204 paces wide. Aerin counted. Multiple times. “What is taking them so long,” she groused to Leliana, who had been attempting to read the same page in her book for the last hour and a half.

“It’s the first contact they’ve had with the Grey Wardens since Ostagar,” she replied sourly. “They must have had much to report and discuss.” Aerin groaned. She flexed her limbs for the hundredth time, wishing she had more time to break in her new armor before the final battle. *Although I suppose there will be plenty of battles before that.* Her elbow squeaked. *Ugh.* The muffled sound of male voices echoed from beyond the library’s entrance. Muttered, arguing voices.

“She’s got to be insane!”

“If one of us doesn’t, someone will die.”

“What will they say? What will Leliana say? Aerin? This is madness.”

“What will I say? To what?” Leliana watched guardedly as the men walked in, faces bright red and countenance disturbed.

Aedan sat heavily in a chair, pouring himself a very full glass of wine. “Riordan told us the secret. Why a Grey Warden has to kill the archdemon. The dragon is effectively immortal; if it’s slain by a regular person, it’s essence moves on to another darkspawn via the taint. Darkspawn are soulless, so it can house the archdemon’s soul with no effects. If a warden kills it, the essence collides with his soul. Destroying the archdemon, as well as the Grey Warden.” He snorted mirthlessly. “If Loghain had succeeded, Ferelden would have been doomed.”

Aerin could barely understand. *After all this, someone has to die? There has to be another way. It’s not fair…* Leliana’s face reflected her own. “Riordan plans to take the final blow himself, but…” Alistair trailed off.

“Is that what you were arguing about?” Aerin murmured.

“Oh, no.” Her lover’s face darkened again. “Morrigan, of course, has a way around the whole death thing. Old blood magic ritual, no surprise there.”

Leliana shot up. “If it could save you both…”

“Leli,” Aedan sighed. “It’s… well-”

“Sex,” Alistair blurted out. “With Morrigan. To make a baby.”

“Guh.” Shocked into speechlessness, Aerin and Leliana stared at the men.
Aedan drained his glass in one gulp and buried his face in his hands. “If she conceives a child with one of us, it will bear the taint. Therefore the archdemon’s essence will travel into the child, who will be able to survive since it’s like, the size of a pea. Or something. It absorbs the spirit, and pretty much becomes a regular kid with the soul of an Old God. And we both live. Provided we don’t die otherwise.”

Leliana stared at Aedan. “Do it.”

“What?!” he jerked up. “You do understand what I just said? I have to have sex with Morrigan. Sleep with her. Put my-

“I heard you,” she snapped. “But the alternative is we might lose one of you. The odds are not in your favor. Aedan,” her voice lowered. “I can’t lose you. And it makes sense for it to be you. Alistair is king. Having an unknown child of his blood would put his throne at future risk with his own heirs.” She knelt in front of him. “I can be there too, if you’d like.” A playful smile graced her lips. “It could be fun.”

“Fun,” he deadpanned. “Fun. Andraste’s tits, you’ll be the death of me, woman. I need more wine. Would you like wine? Let’s grab a bottle. Or three. I’ll see you two in the morning. If I don’t die first.” Grumbling to himself, Aedan stalked out of the room, Leliana following with a sad smile.

“Well. That’s, ahh…” Aerin blinked some more.

“Maker. This is the most disturbing evening I’d had in a long time. Ever, actually.”

“Well, let’s take your mind off it then,” she winked, smiling seductively at him. He grinned lazily at her.

“Yes, please. I know we should get rest, but I have no urge to sleep tonight.” Lowering his mouth to her ear, he murmured huskily, “I do have an urge to get deep inside of you, and watch you come undone around me. I need to hear you scream my name.” A wanton moan wrenching from her lip at that thought, she wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her mouth to his own.

“Anything you desire, my king.”

Chapter End Notes

I called my husband a druffalo faced nugget the other day. He was confused.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything she had seen and experienced so far could not have prepared her for this level of devastation. Denerim burned. The darkspawn slaughtered everything. They destroyed for the sake of chaos, their only goal to annihilate all life. Dark storm clouds blocked out the sun. Purple, soundless lightning streaked across the sky. Plant life withered. Human, elven, and dwarven corpses lay scattered like a child’s toys, used and discarded without care. The air reeked of smoke and blood and ashes.

Fighting their way through the horde took hours. Maybe days. Aerin wasn’t sure anymore. The sun and moon were both gone, so time became a nonentity. Life became a cycle of stab, slice, block, kill, relieve herself, catch an hour of sleep here, stuff some dried rations into her mouth there. But they were able to reclaim Denerim, with the aid of their gathered armies. District by district, they forced the darkspawn back with shattered war cries and broken bones. It was incredible, to look out onto the battlefield and see a Dalish block a hurlock’s blade for a fallen human, to see a human take a blow meant for a dwarf, to see a dwarf taunt an ogre, back to back with an elf. *This is what the world was meant to be. And all it took was the end of the world to get them here*, she thought wryly.

With a scream, a shriek materialized in front of her, claws shredding the air, reaching for Aerin. Grunting, Aerin cast a cone of ice, freezing the monster to the ground, when a shield came from her left and smashed it to tiny shards. *Heh, shrieksicle.* Alistair sighed. “I reeeeeally wish you would have stayed behind with the others.”

“No such luck, buddy. Where you go, I go.” Reaching up to give him a quick peck on the only square inch of him not covered in blood and Maker-knows-what-else, she surveyed the area. “Shit! Riordan! Up there!”

Her companions turned to stare. As the archdemon swooped down, the Orlesian Grey Warden leapt from a tower onto its back, scrambling for purchase with the tip of his sword. “He’s injured it! Look, it’s wing!” Aedan shouted. “No! NO! RIORDAN!” All they could do was watch in horror as the man was flung from the dragon’s back, plummeting to the burning ground below. The screams and shrieks of the dying monsters and men faded into the background.

Alistair broke the silence. “It’s up to us two now. Looks like it landed on top of Fort Drakon, as planned. We need to hurry! Move out!”

Oghren’s last words before parting echoed in her mind. “*Let the stone turn red from the blood of heroes. Today I will be the warrior you taught me to be. Let’s show them our hearts, then show them theirs!*”

“The warrior you taught me to be.”

“Hmm, what’s that?” Alistair distractedly swiveled his head around, trying to pinpoint which path would take them to Fort Drakon the fastest.

“Nothing love. There, that way. Cut through that alley by the bakery, jump the fence. The fortress is just beyond.” *The warrior you taught me to be. I was a shell before. An empty vessel, filled with only the skills to kill and survive. You taught me to live, Alistair. Gave me a purpose beyond just*
existing - to protect and defend. Now, no matter what, I know what it is to feel alive and stand tall, knowing I have done the right thing. If I die today, I die in peace.

***

*I'm never climbing a single stair ever again.* Gasping, thighs burning, the group reached the top of Fort Drakon, just in time to see the massive archdemon viciously snatch up a man with those monstrous jaws, impaling him on his teeth, then toss him over the wall like a leaf. Crushing another under its lumbering claws, the dragon screamed.

“FOR THE GREY WARDENS!” Alistair raised his sword and charged, the rest of the soldiers cheering as they followed suit. *How willingly they follow their king into battle. I can do no less.* Giving her swords a fancy flourish, she smiled at Leliana.

“Shall we?”

The battle dragged on. Aerin did not remember a time when her muscles did not scream in agony, when blood and sweat did not drip into her eyes, when the screams of the dying did not echo through her head. Gathering her mana yet again, she aimed the lightning bolt directly at the dragon’s eye. Temporarily blinded, the monster was unaware that Aedan had grabbed the chance to slide under its pale neck, jamming his sword up into the unprotected skin. Shrieking in rage and torment, the dragon reared its head up, swiping Aedan away with a razor sharp claw, then crashed to the ground in a shuddering heap. *This is it!* Alistair stood up wincing, in pain from where the archdemon had just thrown him against a broken section of wall. With a determined tilt to his chin, the future king snatched up a fallen sword and sprinted toward the dragon, using the last of his failing strength to vault onto its back and pierce the monster’s skull. His scream slammed into her with the force of a tidal wave as a bright, almost holy light emanated from them both, streaking across the sky into the heavens above, visible for miles around. With a final heave, Alistair wrenched the sword out of the demon’s head as the light exploded out in a supernova. The blast launched Aerin into the air, flying across the battlements, wheezing as her back collided with a stone wall. Weakly opening her eyes, she tried to focus her vision. *Dragon… not moving. Don’t see any darkspawn left. Alistair.* “Alistair,” she croaked. *Need… to find. Can’t… breathe…* She knew her ribs were broken, probably puncturing a lung. Blood bubbled up into her mouth. We did it, at least. Ali… I love you.

***

Chirp, chirp. Tweet, tweet.

*Birds? I forgot what birds sounded like. Am I dead? Are there birds in the afterlife?* Eyes crusted over struggled to open. *Nope, not dead. It wouldn’t hurt this much to just move my eyelids in the afterlife, I hope at least. Where…?* There was sunlight, she knew that much. And obviously birds. The surface she was lying on was soft, softer than anything she had lain on in years, maybe ever. Murmured voices across the room. Attempting to open her eyes again, she managed to get a fuzzy peek of her surroundings. Stone walls covered in a rich tapestry adorned the far wall. A thick fur was draped over her, protecting her from the cold winter’s air coming in from the open window. Two figures stood at the end of the bed, talking in hushed voices.

“…injuries were extensive. She’s lucky… to her in time. Should…any time now. Oh, look. Seems she heard us. Welcome back to the land of the living, child.” Forcing her eyes completely open, Aerin blinked to clear her sight. Wynne stood over her, smiling, while to her right was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen. Alistair grinned in relief. His hair had been trimmed, chin shaved, dressed in a dark red velvet doublet that reached his hips, embellished with gold embroidery and shining, engraved buttons. She could already picture the crown.
“Hi, handsome,” she rasped. Alistair sat at her side, holding a glass of water to her lips, a wide, joyous grin written in his warm features.

“Slowly now. You’ve been out for three days.” She frowned. “That last blast took you out. If the mages had gotten to you a moment later…” He shook his head. “No sense in dwelling on that now. You’re alive, and healing. And I’m alive, and Aedan, and Leliana, and Cal and all the rest of our travel companions.” He bent over to nuzzle her nose. “I’ve been so worried.”

“Sorry,” was all she could manage still. Wynne stepped over to the opposite side of the bed, raising her hands. Aerin watched as the uniform strands of magic neatly wove themselves into a lacy spell before flowing into her chest, easing the pressure and soothing her ravaged muscles. Sighing in sheer, blessed relief, she smiled up at the older mage. “You’re an angel.” She chuckled.

“I try. Now I want you to remain in bed at least the rest of today. Tomorrow you may try to walk around some, but you are not to overdo it, you understand? It was a lot of work putting you back together and I won’t have you sabotage my efforts.”

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chatty for your own good.” Alistair laughed at that. “Then after that, who knows. I don’t really have any plans. I need to try and do some research on runes, maybe track down some people who craft them.”

“Runecrafters? I think that's what they're called. Rather original moniker. Hmm. Rivain has a lot of interesting views on magic. Someone there might know.”

“Rivain, then. Maybe Antiva, or Nevarra, or Orlais.”

“You sound like you just want a grand tour of Thedas,” he teased.

“I just want to see if all of Thedas is as brown as Ferelden,” she replied loftily.

Chuckling, he kissed her gently. “Alright. Get some more rest. I have to go pretend like I enjoy talking with the nobles that have gathered, and do things like compliment their smarmy faces. Some of them have even brought their daughters,” he shot her a look of horror. “Maker preserve me.” Giggling, she waved him off.

“Have fun, Your Majesty.”

***

The crowd’s roar was deafening. The people adored their new king. The streets were packed, the skeletons of burned buildings still scattered throughout the city, the smelling of the funeral pyres just recently turned to ash. And yet they still came, from all over the country, to get a glimpse of the commoner raised bastard who became their king. Alistair, clad in a golden set of spotless plate armor, shining in the sun, looked every ounce the monarch, except for his nervous smile, unused to all the attention. Wherever he could, he dismounted to talk to the men and women gathered, inquiring after their health and the state of their district or town or village. No person was beneath his notice. Aerin felt her nothing but pride at this man. He may disagree, but he was born for this.

Over the next several weeks as spring came upon them, Alistair and Aerin could be found in the city and outlying farms in their spare time, doing whatever was needed to help- from barn raisings, clearing out debris, helping to plant and till the soil, entertaining the kids to keep them out of the adult’s way. She loved watching him with the children, almost daring to think of their own. I hope they get his nose, she thought. And his eyes. And smile. Hell, just everything. Blushing at that train of thought, Alistair caught her eye, a little girl clinging to his back in a fit of giggles, two more boys wrapped around his legs squealing. He shouted, “Aerin, help! The Grey Wardens have defeated me, the mighty archdemon ahhhhh!” With dramatic flair, he carefully lowered himself to the ground so as to not squish the kids, laid there, pretending to be vanquished as the littles one threw themselves across him, shrieking with joy. The adults looking on smiled, a few with looks of concern that their ruler was demeaning himself, but he didn’t care. He looks so young and free out here. The demands of governing, learning the rules of politics and navigating the nobility had left him feeling haggard and drained mentally, so these trips into the city had become more of a necessity as time went on.

Teagan approached them. “Your Majesty, it’s time to return.”

“Of course, Teagan.” Turning to his miniature admirers, he knelt down, extracting a promise from them to be good and listen to their parents. Wide eyed, they all enthusiastically agreed. With a fond farewell to the townspeople, they climbed into their saddles to head back, Teagan going over the agenda for the evening. The Orlesian ambassador had just arrived earlier that morning, and the Nevarran ambassador was set to arrive by the end of the week to pay their respects. Alistair groaned. “Can’t I just fight another archdemon?”
“I’m afraid not, Your Majesty.”

“Alistair. Say it with me. Allllistaiiiiiir. Maker, Teagan, you hauled me out of a pile of manure when I was 8. If you don’t call me by my name, I will scream.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”


Back in their room, the couple made a little time for some well deserved privacy. Sprawled on the sheets, sweaty limbs intertwined, they basked in the glow of their lovemaking. Alistair pressed a lazy kiss to her breast. “Again?” she asked disbelievingly. He happily laughed.

“Grey Warden stamina, remember?” Just then, a knock sounded at the door.

“Your Majesty? Urgent missive from Weisshaupt.” Aerin wrapped the sheet around herself as Alistair shimmied into a pair of pants, meeting the servant at the door.

“What is it?”

“About Aedan. I’ll have to send someone to Highever for him. Looks like he’s going to be the new Commander of the Grey of Ferelden at Amaranthine, when the documents finally get signed that will turn over the keep to the Wardens. The Order is sending some senior members from Orlais to meet him there.”

“Do you think Leliana will go with him to Amaranthine? Maybe I can convince her to stay here. It’s been so lonely without her and you always being in meetings.”

“You should ask, at least. I’ll send a message today. Hopefully, they’ll be here within a fortnight. Now, back to where we were…” He pounced back onto the bed, smiling mischievously, tugging the sheet around her down.

“Alistair, don’t you have a supper to attend with some very important diplomats?”

“But this is more fuun,” the king whined. At her raised eyebrow, he huffed. “Fine, fine. Denying your king. I think that’s treason or something.”

“You can punish me later,” she winked, getting off the bed and walking to where her clothes had been thrown. Watching her naked backside sway as she moved away, he groaned.

“You are an evil woman.”

***

“Leli! Aedan! Or should I say Commander?” Aerin grinned at the two, leaning against the fence of the training yard where she had been sparring. The weeks away at Highever had been good to them. The gauntness of their faces from the last several months had begun to fill back in, giving them both a healthy glow.

“Commander. Maker. I mean, I know there weren’t many options, but still,” he shook his head.

“How is Fergus?”

“Well enough. We started repairs to the castle. It will take a while. There’s… a lot of bad memories there. I don’t know how he will stand living there alone, without…” Aedan trailed off. “But enough of that. How is our king doing? And where’s Zevran?”
“Zev will be along later. He mostly spends his time lurking in the shadows, popping in to check in every few days or so. Alistair is doing well. Really well, despite what he thinks,” Aerin’s enthusiasm and pride in her love bubbled over as she rambled on to them about all his accomplishments over the past weeks. “…And the Orlesian ambassador was actually impressed! He is getting antsy though, so we’ve been spending as much time outside the castle as possible, helping around the city. The people adore him.”

“It is easy to see why,” Leliana piped up. “Speaking of our king…” Alistair strode out of a side door to meet them. “You’re looking well, Your Majesty.”

His gaze darkened. “Don’t you two start that nonsense. Or I’ll be forced to give a royal decree, or something. All red headed bards will only wear shoes made of brown nug leather.”

“The horror!” she laughed. “Very well, Alistair. Have either of you heard from Wynne recently?”

Aerin nodded. “She and I have been keeping in touch. She’s trying to find out more for me about… well, you know, but no luck so far. I think I might have to travel a bit. I’m thinking Rivain first.”

“Oh! If you need a companion, I could come with you,” Leliana offered.

The elf’s face brightened. “Oh! Would you? But what about you?”

Aedan waved off her concern. “I’ll probably be busy with Warden stuff for a long while. You won’t be leaving quite yet, right? We’re both going to Amaranthine for the ceremony and to meet the Orlesian Wardens, but I’m sure she’d get bored there after a bit.” He smiled at his lover. “So, supper? I’m starving.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Aerin informed them. “Let me change and drop off my weapons.” Entering the castle, turning left for the royal chambers, she padded softly across the plush rugs.

“Oh, Mistress Aerin, might I have a word?” She turned, startled to see Arl Eamon standing in a doorway. He’s never spoken to me before, besides the odd pleasantry or two. What could he want?

“Of course, my lord.” Motioning her into the study he was in, he stepped to the side, closing the door behind him.

“I know you aren’t overly fond of politics and the pandering that goes along with it, so if you would allow me to be direct? I realize you and Alistair are… close. Perhaps even fancying yourself in love?” A black shadow descended on her fair features.

“It is not a fancy,” she responded in a clipped tone. “We are in love.”

“I see,” he nodded calmly. “And yet the fact remains that he is the king, and as such, requires an heir. Which necessitates him having a queen. If he were any other man, there would not be an issue, as he would marry and you and he could continue your… dalliance. However, Alistair is not any man, and has a strong sense of loyalty. One that I believe, will not allow him to marry another while you are in his life. You are an elf. You must know that any future between the two of you is nonexistent.”

Ice froze over her heart. “What are you saying,” she whispered.

“You are preventing him from doing his duty. If the unthinkable happens and he dies without an heir, the country will be plunged into a civil war. One we cannot afford. He must marry, for the sake of Ferelden. You are a millstone around his neck.”
A burden. NO, she screamed from deep within her soul, I’m human, I’m not an elf! We can marry, I just have to… to… A voice snaked into her mind, cold and unflinching, How long will it take? You were told years. Will you be young enough to even have children by then? You’re a distraction from his duties. Isn’t duty why you told him to take the throne? Hypocrite. “No. I will convince the king of his need to marry. But I will not abandon him, as you did,” she snarled. “Now, if you excuse me, I have a supper with His Majesty and the Warden-Commander to attend.” She flung the door open, causing a nearby servant to squeak and scurry away, stomping down the hall to her own untouched room, only used it to store her clothing and weaponry. “I can’t believe the nerve of that pompous, overbearing… jerk! Aghhh!” Flinging her armor on the ground, she flopped onto the bed. He’s not wrong though. I think I knew, that it wouldn’t work between us. Not with him being king and me being me. It’s not fair. No. NO. I’ll make him see that he has to get married. And I’ll deal with him having to sleep with her, pretend to be a happy couple with her in front of the country, and be a father to her children, and… Choking back a sob, she punched the duvet. Why…

After a few minutes, she sat up, walked to her vanity, splashed some cold water on her face, combed her hair and wrapped it up in a loose bun, and grabbed a simple gown from the armoire. I’ll deal with it later. Straightening her spine, Aerin put on her most cheery smile and waltzed into the dining room. “Apologies for taking so long,” she walked over to place a chaste kiss on Alistair’s cheek. His eyebrow quirked, but she gave him a slight shake of her head. “Later,” she murmured.

Supper itself was a fairly low key, pleasant affair. Zevran had finally appeared so the five of them ate, reminisced, and laughed away the rest of the evening.

“Do you remember when Aedan threw that spider leg at Aerin in the Brecilian forest?” Alistair cackled.

“You still owe me chocolate,” she glared at the Warden.

“Did you see Sten’s bags he packed before he left? Two of them were filled to the brim with cookies! I gave him a few recipes for cakes as well,” Leliana giggled.

“Oh, Oghren’s a dad!” Aedan grinned. “Felsi had her baby just a few months ago. Can you imagine, him a dad? I wonder if his kid’s first words will be ‘nug humper’.”

“Sire! Sire!” A servant in immaculate livery rushed in. “I apologize for the intrusion, but there is a messenger here to see you. He says he’s from Tevinter.” Well, shit.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to Angstville. Starting tomorrow.
Aerin was shoved into a hidden alcove at the back of the study, watching Alistair anxiously standing behind his massive desk through a small peephole. Eamon and Teagan stood at attention to the left of the study, while Aedan sat to the right, casually leaned back. Alistair’s golden crown perched on his hair, navy blue brocade waistcoat fitted snugly around his muscular body, calm expression on his freckled face all made for an impressive scene. “Show him in.”

A black haired man in a messenger’s uniform walked in, swarthy skin contrasting with the cream of his cowl over embossed leathers. Bowing smartly, the man approached the king. “Your Majesty, I apologize for the lateness of my arrival, but it is a matter of some urgency.”

“I hope this is extremely important, man.” Alistair drummed his fingers on the smooth oak expectantly. “You interrupted my supper.”

“Of course, Your Majesty, I’m so sorry. It has come to the attention of my employer, Lord and Lanista Caius of Ludus Therion of Minrathous, that one of your… traveling companions is, in fact, as escaped slave, and property of the Lanista. It is a well trained asset, and skilled in deception. I have been sent to collect it.”

“She is not an ‘it’, and she has a name,” Alistair glared at the man, wanting nothing more than to throw him outside of his palace. Maybe tar and feather him.

“As you say, Your Majesty,” he gave an unconcerned bow. “I have acquired rooms within the city. If you would be so kind as to locate her, or alert me as to her location, I will be able to collect her and remove myself from your gracious hospitality all the sooner.”

“Tevinter has no jurisdiction here, and Ferelden does not recognize slavery in any form,” the king declared. His fists gripped the wooden surface of his desk so tightly, Aerin wondered if it would crack. “If your employer wishes to retrieve her, he will have to expend the effort himself. You are dismissed.” Fury strained through every note as he spoke. The messenger hesitated.

“If you change your mind, Your Majesty, I will be at the Gnawed Noble Tavern for the next two days.” Alistair opened his mouth to speak, but the Tevinter smoothly continued. Dangerous game he’s playing. “The Lanista is a powerful and well regarded man, with the ear of the Archon Radonis himself. He would not take kindly to the theft of his property.” He smiled, slyly. “It is good to see Denerim in the process of recovering. Your country has suffered much for this Blight.”

The monarch pinned him with a hard glare. “I doubt your lord would convince the Archon to go to war for one single person. A slave, no less.”

“Stranger things have happened,” he shrugged. “My thanks for allowing me the audience. I wish you a pleasant evening, Your Majesty.” With a final grand bow, he exited the room.

“That- that sneaky, insinuating Tevinter,” Alistair hissed, “thinks he can come in here and threaten the woman I love? My country?” His fists rained down on the desk, the crack of wood resounding through the room. “How dare he?”

“Alistair.” Eamon stepped up. “We cannot risk a war, even a trade war with the Imperium right now. A great deal of our metals come from them, metals we need in the reconstruction efforts.”
“Do you seriously think that the Archon would retaliate on the behalf of this Lanista? Someone who's not even a magister?”

“That depends. Aerin, will you join us?” Aerin was stuck inside her cubbyhole. None of her wooden limbs would respond to her brain. Radonis is Archon now? Aedan opened the hidden door and gently drew her shaking form out.

“Aerin?” Alistair all but leapt over the furniture to sprint to her side. Gently gathering her stiff body into his arms, he held her close before pulling her back to arm's length to hold her gaze. “Aerin. I’m not letting him take you.”

“Who exactly are you? Would the Archon be willing to risk relations with Ferelden in an attempt to reunite you with your master?”

At the word master, Aerin felt herself start to slip. She could see the ludus in her head, the sandy training yard, that room with the stone table and the slaughtered elves and the lyrium. Just a slave. Legs gave way as she fell to her knees, oblivious to the pain that shot up her through her, and raised her eyes to meet Eamon’s chest. “I was called Seraphina, Victorem of Minrathous. And one of the Archon’s… favorites. Back when he was just a magister.”

“Victorem?” Teagan asked.

“The reigning champion of all the Tevinter gladiators, am I right?” Eamon asked, voice stern. She nodded mutely.

“Maker…” Aedan stared. “You’re not just any gladiator. I’ve even heard of you. Not your name, but... A Tevinter merchant who landed in Highever a few years ago talked about you, a mere slip of an elf who defeated all of Tevinter’s best. Adored by all. You’re a national celebrity.” She broke. Collapsing on the floor, she began to sob, silent, heaving choking groans. There were no tears. She had none left for this.

“It doesn’t matter. She’s not going back. Ever.” Alistair’s gaze was chiseled in stone, daring anyone to contradict him.

“I have to.” Aerin’s voice was barely a whisper, even as her body shook violently. “I cannot risk your reign before it’s even stabilized.”

“It’s blackmail, what that messenger threatened. I will not be cowed by a mere errand boy in my own castle!” This was not her Ali. This was King Theirin that was staring her down. The voice was so familiar, and yet not.

“They will come for me, regardless. Send assassins. You and your staff would get caught in the crossfire. People will die, because of me. I have been the cause of enough death.” Her face was expressionless, schooled to neutrality, her mind denying the horrors that surely awaited her. “I’m sorry, Alistair.” She stood up, movements jerky, like she was a marionette on strings. With a curt bow, she turned to leave.

“No! Dammit! I’m not letting you go!” His massive arms wrapped around her tiny frame, quivering. “I promised you. I will not break my promise.”

“I release you from your vows to me, Alistair Theirin. For you made them to Aerin Lavellan. I am not she. I am Seraphina.” A voice raged inside of her. Giving up so easily?! Coward. Not even willing to try and fight? Her logical mind answered herself. Because it will never work anyways. I can’t have him. Not in this lifetime. Better to return, and at least know Ellana is safe. “Aedan. Will
you get a message to Clan Lavellan? Tell Ellana… I’m sorry.” Numb as the Void itself, she walked out of the study. Heavy footfalls sounded behind her, then- a thud.

“Aerin!! Eamon, let me go! Dammit! AERIN! LET ME GO!” The sound of guards in armor struggling to restrain the king floated out to her. “Please! I love you! DON’T DO THIS!” A sharp brand of pain pierced the wall around her soul and a guttural sob wrenched from her throat. She broke into a dead sprint, flying through the darkness of the castle, into the courtyard, straight across the deserted town to the tavern. She was afraid if she slowed down, even by the slightest degree, she would falter and run back to him. Every fiber of her being screamed to go back. Her spirit was shattering into a thousand glass fragments, slicing her from the inside out.

It’s over. She stumbled into the inn’s lobby. A swarthy man in leathers with a cream cowl turned, smiling slowly at the sight of her.

“There you are, my dear. You’ve been a naughty slave. The Lanista will be pleased to have you back.”

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The dawn was clear, the day promising a bright sun and cloudless, blue skies. It didn’t seem right to her. It should be pouring down rain, cold, and thundering. But it was the same as any other late spring morning in early Ferventis. A light fog clung to the ground, tendrils curling around her feet. The iron shackles clinked softly as she shuffled behind the messenger, who had yet to introduce himself- why would he, to a slave?- and surrounded by six guards. Tevinter as well, possibly mercenaries. Aerin considered overpowering them. She probably could, with her newly acquired magical talents, but she despaired.

What’s the point? I can’t stay in Denerim with him. They’d probably track me to the Dalish as well, and put them in danger. I could escape to Rivain, do the research I was planning anyways, or Antiva, or Orlais. But I would be alone. Aerin had never been alone in her life. There had been her parents, then Ellana, then Alistair and Leliana and Aedan. She wasn’t sure she would make it out of the country by herself, much less to Rivain. So she obediently trudged along, head hung low.

The smell of the docks reached her first. Her escort pulled her into a side alley, while the retainer walked off, probably going to bribe some unscrupulous captain to overlook the elf in chains. Resigned, she slumped against the wall, staring blankly at her cuffs. What will become of me? Will they take my mind? Torture me first? Will I lose all my memories of Alistair? That thought raced through her mind like a burning lance. I will lose all my memories of Alistair. Images flashed like a movie reel through her thoughts of his smile, those pale blue eyes crinkling, freckles splattered across his nose, chasing after Calenhad with one sock missing, his scarred chest pressed against hers, covered in a thin sheen of sweat, swinging his sword into the archdemon’s head, stuffing a hunk of cheese as large as his fist into his mouth, standing there with a bright red rose held out to her. The notion of forgetting everything that they were terrified her more than anything. Aerin shot upright. The guards eyed her warily.

“Pardon me, sirs. But it seems I’ve changed my mind. I don’t think I’ll be accompanying you today.”

The guards chuckled harshly. “Right,” one drawled. “You’re unarmed. Oh, and Julian here is a templar. So no magic either. What will you do now, slave?” Shit. Think. Think think thi-

One of the guards jerked back, suddenly sporting an arrow through his eye. The rest quickly unsheathed their weapons and snapped to attention. Another arrow, this time from another direction, struck a snarling guard in his shoulder. Two more arrows whizzed by. Then, a redhead elf fell out of the sky, jumping from a nearby roof, tackling one guard to the ground, shoving a
blade into his stomach. Another elf, this one blonde and tattooed, melted out of the shadows, leapt into the air, slamming into the templar's back, stabbing him in his neck from above. Now free to use her magic without fear of a Silence, Aerin spun a ball of fire and flung it at another mercenary. As he screamed in pain, an arrow pierced his chest from behind to quickly put him out of his misery. She watched in shock as her defenders took down the rest in quick succession. “Zevran! Shianni? Soris? What’s going on?”

“Your king will pay for this!” the Tevinter retainer had spotted the dead guards, and was backing away slowly.

“King?” Shianni laughed. “No shem would care about the elves. We take care of our own, ‘Vint scum!” Drawing an arrow, she aimed for his heart.

“Fucking knife ears,” he spat. Gathering his mana, he began to weave a spell. Of course he’s a mage. Aerin narrowed her eyes, watching the magic weave in front of him. His magic almost looks like a dance. A court dance, slow and graceful and yet… not. Let’s see, if I tug on that piece there- Reaching out with her own mana, she carefully snipped one of his strands. The spell imploded. Recoiling in horror, he stared at his hands, “What- what?!” Shianni released her arrow. The Tevinter fell to his knees, spluttering blood, staring in shock down at the feathered shaft protruding from his leather chestplate. Zevran calmly sauntered over, smiled pleasantly at the stunned man, and deftly drew his dagger across his throat. Dead. All dead. He pulled Aerin to him by the cuffs around her wrists, digging a lockpick out of his pocket.

“Did you really think we would just let you run off to Tevinter? You would miss my face too much, bella.” He grinned as her cuffs fell away, her hands rubbing her sore wrists.

“But- all of you- why?”

Shianni smiled. “You saved us from a fate as Tevinter slaves. Just repaying the favor, friend.”

“Does Alistair know?”

Zevran's voice lowered. “Of course. And Aedan and Leliana. In fact, we are going to head to Amaranthine right now. Alistair has a ship coming to meet us there that will take us to the Free Marches.”

“Us? You’re coming with me?” Aerin’s head was spinning. She wasn’t going to Tevinter. She was going back to the Free Marches. Back to Ellana. Away from Alistair. Her emotions were tied up in one giant, complicated knot.

“Sí. If you don’t mind, that is. Aedan mentioned you might be traveling to Antiva and I have plans there to cause some mischief. Plus, I am an excellent tour guide of all things shady, which I assume will come in handy for you, no?”

“You’re to guard me then.” He grinned. Aerin could only shake and head and smile in return. “The company will be much appreciated.” Following the grinning city elves, they walked back to the alienage, where the damage from the Battle of Denerim had been the worst. Almost everything here was destroyed. Most of the people had either fled or died. “Why haven’t you left, Shianni?”

She shrugged. “It’s home. Where else would we go? In here.” Ducking in their home, mercifully left intact, the elf tossed Aerin a bag and indicated a pile that contained her armor, bow and quiver, and swords. Gratefully, she quickly fastened herself in and strapped her weapons to her back and waist, taking a moment for a deep, shaky breath.
“All set then?” Zevran popped into the room. “Come, we have horses waiting on us just outside the city.”

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“Zevran, won’t Tevinter retaliate? On Alistair?”

“It’s very unlikely. That very public attack was carried out by the city elves, and Loghain and his Tevinter friend’s plot to capture and enslave those elves is quite well known through the city now. The witnesses on the dock will report that the elves took their own revenge against the mercenaries and freed you. No harm done to our handsome king.”

Sighing in relief, she let herself relax for the first time since that messenger had interrupted their supper last night. The road to Amaranthine was clear and the day was bright. Small buds of wildflowers and new leaves were beginning to appear across the Blight ravaged countryside. It gave her hope that one day, no signs of the horrors and devastation of the past year would be visible, except on the survivors. But even those scars would fade. People would survive and life would go on. There was no other option. There never was.

Farms dotted the formerly idyllic countryside, nothing spared from the fractured rampaging horde that had scattered out of Denerim following the archdemon’s defeat. The townspeople scurried about in the early morning, terrified and harried. Ahead, the city walls towered over the small cottages, as tall as the walls that encircled the palace at Denerim. She could hear the calls of the merchants somewhere to her left, the Chant being sung to her right, and the shouts of drunken men in the tavern next to her, while in the distance, Vigil’s Keep loomed, the ancient stone fortress built into the shadow of a mountain. As the two elves passed through the gate to the Keep, an older man walked out to meet them.

“Greetings, I am Seneschal Varel, steward of Vigil’s Keep. You are Zevran? And the companion the Commander spoke of? Excellent. I have prepared rooms for you within the Keep. I believe Warden-Commander Cousland should be here in another day or so. If you require anything in the meantime, please let me know.” Bowing, he excused himself.

“So will we be able to see Aedan? Gods, the darkspawn’s touch is everywhere. The Orleans Warden-Commander Cousland should be here at least, right? Wonder if they need help.”

“Probably not. Our ship leaves before dawn at high tide. I’m sorry, querida. Let us go find these Orleansians, and see if we can be of assistance.”

“Mind your tongue, apostate!” The pair swung around to a small cottage near the Keep stairs. A blond man in circle robes sat on a wooden chair, watched by four templars.

“What’s going on?” Aerin stopped in front of one of the templars.

“Runaway mage. Almost made it to Denerim before we caught him. Just resting a bit here before continuing on to the circle.” The mage in question flashed Aerin a cheeky grin.

“Hello! Don’t suppose you’d knock out my guards for me, would you?”

“I’m afraid not, ser mage.” Aerin gave a slight, apologetic smile. Would that I could.

He gave a dramatic sigh. “Didn’t think so. Oh well. Next time then.”

Zevran and Aerin spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the massive keep, speaking politely to the Orlesian Warden-Commander, but finding nothing to do, since everyone was simply waiting for the
Commander to show up tomorrow.

“Well then, nothing to do except play cards.”

“I don’t know any card games, Zev.”

Grabbing a bottle of whiskey, he grinned. “Allow me to teach you.”

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Shouts shook her from her deep slumber. Sitting up groggily, she groaned. What now? Her door flew open. “Darkspawn! The Keep is under attack!” Zevran rushed in, throwing her armor on the bed. “Get dressed, now!”

“Last time I ever drink with you,” she muttered, fumbling for the leather straps. “What time is it?”

“Maybe an hour after sunset? I can’t believe just three shots and you were passed out. Such a lightweight,” he chided, humor failing to conceal the impatience coloring his voice.

“My head is killing me. How did Oghren do this all the time?”

“How did Oghren do what?” The red bearded dwarf in question poked his head in her room. “Miss me? Let’s go smash things!” And he ran off, twirling his axe over his head, skipping with glee.

Guh buh wha? The hell just happened?

“Well, that was unexpected. Alright, let’s go.” They skidded to a stop outside the castle, gasping a breath in as they witnessed darkspawn were everywhere, soldiers scattered into small pockets, fighting valiantly for their lives. “Shit! How did we get jumped like this? Where are those damn Wardens?” Aerin unsheathed her swords. “Just like old times, huh?”

Zevran smiled and shrugged. “I could have done without the the reminder.” Wave after wave swarmed the castle. Aerin knew it was only a matter of time before they were done for. Shit. After all this, I’m going to end up on a darkspawn’s pike? Decapitating yet another genlock, wincing at the burn in her muscles, a call caught her attention.

“It’s the Warden-Commander! The Hero of Ferelden is here!”

“Thank the fucking Creators,” she groaned. Slicing her way through several more hurlocks and an emissary, she finally found Aedan inside the keep, ducking just in time to avoid being smashed by a hurlock’s massive hammer. Oghren, a woman, and the mage from earlier fought with him.

“Aedan! Duck!” He instantly dropped the ground, as Aerin flung a flaming dagger straight for the hurlock’s throat. With a strangled gurgle, the monster crashed to the ground.

“Aerin! Thank the Maker you’re safe! Ish.” He swung her up in a bear hug.

“You’re early! Or late. However you want to look at it. Hey, mage, your handlers mysteriously die?” The blonde man grinned. “Where’s Leliana?”

“The Grand Cleric wanted to see her for something, I’m not sure. This is Anders and Mhairi, by the way. We’ve cleared the outside of the keep, making our way up. You two want to come?”

“We haven’t anything better to do, it seems,” Zevran grinned. “Lead on Warden-Commander.”

“This is insane,” Aedan muttered as they climbed, trail of bodies left in their wake. “How did all these darkspawn get in here without advance warning from the Wardens? Where are they all?”
Aerin shrugged. “Don’t ask me, I was in my room drunk all afternoon.” Oghren giggled. “Over there! Shit, the seneschal!” The darkspawn, unusually clad in a chainmail suit, approached Varel. And spoke. The fuck?

“Commander!” Varel gasped.

“Capture the Grey Warden,” the darkspawn intoned. “These others, they may be killed.”

“Not a chance!” Anders shouted. Although it was much stronger than normal hurlocks, it still didn’t take long for the six of them to take it down. Mhairi withdrew her sword from its corpse, wiping the ichor off her blade.

“Commander, I owe you my life,” Varel bowed, then straightened, something catching his gaze out past the Keep’s walls. “Hmm. Soldiers on the road. Seems we have company.” Aerin looked to where he pointed. A familiar strawberry blonde head rode at the front of a line of soldiers. With a gasp, she sprinted back into the Keep, tripping over the stairs in her rush.

Wouldn’t it be ironic if I died from falling down the stairs after everything else I’ve survived?

Sliding to a stop, she hung back while Alistair formally greeted Aedan, King to Warden-Commander, and spoke with the Warden recruits. He looks so handsome in his new armor, she sighed wistfully. I don’t want to leave him.

“Good luck Commander Cousland. May the Maker watch over you.” The men grasped forearms in a fierce hug. Aerin smiled at the sight. They were practically brothers after all they had endured together, family forged in blood. Alistair stood alone now, searching the courtyard with a furrowed brow.

“Looking for me?” she called from the shadows. Relief flooded his expression. Briskly walking to where she lurked, he grabbed her and crushed her to his chest.

“Maker, Aerin, I thought I had lost you forever.” His voice wavered and she felt something wet hit her head. Tears? She pulled back to look at him. He’s crying.Feeling her own tears burn her eyes, she reached up to gently wipe his face.

“Thanks to Zevran and Shianni, you didn’t. I’m so sorry I left, I was so afraid, Alistair.” Burying her face against the cool metal, she couldn’t stop the tears that were finally streaming down her cheeks. “I was so afraid they would make me forget you. I could handle everything else. But not that. Anything but that.”

“Shhh.” He softly rocked her. “It’s okay now. I… I can’t stay long. I have to get to West Hill to settle a dispute as soon as possible. Aerin.” His arms tightened even more around her. She welcomed the slight pinch in her side her armor created; it anchored her to the present, reminded her that this was real, that he was really here and she wasn’t going back to Tevinter. “I wish… I wish I had just one more night with you. Or a day, a week, a month, a year, one more lifetime- but it still wouldn’t be enough.” Drawing her head up to his, he kissed her, soft lips gently moving across her, tasting her, memorizing the dips and curves of her mouth. “I could live a hundred more lives with you and it would never be enough.” He pressed his forehead to hers. Aerin shook with silent tears.

“I love you, Alistair. You gave me so much light and joy and hope, even in those dark times.” She sniffed. Reaching into his pocket, he pressed something cold into her hand.

“A gift. To remember me.” It was a golden ring, an engraving of a mabari chasing an icy blue stone the color of his eyes set in the center, threaded through a chain. She smiled through her tears.
“It’s perfect. Help me put it on?” They both flashed back to the night by the campfire, their first kiss, Aerin fastening his mother’s locket around his own neck, a year ago now. What I would give to go back in time. I should have married her then. Then we wouldn’t be here, I wouldn’t be standing here, letting her go. Sobs threatened to choke him again.

Pulling her close for another suffocating hug, he whispered, “I love you. ‘Til the end of time.” Spinning away abruptly, he marched for the gate, leaving Aerin with her arms wrapped around herself, trying to stem her river of tears. He turned back one last time to wave, mouth quirked up in that silly grin she loved so much, it hurt, and he was gone. A hand rested on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Aerin, but we have to go. Our ship leaves in less than two hours.” Nodding, she stared at where her love had been standing just a moment ago.

“I’m ready.”

Chapter End Notes

*sobs*
The Hunt Begins

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A crisp breeze lazily drifted over the tall, prairie grasses, the faint smell of woodsmoke tickling her nose. The sun was high overhead, warming her richly tanned skin, draining her energy. At her side, her friend strolled sedately, head held high, breathing in the sweet air in deep lungfuls.

They had been walking for about a week now. Their ship had carried them as far as Wycome, a sizeable fishing village on the eastern coast. It was a simple matter to follow the river tributaries up to the Minanter, then turn west until they reached Ansburg. Not far past there, the Green Dales beckoned. Aerin could see the blue of the aravel sails in the distance, pale gray tendrils of smoke creeping towards the sky. For the first time since she had left Amaranthine, she smiled. It was a fragile thing, but it was there.

“’This is beautiful country,” Zevran breathed. “A far cry from the crowded slums I am used to, but lovely still. The Dalish I stayed with before camped in the woods. This is so much more… open. I am uncertain of what to think, honestly.”

“I feel vulnerable out here,” Aerin admitted. “All this space, nowhere to hide. Cal would love it here.” Smiling, she pictured the giant mabari, frolicking through the field, chasing the rabbits and mice that flourished here.

“There is a severe lack of sticks for the brute. I doubt he would be as pleased with that. I think we’ve been spotted.” She looked up. Two scouts were jogging to meet them. She could just make out their figures and…

“AERIN!” A tiny brunette launched herself at the woman, tackling her to the ground, fingers clutched desperately around her shoulders. “You’re back, you’re alive, oh Creators, you’re alive!” The girl sobbed, face pressed against leathers. She raised her forest green eyes and grinned.

“Ellana.” Aerin whispered her name like she was seeing a ghost. Gently, she traced the younger girl’s face, trying to reacquaint herself with the once familiar face. It had only been a year. But it was such a long year. “Gods, you’re actually here. I’m here.” Crushing her to her chest, Aerin felt her lungs constrict in dry, heaving sobs. Pulling back once to hold Ellana’s face in her hands, she hugged her again.

“I’ve been so worried. We’ve had news, of course, that the archdemon was defeated. But no word if you survived or what had happened. When you didn’t come back right after the dragon was slain, I feared the worst.” A pang of guilt stabbed Aerin’s heart.

“I’m so sorry, Elle. I had… things to take care of. I’ll tell you everything later, ok?”

Sniffling, Ellana nodded. “You… seem sad. Did something happen? Who is that?”

Wearily, Aerin stood up. “Later. Just.. later. This is Zevran. He was one of my companions. Zev, this is my sister.” Glancing over, she saw the other elf that was standing awkwardly to one side. “And Erival. Erival, how are you, friend?” The white haired elf eyed Zevran suspiciously.

“Better now that you’re home. Come on, the Keeper will wish to greet you and your… friend.”

Smirking, Zevran grabbed Aerin’s had. “Of course. Come on, bella, I am most curious to meet
your clan.” Quirking her eyebrow up at him, she allowed him to keep one of her hands, grabbing her sister’s with the other. Ellana grinned at the Antivan.

“He’s handsome, Aerin,” she stage whispered.

“Don’t encourage him,” her sister responded dryly. Zevran just preened. Cheers went up as the elves walked back in camp.

“Aerin’s back!”

“Ghilan’nain has brought her back to us! Praise Mythal!”

Before she knew it, she was standing in front of the serene, kind face of Keeper Deshanna. “Welcome home, da’len” she pulled Aerin into a fond hug. “We have missed you. You have brought a friend with you?”

“Yes, Keeper. This is Zevran. I owe him my life,” she replied simply. Zevran bowed slightly.

“Andaran atish’an, Zevran. You are most welcome here. How was your journey back? I’m sure you are tired. Rest for now, and tomorrow, will you grace us with a tale of your adventures?” Aerin gave a small, exhausted smile.

“Of course, Keeper.” Wrapping her fingers around Aerin’s, Ellana proceed to drag her away from the fire to a more secluded grassy spot, Zevran trotting along behind. As she shrugged out of her bag and armor, Ellana plopped onto the ground.

“So… you and Zevran…?” she asked with an expectant grin. Aerin wasn’t prepared for the sudden ice that shot down her veins. Alistair.

“Unfortunately, your lovely sister has remained immune to my many charms,” Zevran answered wistfully. “We are merely friends.”

“Merely friends?” Ellana asked incredulously. “To have followed her halfway across Thedas back to her home?” Home? Am I home?

“Well, you see, your sister likes to get in trouble a lot. Someone had to tag along and keep her safe. Plus, we are near Antiva, my homeland. I plan on visiting sometime soon.”

“Trouble? What kind of trouble?”

Aerin sighed, a slow exhalation as she laid back on the grass. “Caius. He found me. In Denerim. Sent guards to bring me back. I would have been taken if not for Zev and a few friends.”

Ellana’s face went ghost white. “No…”

“I can’t stay here for long, Elle. I don’t know if he’s still tracking me, but I won’t put you or the clan in danger. Zev and I are going to Antiva, maybe Rivain, to see if we can find any leads on my rune.”

“I’m going with you.” Aerin sat up with a panicky, earnest look.

“Elle, no.”

“I’m much better with my bow now! I’m almost old enough to take vallaslin! I can help!” she insisted. Aerin shook her head.
“Absolutely not. I do not wish for that kind of life for you that I will have to lead. Sleeping in the slums, slinking around at night, possibly killing others. You are safe here, and here is where you will stay.”

“But you would wish that sort of life on your friend?”

With a weary sigh, she watched at Ellana’s thunderous expression. *Still as stubborn as a mule.*

“Zev’s an assassin. An Antivan Crow. And he’s just as wanted as I am right now.”

“An assassin?” she squeaked, shifting away from the blonde slightly. Zevran gave her a sad smile.

“I, too, was once a slave, my dear.”

“Oh.” Ellana fidgeted with a long grass stalk she plucked from the ground. “Is that why you’re sad? Because you have to leave again?”

“Partly.” Aerin drew her knees up and hugged them, feeling the gold ring under her shirt dig into her skin. “I met someone. And I had to leave him.”

“Why didn’t he come with you too?”

“Duty,” she whispered. She barely noticed as Zevran silently stood up and left, giving them privacy. Ellana leaned in closer, pulling Aerin’s head against her chest. *My little sister has grown so much while I’ve been gone. She really doesn’t need me anymore.* Haltingly at first, she talked about Aedan and Alistair and Leliana. The first true friends she had made here since meeting Ellana. The words were hard to find at first, but as she continued to picture them in her mind, sentences tumbled out like crashing rapids over smooth river rocks. How they had truly accepted her, knowing who and what she was. How much she loved them, and them her. Alistair. How silly he was, and kind, brave, gentle, and strong.

“Alistair. The new king?” Aerin nodded miserably. “Oh, Aerin. I’m so sorry. Couldn’t he have… why didn’t he…”

“Caius put him in a diplomatically tight spot. He had to let me go, even though he tried not to. Else, I would have stayed. Asked you to come to Denerim with me. You would like him. You share a lot of the same qualities.” Ellana smiled at that.

“Intelligent and amazing?”

“More like talkative and stubborn, but whatever makes you happy.” They smiled at each other.

“So how long are you staying?”

“Not long, I think. Our trail is still too fresh. We will probably rest a week before heading to Antiva. Huh. Erival looks like he might punch Zevran,” Aerin commented. “Now he’s blushing. I think Zev just propositioned him.” Ellana giggled a little.

“Erival was so sad when you left. Ranted for a solid three days about how you shouldn’t have gone alone.”

Aerin snorted. “Little does he know. So. Tell me all about what I missed this past year with you.”

***

Zevran decided he like Clan Lavellan well enough, as far as Dalish went. Far more hospitable than
Zathrian’s clan at least. He gladly had recounted all the trials and adventures of the Hero of Ferelden, with Aerin only filling it what had happened before he joined them. She was reluctant to talk much about the friends she so sorely missed, so he willingly took over storytelling duties. One of the Dalish, a pretty brunette named Vera, especially appreciated his tales. Laying back under the stars, a lovely woman in his arms under a warm blanket, he could almost be happy here. Almost. He thought of Taliesin. His friend’s regretful death back in Denerim meant that the Crows would think he was dead. He was free, as long as he kept a low profile. He should stay away from Antiva. But it called to him. Eoman. Rinna. Revenge was finally within his grasp. He would see if Aerin would leave with him tomorrow. If not, he would go alone.

***

“Oh! I have something for you. I bartered for it from a merchant last autumn. A late birthday present.” Ellana held out something in her hand. It was a length of emerald green silk, embroidered with golden thread vines, the identical twin to the one that was braided into her own hair. “For your hair.” She smiled sheepishly, the faint glimmer of tears in her eyes. “I know you don’t normally wear things like this, but I thought… maybe…”

“It’s perfect. It matches your eyes, you know.” Aerin turned around so Ellana could weave the ribbon into her braid securely.

“The gold matches your eyes though. This way, we’ll always be together. There, safe and sound. Do you really have to go? You just got back,” she murmured, another sob wracking her slender frame. Aerin wrapped her into a tight hug, pouring all her sorrow and love into her embrace.

“I’m sorry, my Elle. I wish I could stay. But I can’t risk… I’ll come back. I promise. I won’t stay away forever.” Pressing a kiss to Ellana’s hair, Aerin shouldered her pack, double checking to make sure she had all of her things. With a small bow to Keeper Deshanna and a wave to a sullen Erival, she and Zevran set out once again, this time heading east across the plains. “So, Zevran, care to share what your business in Antiva is? I would have assumed you’d stay as far away from there.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps I just missed the smell of leather, sunbaked urine, fish guts, and despair.”

“Oh, that does sound lovely.”

“It truly is,” he chuckled. “To be honest, I have the urge to visit someone. A few someones, actually. It’s been weeks since I killed anyone.” He joked, then fell silent, his normal gaiety morphing into solemnity. Aerin didn’t press him for more information. His past was his own, and everyone was entitled to their secrets.

As the plains gave way to marshlands and then to rolling hills over the next several days, they talked of inconsequential things—Antivan politics, comparison of Antivan nobles to Tevinter, dragons, jousting, and chocolate. Aerin was especially excited to try and find some. It had been so long since she had the rich sweets.

“Antiva City, jewel of Thedas,” Zevran announced grandly, as they finally stood on the crest of a hill, overlooking the city. It was beautiful. Houses and buildings were built into the hills on terraced platforms, farms and vineyards surrounding the city’s walls like a cloak of green. The warm, salty air blew in from the Rialto Bay, stretched out beyond the city like a shimmering blanket. And at the tip of each grand hill, lay a sprawling manse, decorated in stucco and terracotta tiles. Aerin’s memory took her back to pictures of the Italian countryside. She had always wanted to visit. Well, at least there’s Antiva.
“The Grandmaster.”

“Hmm?” Aerin turned to her companion.

“The Grandmaster of House Antiva. He’s why I’m here. When I was a Crow, I had two partners. Taliesin, and Rinna. We were all… very close. So it was a shock when we were told that Rinna was a traitor. Taliesin killed her while I laughed at her pleas of innocence.” His face screwed up in disgust. “Turns out, the accusations and evidence against her were planted. It was orchestrated by our trainer, Eoman, in exchange for more power for him. She had been innocent and I…” His eyes were far away, trapped in his guilt.

“Zev.” She laid her hand on his arm. “Let’s get the bastard.”

“Ah, bella, you truly know the way to a man’s heart. I know a place we can stay for the night. Come, let’s hurry.”

***

Aerin sauntered up to a pair of massively ornate iron gates, dressed in a deep navy corset, a matching ruffled skirt slashed with gold that just grazed the front her mid-thighs before flaring out into a floor length train behind her, and knee high black leather boots. Her hair was artfully piled on her head in a waterfall of rich, ruby curls. She made to walk past the guard, before doing a double take at the sight of the guards. “Well, hello,” she purred. “Would you gentlemen care to help out a lady? It seems I am lost.” Her lips curled up just so.

The taller guard, black moustache elegantly drooped across his upper lip, snorted. “Lady, I’m sure. Tell me, señorita, where are you bound?”

“The Prancing Stallion, an inn. I’m supposed to meet my… friend there this evening,” she strolled up to them, hips swaying all the while. “I do have a little time it seems before my meeting… What is there to do in this droll little town?” The guard smirked and reached for her hip. Allowing him to press her to the growing bulge in his pants, she smiled and wrapped one arm around his neck. A shadow blinked into the light out of the corner of her eye. The guard gasped, red already staining his doublet, just barely visible in the light of the lantern. Aerin pulled her dagger out of his side, and quickly raised it to his throat and sliced. As he fell, Zevran motioned for her to move, standing over the body of the other guard. Deftly picking the heavy gate lock, the two elves slipped inside and disappearing into the shadows, inside the enclosed courtyard. Racing across the manicured lawn, they silently made their way up the trellis that snaked its way up one side of the house. Zevran swung himself onto a balcony, Aerin on his heels. Guards inside, he mouthed. Nodding, Aerin wove her mana and whispered, “Somnus.” The thumps of several armored bodies outside the room could be heard falling.

“What is going on? Guard!” A gray haired man, resting in the center of a huge, plush four poster bed covered in gilded brocade, sat up, panic evident in his dark eyes. Three shapes surrounding him stirred slightly, two men and one woman sleepily looking around.

“My lord, is something amiss?” one man muttered, sheets slipping away to reveal a slim muscular chest.

Eoman sat up, staring out the balcony window. “I thought…”

Zevran casually jumped down from the stone railing and waltzed into the room, flourishing a grand bow. “Ah, Grandmaster, it has been awhile.”
The man’s face paled, mouth gaping. “Zevran? But you… Guards! Guards! Intruders!”

tsking, the former Crow smiled. “Your guards are napping on the job, as it were. You should consider finding new ones.” He approached the bed. “I suppose you know why I am here?”

“The bastard, Rinnala, I presume.” Eoman’s companions quickly huddled off the bed, trying to get away slowly, only to be blocked at the door by a bemused Aerin.

“All of us are bastards here, are we not? And none are innocents. It’s very tragic. Farewell, Eoman. You will not be missed.” And quicker than a hummingbird’s wing, Zevran whipped out a dagger and flung it straight at the man’s heart, striking true. Turning to face the others, he frowned.

“Slaves? Or willing companions, do you think Aerin?”

She examined the cowering lovers. “No scars from the lash. Ladder climbers, perhaps?”

“I do think you’re right. Very well.” It took them less than six second to dispose of the naked trio. “Let’s go.”

***

Back in the alienage, in a tiny shelter—calling it a house would be far too generous—Aerin stretched out on her bedroll, watching a roach climb the opposite wall. Zevran’s voice, muffled by the door, was hushed and hurried, deep in conversation with a dark man from his past. She laid down and tried to relax while she waited him to finish his discussion, attempting to calm her racing mind. A few moments later, she heard the door slide open. Sitting up, she watched her friend walk in, expression pensive.

“There is one who might be able to help, but…” he frowned. “You won’t like it.”

“Try me.”

“There’s a mage, goes by the name of Rosso, he serves one of the local merchant princes, and is rumored to have extensive knowledge of runes. He is, as luck would have it, also a known blood mage.” Aerin’s face contorted in disgust.

“If we kill him?”

“I would not recommend it. He is well protected by Prince Desanti. Plus, the mage is notoriously powerful. You already have one lord after you. I would not advise you to raise that number any higher.”

“Fine. We keep looking.”

“You don’t wish to at least speak to him?”

“Not unless I can crush his worthless heart under my boot, no.”

“There are still other contacts in Antiva I can ask. Do you mind staying here longer?”

“Nowhere else for me to be.”

Zevran nodded thoughtfully. “I have a few other marks as well, here, as well as in Rialto, Salle, and Treviso. From Treviso, we can charter a boat to Dairsmuid, Rivain. We might have more luck there. The Rivaini have very different views on magic than the rest of Thedas.”

“Thank you, Zevran.” Her tired eyes met his. “I don’t think I’ve said that enough recently. Thank
for coming with me. For staying with me. I couldn’t do this without you.”

He smiled, patting her on her knee. “Hush, now. You’re helping me as well. I’ll make a master assassin out of you yet. You did much better the other night at remaining in stealth.”

“I miss my swords,” she informed him, glaring at the daggers in her belt. It was unavoidable. It was harder to sneak up on someone with two swords to unsheathe. Daggers were more silent and maneuverable.

“Someday, you will be free of this and you may swing your giant metal bits like a barbarian to your heart’s content.”

“Metal bits,” she snorted a laugh. Zevran missed her easy smiles and laugh. Aerin had not been the same since Denerim. He almost caught a glimpse of the girl she once was when she was around her sister, but he suspected that it would take months, maybe years for her to heal. A love like that… He sighed. Rinna. Forgive me, my love. Maybe with Aerin’s assistance, I can begin to atone for my crimes against you.

“I think I know who I want to check in on tomorrow. But first, I got you a present.” He tossed her a small box wrapped in shiny red paper.

Opening the lid, Aerin gasped, inhaling the sweet, rich scent. “Chocolate!”

“Aedan gave me a bag of gold sovereigns before I left and ordered me to find you as much as you wanted, querida.”

She smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Going camping this weekend so y’all get a bonus chapter tonight. If I don’t post Saturday, there will be 2 chapters on Sunday, too. :D
The rich scent of incense and thick smoke curled around her, drawing her into the small, dimly lit room. “You have what I asked for?” Aerin handed over a parcel, blood seeping through the layers of fabric. A dark, tattooed, and bejeweled hand reached out to daintily accept the package, unraveling the layers. Smiling contentedly at the dismembered finger, the woman slipped the signet ring off and tossed the finger aside carelessly. Holding the ring up to the light, she asked, “It is done then?”

“Yes, my lady. Precisely as you wished.” Aerin leaned against the doorframe. “And my payment?”

The woman floated over to a plain wooden box on her dresser, chains around her neck and wrists softly chiming as she moved, and withdrew something. “This is should do the trick. If not, come back and I’ll what I can do to modify it.” She dropped an amulet into the elf’s outstretched hand. “Good luck, my friend.” Aerin bowed, and quickly exited the house, stealing down the dark alleys back to the slums of Seere, amulet tightly grasped in her hand. Finally, after all these years…

It was midsummer, and the year was 9:36. Five years had passed she left Amaranthine with Zevran. Five years since she had last seen Alistair, and Ellana. She kept meaning to go back to visit the clan. But there was always another lead, another mark, another job. The pair of assassins had moved silently through Antiva, leaving a trail of dead Crows in their wake. It was now rumored the position of Grandmaster of House Arainai was cursed, as four of them had met mysterious ends over the last few years, along with numerous others, to what the Antivans called the Black Shadow and La Sirena, the Siren. It was said the last you would see before death took you was a beautiful woman with eyes of burning gold emerging from a dark shadows, smiling as she plunged her dagger into your flesh. Their last victim, a Guildmaster of Rialto, had pointed them to this seer in Seere. Heh, seer in Seere. A seer who promised Aerin an amulet that would break the power of any rune. The amulet that was now clutched in her hand. The tautness of her skin and the sensation of suffocation had never gotten easier over the years, a part of her now, as surely as her bones. How would it even feel to be free? I bet I could fly.

She had kept up with the news of her friends around Thedas, snapping up tidbits of information where she could. Aedan had been doing well as Warden-Commander and was well respected by all his peers, although the lack of news surrounding him recently was slightly disturbing. Called to serve as the Divine’s Left Hand two years before, Leliana had gone to Val Royeaux, known now as Sister Nightingale. She was proud of her friend. And Alistair… she secretly devoured any scrap about the King of Ferelden that crossed her path. How he fought off bandits that had been harassing a village he was traveling through, saving the lives of all the residents, bravely running into a building that had been set aflame to rescue a child. How he successfully ended a decades old blood feud between two of the Banns. How he refused to marry still, despite enormous pressure from his advisors and whispers from the nobility. A part of her thrilled at that. Maybe he still waits for me? Hope had blossomed in her chest for the first time in years when she heard of his reluctance to name a Queen. Then, as quickly as it came, her optimism was snuffed out. Look at who I’ve become. An assassin, a murderer. After all these years, I’m still just a weapon of death. An escaped slave on the run. Unworthy to have the love of a man like him.

Walking into the noisy tavern, the air reeking of stale beer and spilled wine, she made her way upstairs to the tiny room she had been renting with a nod to the barkeep. Locking the door securely,
She examined the amulet. It was simple, a dodecahedron, made of everite, swinging from a silver chain. Prodding with her magic, she could sense a powerful spell tightly woven inside, like lace, intricate and nigh on impossible to unravel or recreate. She sat in front of the small sliver of polished metal that served as a mirror in this room.

“Here goes nothing.” With sweaty palms and faintly trembling fingers, she drew in a deep breath and slipped the chain over her head. And waited.

A faint tingle started in her lower back, where the rune was embedded, spreading down her arms, into her chest, and then warming her skull, like heat painfully flooding back into frostbitten skin. Gritting back the pain, she opened her eyes, excited. And frowned. The normal pain was still there, the tightness of her skin stretched over her real body, the constriction of her lungs. She reached for her ears. Still pointed. Her hair was blood red, not black. With a groan, she fell back. And gasped. My magic…

She could feel the power deep inside her, uncoiling like a slumbering dragon, rising to the surface. Her mana thrummed through her veins, causing her to almost faint with the suddenness of the release. It broke the binding on my magic! No, wait… she looked inward. Not completely broken. Some of my power is still bound, but still. This is… She summoned a magelight. It glowed with the force of the sun. And it took her almost no effort. She knew she could keep this spell up for days if she had to, while casting simultaneously, where previously, juggling more than one spell would tire her out sooner rather than later. A giggle broke through, taking her by surprise. She touched her lips. Has it really been so long since I laughed last? She couldn’t remember. A knocked sounded at her door, interrupting her joyous revelations.

“Mistress? Message for you.” Grabbing her dagger, she carefully edged open the door. The barkeep from earlier nervously held out a parchment, eyeing the blade. Thanking him, she took the note and relocked the door.

Querida, it is done.
-Z

It’s done. Aerin stumbled to her bed, staring vacantly at the wall in shock. Caius was dead. It seemed so… anticlimactic. Zevran had blackmailed two Guildmasters into his employ within the last year and convinced his new allies to send a few Crows, plus himself, to Tevinter on a special mission. To kill her old master, destroy her and Ellana’s purchase papers. And now it was done. She was free, no longer wanted. While the list of those who wanted Zevran dead grew exponentially by the day. She owed her friend much.

Right. Time to head back to Antiva I suppose. And then, to tell Ellana the good news. If she forgives me.

***

“He’s dead?!” Ellana’s face was suspended in shock, then- “EEEE! He’s dead! Oh, sweet Mythal, we’re free, we’re finally free!” Aerin smiled at her little sister. Not so little anymore. She was 20 now, her vallaslin of delicate vines creeping around her eyes like a mask. Ellana had been so proud to show them off to her, forgiving her almost instantly when she caught sight of her older sister for the first time in years.

“It’s Syllaise’s marks! Since I’m a healer. I know you won’t ever take vallaslin, but I imagine that if you did, it’d be Andruil’s, Goddess of the Hunt. So Syllaise’s was perfect for me. They were sisters, remember? One to fight and one to heal. Just like us.” Aerin had agreed.
Ellana stared up at the night sky. “I can’t believe it. It’s finally over. Well, that part at least. Do you think anyone will retaliate? Any luck with the rune?”

Pulling out the amulet, she showed her sister. “A Rivaini seer gave me this. Didn’t quite work the way she intended, but it loosened the hold on my magic immensely. It’s incredible. As for the ludus,” her shoulders shrugged. "He wasn't a magister, just minor nobility. I doubt anything will come of it.” Ellana smiled, the lines of her vallaslin crinkling.

“So what now?”

“I’m not sure.” Aerin watched the other clan members, laughing and talking. Zevran, who had accompanied back to the Dales for some much needed rest and relaxation, was in the middle of entertaining a group of children with his juggling skills. A female elf caught her looking and scowled. “What’s her deal?”

“Who?” Ellana peered at the other woman. “Oh, that’s Erival’s mate. She came to us from another clan a year ago, I think? I guess she doesn’t like you.”

Rolling her eyes, Aerin chuckled tonelessly. “I didn’t want her man when he was available, sure as hell not going to make moves on him now.” Stretching to ease her cramped muscles, the woman laid on her stomach, content to simply enjoy the presence of her family.

“I miss you so much. And worried about you. A lot.” Ellana ran her fingers through Aerin’s hair, plaiting and replaiting it, pulling the dirty ribbon out so she could clean it later. “What were you up to all those years? What did you do for work?”

“I’m sorry. I meant to come back sooner, much sooner. You know, when things got hopeless and I felt down, I would always think about you. The one bright spot in everything I’ve gone through. I don’t know where I’d be without you. Back in Tevinter, I suppose.” She sighed. “We took random jobs, whatever we could. Nothing that's a big deal. Don’t worry about it.”

Ellana frowned. “You killed people for money,” her tone accusing. "Is that what you and Zevran did?"

“We did what we had to do, to survive.”

“There had to have been other things!”

“Elle. I’m an elf. And all I know is how to fight. There really isn’t much out there in cities for people like us. The alienages, all of them, they’re like… the worst of the slums. So bad, most humans won’t even go near them. No one cares.”

A small smirk spread across the younger elf’s face. “Not all the alienages.” Aerin looked up, questioning. “Rumor has it that the King of Ferelden razed the Denerim alienage to the ground, and rebuilt it. Putting in schools, a hospital, the works. They say the elves are actually happy there now.” Oh, Alistair. Aerin’s heart clenched with remembrance. How she had begged him to take the throne so he could fix it. And he did. She smiled, a warm, happy smile. A rustling in the grass nearby drew their attention up.

“Aerin, would you join me in the Fade this evening?” Keeper Deshanna smiled down at the girls. “It’s been awhile. I wish to see your progression.”

“Of course, Keeper.”

“She’s gonna be so surprised,” Ellana grinned, poking Aerin's new jewelry.
“Your skills have come along impressively.” Deshanna lowered her own staff. “You feel… different. Your magic is deeper, more intense.” Pulling out her amulet, Aerin showed the Keeper. “Ah, I see, that explains it. The sensation is not unlike a panther, muscles coiled, poised to strike. Restrained power, I suppose. It’s hard to explain. So what is your next move, child? Will you stay here for awhile, now that you are freed?”

Aerin sat on a nearby rock, mulling over the question. “I’m running out of leads. I don’t know where to go next. Nevarra, maybe? Although their forte is the dead. And I know they’re pretty strict on all things related to blood magic. I might get killed just for asking around.”

“What have the sources you collected been telling you?”

Sighing, she kicked at a Fade rock. “Always the same thing. I don’t want to go there.”

“Blood magic then.” The Keeper watched her expectantly.

“Blood magic,” Aerin agreed. “Blood magic got me here, blood magic can get me out. Or so the theory goes.” Deshanna slowly paced the clearing, turning her staff over in her hands. Stopping, she nodded to herself, reaching some internal conclusion and faced the younger elf.

“Kirkwall.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Specifically, Sundermount. Clan Sabrae is currently camped there. Their First has been known to… dabble in blood magic, Sabrae’s Keeper Marethari told me. It caused problems within the clan, and Merrill left the clan to go live in the city. Not to mention, Kirkwall is overflowing with blood mages right now. You might find an answer there. But be cautious. The templars there are much more vicious than in other cities due to the prevalence of maleficarum.”

Aerin frowned. “Isn’t there a Qunari invasion going on there? I don’t want to get caught in that mess.”

Deshanna shook her head. “The Qunari were ejected from the city almost two years ago. Go to Sabrae first. Marethari will know where Merrill is. It’s worth a chance, yes?”

Slowing exhaling, she nodded. “It’s all I’ve got now, anyways. I don’t like it though.”

“I trust your moral compass is strong enough to resist the urge to slaughter unwilling innocents for their blood,” the Keeper remarked, bemused. “Blood magic itself is not inherently evil, after all. It is just a slippery slope. I would not recommend this path to you if I did not think you strong enough to traverse it.”

“I will not disappoint, Keeper.”

“I never doubted, da’len. I should imagine that Ellana will demand to go with you. Take her.”

“No,” Aerin emphatically stood up, “She’s safer here.”

“Yes. But the girl is skilled with her bow, and her healing. And I doubt she will be as forgiving if you leave her this time. She will be fine with you. And I think, you might have need of her. You’re slipping, Aerin. Who you are now is not who you were when you first came to us.”
Opening her mouth to retort, Aerin shut it with a snap, sagging. *She’s right. Ellana always stabilized me. Without her, I’m losing myself.* Suddenly drained, she nodded limply. “You’re right, of course. If she asks, I’ll take her.” A tug of awareness pulled at her consciousness. “Time to wake up, I think. Ma serannas, Keeper.” The clearing faded from her mind as the pale dawn sun streamed across her face. Groaning, she sat up, blearily looking around. *Still not a morning person.*


“Sleep well?”

“Mmrph.”

“I woke to tell you that I’m leaving, bella.” Aerin was wide awake now.

“Leaving?”

“Sí. I have an appointment in Hercinia at the end of the month, so I must leave today if I am to make it.”

Nodding, Aerin pushed off her blanket. “Let me pack and wake Ellana.”

Zevran smiled, sadness flickering in his eyes. “No, Aerin. I must go alone. There are a number of Crows on my tail. I would not wish to put you in anymore danger. You are free now. A life as an assassin is not one you ever wanted, I know.” She opened her mouth to protest, but he laid his hand across her mouth. “No arguing. We had fun together, no? Do you know where you are going next?”

Pursing her lips, a tired sigh puffed away. “Kirkwall.” He let out a low whistle and scratched his head.

“Be careful, Aerin. The circle there is… volatile. The templars are far harsher there than anywhere else we’ve been. Be very, very careful. There are also rumors of slavers there.”

“Keeper Deshanna warned me about the templars. Slavers, you say? I imagine I should pay them a visit, then.” They grinned at each other. “Thank you, Zevran.” She threw her arms around him in a rare gesture of affection. “I would never have made it this far without you,” she mumbled into his shoulder. He hugged her tightly.

“It was all my pleasure. Maybe yours, as well.” With a final smile and a kiss on the cheek, the handsome former Crow hefted his pack up and walked out of camp, the rising sun warming his face. Aerin felt a hollow ache gnawing at her chest. He had been her sole companion for four years. They hadn’t always stayed together, sometimes their jobs necessitated them separating for weeks, even months, but she knew he would always find her. She was suddenly and finally alone. *No, Ellana is here. She’s coming with me.* Her sister laid on the bedroll next to her, still sprawled out like a starfish, mouth open and snoring. *Somethings never change.*

Sipping her tea in contemplative peace, she watched the sun rise over the distant mountains, scattering golden rays across the prairie. As the light grew brighter, the starfish next to her finally grunted before sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

“You’re up early,” Ellana muttered. “Gimme that.” She swiped Aerin’s tea from her, taking a long drink. “Ugh. It’s cold. Why are you up?”

“Zevran left,” Aerin said softly, still watching the direction in which he had disappeared. Ellana sucked in a breath.
“Without you? Oh, Aerin, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s… fine. It really is. I have you now.” She smiled at her sister, and reached over to squeeze her hand. “I think I know where I’m going next. Kirkwall. The City of Chains. Pleasant sounding, really.”

“I’m coming,” Ellana stated immediately.

“Okay.”

“Aerin! I’m not a child anymore, I can- wait, what?”

“I said okay.”

“Oh. Well then. Okay.” She sat back, nose wrinkled in confusion. Aerin laughed. Head thrown back, eyes crinkled, truly laughing for the first time in Creators know how long.

“Oh, sweet Mythal, your face!” She giggled some more, flicking her finger at Ellana's protruding bottom lip. “The Keeper said you would probably want to come. And that your skills are more than adequate now. So, if you want to come, you can. It’ll be dangerous though. I've heard rumors about the city. Gangs and blood mages and slavers all running rampant.”

“I know. I don’t care.” Her jaw was set into that familiar, stubborn expression, emerald eyes firm. Aerin leaned over to ruffle her hair.

“I'll see the Keeper about some supplies, it's going to be cold. Go pack your things. We leave tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

A bit of a shorter chapter as the next arc sets up.
The Champion of Kirkwall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was cold, high in the windswept, barren Vinmark Mountains. Autumn was slowly giving way to winter, and the days were getting frostier by the minute, it seemed. The girls broke down their campsite, breath fogging in the dawn’s first light. “Once we get down the mountain, it should be warmer,” Aerin muttered for the hundredth time. Ellana groaned.

“It better be. I think I’m getting frostbite on my toes,” she complained.

“It’s not that cold. Remind me to take you to Haven one day. It was covered in snow. In the middle of summer. Stupid Ferelden.” Shivering, the younger elf picked up her bag, trying to draw her cloak closer around her.

“No, thank you. Hey, I think I see something.” Craning her neck, Aerin just barely could spy a towering wall, glinting with bronze, in the far distance.

“Looks likes we're almost there. Deshanna said Clan Sabrae is camped on Sundermount, right outside the city. Keep an eye out for their red sails.” Picking their way down the rocky slope, Aerin wondered if Merrill would be able to help them. And why the First had turned to blood magic in the first place. I wonder what kind of person she is. Does she love the power it gives her? Is she one of those rare ones who only bleeds herself and not others? Why is she in the city? Hours, she spent lost in her thoughts as they trekked on in silence, huddled against the piercing wind. The sun was starting to set, shadows gaining length. “We need to start looking for a place to camp.”

Ellana sighed. “Fine, fine. I had hoped we- Wait, do you see that? Fire, over there.” Sure enough, campfires flickered at the base of the trail they were on, shadowy wagons surrounding the fires. “Can we join them?” Aerin shook her head.

“Too risky. What if they’re bandits?”

“No, it’s the Dalish! Those are aravels!” She jumped up and down and squealed. “Let’s hurry!”

“Stop rushing or you’ll break your fool neck on this mountain. I think they heard you, anyways.” Muttering she watched as a few scouts loped gracefully up the path to meet them. Ellana continued her hurried descent, albeit at a more controlled pace.

The elves stopped in front of them, hostile glares giving way to surprise as they took in Ellana and her vallaslin. “Andaran atish’an, sister. What brings you here?”

Ellana smiled. “I am Ellana, and this is Aerin, both of Clan Lavellan. We’re here to see Keeper Marethari.”

“Of course. I’m Ineria, this is Terath. Follow us.” Aerin sighed as they neared the fires, the heat washing over them in blessedly warm waves. An older woman rose to greet them.

“Andaran atish’an. You must be the two Deshanna told me were coming. Aerin? And Ellana?” The girls bowed. “Come, join us by the fire. Your Keeper told me a little of why you are here and I would hear the rest from you.”

“Ma serannas, Keeper. Our reason is… a bit sensitive in nature, to be honest,” Aerin hedged. The
old Keeper nodded, and motioned for the others to leave them in privacy. With a grateful tilt of her head, Aerin pulled her blanket closer and huddled closer to the fire. “I was told that your First, Merrill, lives in the city? I am searching for her, in hopes that she may aid me.”

“You require her… special talents, you mean,” Marethari sighed. “Will you tell me why, child?”

Aerin paused. Deshanna trusted her, so did that mean she could to? It was a risk. It was always a risk. “There is a rune I am trying to break, cast in blood magic, and everyone I have talked to, everything I have learned over the years indicates that the only solution is more of the same. I’m hoping an actual blood mage might have more insight. But it’s hard to find a blood mage who isn’t a murderous, tyrannical psychopath,” she remarked wryly, “so I was hoping that your First was a little more… stable? Kind? Not power mad?”

The Keeper chuckled at that. “Stable, I’m not so sure about. But she’s intelligent, and a kind person. Her intentions were good, even if I do not agree with her methods. She hangs around the Champion of Kirkwall, a woman named Marian Hawke. Hawke should be easy to find. The entire city knows who she is and where she lives. Find her, you find Merrill.”

“Ma serannas, Keeper. We will only impose on you for tonight then. Tomorrow, we’ll continue to Kirkwall.”

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Aerin lay sprawled out casually across a rickety wooden chair, appearing as if she was engrossed in her drink. Taking in the ale soaked tavern, a thick layer of filth covering every surface, she listened in on nearby garbled conversations, hoping to catch some mention of this Hawke or her elven companion. “Why don’t we just ask someone,” Ellana complained, eyeing the scenery distastefully, poking a finger at the dirty cup in front of her.

“Because we’re trying to remain inconspicuous,” Aerin murmured. She eyed the Dalish girl, dark tattoos stark against her pale face, sitting in a bar full of humans. “As inconspicuous as possible,” she amended. Turning back to her cup, a rough voice in a hushed whisper caught her attention. She motioned for Ellana to listen in closer.

“Rorek got the last shipment in earlier today. Ship comes in few hours before dawn tomorrow. One of the cages is busted, we’ll need a replacement tonight. Can you contact someone?” Ellana translated.

“How much you wanna bet their shipment is people related?” she muttered. The men shook hands, and stood up to leave. “Let’s go.”

“I thought we were looking for Hawke and Merrill?”

“We will. Later. I want to see what our new friends are up to.” Draining her ale, grimacing at the taste, she set her mug back down on the table. Silently, the girls slipped out of the tavern, named the Hanged Man- what a lovely name for a business- and melded their forms with the shadows of Lowtown. The first man quickly made his way down the deserted streets oblivious to the stealthed elves on his trail. Descending an old staircase into the underground warrens that stretched beneath the city, Ellana pressed a hand to her mouth, horrified at the sight that greeted them. These must be the slums, Aerin realized. Broken, matted, and ragged people, humans and elves alike, laid about in front of tiny, sputtering fires, some sleeping, others nibbling at tiny charred carcasses of the rats that littered this place, and still more just staring vacantly into space, all semblance of hope and life long ago snuffed out.
“This is horrible,” Ellana whispered. Aerin nodded. She had seen the slums of Denerim, Antiva, and Rivain, but this was… beyond that. She had never felt so much despair, thick enough to choke on. Their man paused at a small hatch, glancing around once before lowering himself onto a ladder. Waiting a few moments, they swiftly followed on his heels, lightly landing at the bottom of a dank tunnel, the sides of the walls covered in a thin sheen of moisture. She hear a soft lapping sound up ahead. We must be near the water. Voices echoed into the tunnel. Pulling Ellana behind her, Aerin carefully peeked out. The path opened up to a rott ing, wooden balcony that had stairs leading into the large, open cavern below. The water from one of the rivers that led to the Waking Sea gently splashed on the rocky shore and two large rowboats that looked like they were constructed from driftwood. Against the damp cave walls were three large iron cages, packed with terrified humans and elves, the stench of unwashed bodies and fear permeating the air. One of the cages seemed to be missing a lock, and instead was surrounded by six guards to prevent their escape. Five more guards stood near the other two cages, and another four near the boat.

“Let’s go ahead and load up the first batch,” one of the slavers gestured at a cage.

“We should wait on the locksmith to come first. I don’t trust these new recruits to be able to hold all them back if they have a mind to charge.”

“Nah, they’re all scared shitless. They won’t try nothing.” Frowning, the first man shook his head.

“Not worth the risk. We’re ahead of schedule anyways. I say we wait.” With a scowl, the second guard agreed, scuffing his booted toe against the graveled ground. Aerin slipped back into the tunnel several paces back.

“Ok. I’m going to cast a large blizzard in there. I see one mage, he’s the one with the staff standing closest to the door of the guarded cage. Try to take him out first. Stay to the back, do you understand? Do not leave the balcony for any reason. If something happens to me, you get out. Otherwise I will drag you back and come back here alone later.” Ellana made to protest, then saw Aerin’s face. Her features were sharp, eyes blazing, chiseled from stone, and more stern than she had ever seen before. Gulping, the younger woman nodded. Aerin closely examined Ellana’s face for any sort of deception, then turned, apparently satisfied by what she had seen, and crept back towards the entrance. Muttering under her breath, she reached into the Fade and pulled. The temperature in the cavern plummeted. The mage’s face shot up, eyes darting to and fro.

“We’re und-” With a cry, he fell back, arrow firmly lodged in his chest, easily ripping his robes. Several of the guards whirled around with a start, scanning the chamber for the intruders. Then, a powerful blizzard descended across the cave, freezing the ground in rings around the cages, turning all the blood of the slavers into crystalline icicles, save the four near the boat. With a graceful leap, Aerin sprinted toward the ledge and vaulted off, landing lightly on her feet, swords withdrawn. With a yell, the guards unsheathed their own swords and raced to meet her. Blocking one’s swing with her own sword, she spun and rolled away, throwing a massive fireball when she came up, roasting one guard alive in his steel armor. Flinging herself at another, she somersaulted over his head, twisting her body midair, swords crossed. Drawing her arms back, her blades found their mark and the guard’s head rolled away, body collapsing to the dirt. Pushing herself to her feet, in one smooth, fluid motion, she slipped out a dagger from her boot and flung her arm, watching at the sharp metal ripped into a stunned man’s neck, blood oozing down his skin, coating his armor. Turning to give a feral smile to the last one, she lazily twirled her swords as she sauntered up to him casually.

“Who the fuck are you!” The last slaver fell as he scrambled backwards in the dirt to get as far away from the elf as possible, his Antivan accent quivering, eyes blown open in terror.
“I’ve had many names,” she responded primly. “But you may call me La Sirena.” His mouth dropped open in recognition.

“Please, whatever you want, please I’ll do anyt—” he jerked, making a wet gurgling sound as he stared down at the sword that had pierced his chest.

“You can die.” Looking up, the last thing he saw was the cold, beautiful face of the one they called La Sirena, the killer of Crows. Life expelled, his body went limp. Aerin pulled out her sword and went to collect her dagger, wiping it off on a dead man’s sleeve.

“La Sirena?” Ellana stood behind her, trying to remain unconcerned at the carnage, worried about Aerin’s attitude. The woman she had just watched was not Seraphina, the gladiator, who fought because she had no choice. It wasn’t Aerin, her sister, fighting just to keep them alive. This was the face of the warrior who had faced down an archdemon, that had stalked the Antivan Crows themselves until the legendary order of assassins had trembled at the mention of her, who revealed in the kill. Ellana didn’t know who this woman was.

Aerin merely shrugged. “There’s an old Antivan legend. About a beautiful woman that lures men to their deaths with her song, in my case, the song of blades. The few that saw me and were allowed to live, created the name. They called Zev the Black Shadow.” Turning to survey the guards, she considered trying to find a key, then discarded the notion. Approaching the caged men and women, she asked, “Is anyone hurt?” Most hurried to shake their heads, eyeing her with awe and not a small amount of apprehension, while one man called out.

“My sister, her leg, it’s…”

“Right, stand away from the lock please.” As the crowd rushed to shift away, she held the lock in her hands, summoning a tiny flame, burning hotter than any blacksmith’s fire, and carefully melted off the lock. Moving to the next cage, she did the same. Glancing at the last cage, she raised her eyebrow. “You guys know that one is already open, right? Hurry up, go.” As the ragged group fled up the tunnel, Aerin knelt by the injured girl, no more than 12 or 13 years old. Not much older than I was. “Is it alright if my sister takes a look? She’s a healer.” As the child nodded, Ellana softly approached, directing the man with her to go wet a cloth and bring it back. Wincing slightly, the girl remained silent and still as the Dalish elf quickly cleaned the wound.

“Will you let my sister heal this for you?” The girl swiveled her head to stare at Aerin in unbridled terror. Ellana gently smiled, laying a comforting hand on her arm, and continued, “She won’t hurt you. She only hurts the bad men.” A small nod was her response. Wrapping her hands in a soothing, cool blue light, Aerin laid her fingers over the wound, pulsing magic into the leg, watching it seal itself shut.

“There, all better.”

“Thank you so much, serrah, thank you,” the man fell over himself, bowing to the women. “If there’s anything I can do to repay you…”

“No payment needed, dead slavers are enough for me,” Aerin affirmed. “Although, I’m looking for a woman named Hawke. Do you know her?”

He nodded. “She lives up in Hightown. Her door is one that’s painted red.”

“I’ll save you trouble of a hike up there. Hightown is rather stuffy compared to the lovely air here in Darktown,” an amused, feminine voice called out. Aerin spun around, furious at having been snuck up on. A petite human woman, with short, tousled black hair and bright blue eyes, dressed in
matte black metal armor, grinned at the tableau laid out in front of her, a quarterstaff with a wicked blade strapped to her back.

“It had to be another mage,” a deep voice drawled with distaste, coming from a handsome, lanky white haired elf that reminded her of Erival, a greatsword as long as she was casually laid across his shoulders, bright tattoos glowing softly in the dim light.

“They’re attracted to you like moths to flame, Broody,” a grinning, stocky golden blonde dwarf who sported a nose that looked like it had been broken multiple times replied.

“Hey, it’s you!” This one, a familiar, busty Rivaini rogue.

Aerin said the first thing that came to her mind. “You owe me a drink.” The pirate laughed.

“So I do, sweet thing.”

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Back in the Hanged Man, the group settled themselves around a worn table near the fire. Varric, as the dwarf had introduced himself, lay a complicated crossbow in front of him. “Nice,” Aerin appreciatively running her gaze over the contraption.

“Isn’t she though,” he grinned, chest puffed out in pride. Hawke groaned.

“Don’t get him started on it, Maker, pleeeease.”

“You love Bianca, don’t lie, Hawke. So, La Sirena? Overheard the guy you skewered. I’ve heard of you. Been up in Antiva, wreaking havoc for a couple of years, haven’t you? What brings you to Kirkwall?”

“And to me,” Hawke piped up. Realization spread across her elegant face. “Are you here to kill me? Please say no. I saw how you killed those guards like wet paper dolls. You’re not here to kill me, right?” Aerin chuckled.

“If I was, you’d already be dead.” The dark, tattooed elf glared at her. He’s protective of her. Interesting.

“So why did you kill those slavers?” he asked, suspicion still written on his handsome features.


“We were slaves in Tevinter, years ago. Surprisingly, we somehow still hold a grudge against slavers,” the younger elf answered.

“Oh?” the one called Fenris leaned back, relaxing. “I was as well. It’s why I’m here, actually. Bounty hunters tracked me here after I fled. I suspect my former master will return at some point to collect me. I’ve been waiting,” he smirked. Aerin narrower her own eyes at him. I remember something about...

“Those tattoos. Lyrium, is it? I think I’ve heard of you. Ghost, they called you.” He eyed her.

“Painful, isn’t it?” she nodded at his markings.

“Doesn’t bother me anymore. You sound like you know?”

She shrugged. “We all have scars from those fucking magisters. So Hawke. I was told you could
help us find someone. We’re looking for a Dalish elf, Merrill.”


“Dalish stuff,” Ellana said nonchalantly. “Is she around?”

“I can take you to her tomorrow,” Hawke offered. “Do you have a place to stay? How long are you staying? Do you have a job lined up?”

“We were going to find a place to stay in the alienage,” Aerin replied, slightly uncomfortable with all the questions. “As for work, whatever we can find. Not too picky.”

“I can spread the word that La Sirena is in town,” Varric suggested. “Unless you’re looking to get out of that line of work.”

“No, that’s fine. As long as it pays.” Ellana frowned.

“Aerin…”

“Aerin? Not the Aerin, are you? Andraste’s tits, Isabela, where did you say you two met?”

“I didn’t say. But it was in Denerim, during the Blight. Right before I escaped north.” Isabela stretched, lifting her mug to her lips. “Aerin helped me in a tight spot with a bunch of lackwit drunkards who wrongfully accused me of cheating at cards.”

“You were one of the Hero’s companions then?” Hawke bounced in her chair like an overly excited six year old.

“Aedan? Uh, yes. I was.” Hawke squealed. Aerin winced.

“You have to tell us stories! Oh please please please! I saw him, you know, in Lothering. He was leaving town just as Carver and I arrived. He’s so handsome. And King Alistair,” she smiled dreamily. Fenris scowled at her. “Oh, hush, I can ogle still. Not like I plan on doing anything with either of them. Unless you wanted them to join us…” the woman gave him a saucy wink. Clearing his throat, her elven lover flushed.

“Maybe later, yeah? We need to get a move on if we’re going to find a place to sleep,” Aerin shifted uneasily, unwilling to bring up those memories quite yet to these strangers, especially memories of him. When would she be able to talk freely about her old friends again? Maybe never. She unconsciously reached to make sure the ring was still around her neck. Safe, next to my amulet. “Can you point us to the alienage?”

Fenris stood up. “I can take you.” His companions regarded him with open shock. “What, I can be nice.”

“You can?” Isabela asked incredulously. “Well, damn. Butter my nipples and call me a pancake.”

“No one would ever call you a pancake,” Varric chuckled. “Hawke, on the other hand…”

“Hey!”

“Come on,” the grumpy elf muttered. “Before Hawke takes off her shirt again.” Again?
The streets were fairly deserted, only a few souls daring to brave the streets of Lowtown at night. Two guardsmen watched the trio as they hurried through the narrow alleys. As the streets grew narrower, the houses deteriorated, indicating to Aerin that they were close to the alienage. Up ahead, a massive tree could be spotted brushing the tops of the buildings. The vhenadhal. Ellana gasped as the elven neighborhood came into view. “Creators, this is where the elves live?” Fenris shrugged.

“Merrill said the same thing when she first saw it.”

“It’s so… so… and all the elves live here? Are the other cities like this?” Aerin nodded, spotting a few elves on the other side of the square.

“I’ll go ask about housing.” Fenris watched Aerin walk away.

“Your sister seems… familiar, for some reason. I can’t quite place it. Not her face, I’m quite sure I’ve never seen her before. But her.”

“She was a gladiator,” Ellana murmured softly. “Ludus Therion. She was the Victorem, back in 9:27.”

“Seraphina,” he breathed. “I heard she escaped. It’s what convinced me to try my own hand, as well. Half the magisters, including my own master, were in an uproar at her disappearance. It appears she was much desired.”

“She doesn’t like to talk about it,” the girl warned.

“Of course.” They both fell silent as Aerin walked back.

“There’s an abandoned place on the second floor there we can stay in. Thanks, Fenris, for bringing us here.”

“Of course,” he replied in his deep, rumbling voice. “Either I or Hawke will be by tomorrow to introduce you to Merrill.” With a farewell nod, the warrior loped up the stairs, back into the city.

“Let’s get some rest.” With a final depressed glance at the vhenadhal, strung with bits of paper and string and offerings, Ellana shuffled after her sister into the rickety building. Creators, please don’t let us stay here long.

Chapter End Notes

Sarcastic Hawke is my fav.
Most of the blood mages Aerin had known were the classical cackling, sinister villains she had come to expect. Grasping for more power beyond their lot in life, resorting to deals with demons to gain what was not theirs. Merrill was… like if Ellana was a blood mage. The thought made her slight queasy. The two girls did have an uncanny resemblance to each other, Merrill’s face being slightly sharper. She watched as the other Dalish walked into the room, eyes bright and animated, balancing a teetering tray of mismatched earthenware mugs and a pot of tea.

“Sorry, I didn’t expect company today! It’s sort of a mess in here. Well, it’s always a mess. Sorry, I know I’m staring. It’s just so odd, almost like looking into a mirror. I wonder if we’re related? Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Ellana blinked, then grinned at the other woman's effervescence. “It would be! I don’t think either of my parents came from Sabrae though. Maybe a grandparent? I’m not sure.” Apparently Ellana forgot that she’s talking to a flipping blood mage, Aerin scowled to herself.

“Oh, I was born in Clan Alerion. But they had too many mages, so I was given to Sabrae. My mother was from Clan Boranehn.”

“I think my mother was from Boranehn too! She came to Lavellan when my father asked her to bond with him. Maybe we are cousins!” The girls grinned and giggled happily at each other, with Aerin only shaking her head, trying to suppress the fond smile that had snuck up her lips.

“So,” Aerin cleared her throat, “your Keeper tells us you know blood magic?” The other two winced at her bluntness.

With a hesitant, guarded look, Merrill nodded. “I do. I learned a bit, from a trapped spirit. Or demon. The distinction isn’t always clear. I wanted to cleanse a shard of a mirror I had found in an old ruin. Our history speaks of the eluvian, and I wanted to try and repair the one I found. We know so little of our past…” her eyes glanced over to an ornate mirror in the corner of the room, the surface dull and misty. “Well. I tried. I didn’t have enough lyrium for the spell, but the spirit showed me how to use my blood for mana instead. And it worked! The eluvian still doesn’t do anything, although I have an idea about that. I’ll have to remember to ask Hawke later if she’ll help.”

All the talk of spirits and demons made Aerin uncomfortable. Any demons she encountered in the Fade, she automatically killed. The spirits, she banished from her small protected corner. She trusted nothing on the other side of the Veil. Sighing, she rubbed her temples, attempting to stave off the headache she felt coming. “Do you know anything about runecrafting? Specifically a rune that was cast using blood magic and lyrium?”

Merrill’s eyes widened. “That would be a powerful rune, indeed. But sadly, no. I don’t have any experience with runes.” Aerin slumped against the wall, feet stretched out in front of her. Back to square one. “But I might know someone who does. Er. Something.”

“A demon.” Aerin glared at the girl, features curling in disgust.

“Um, yes. Actually, it involves what I was going to do anyways. The… spirit that helped me at the
start. It’s still there, up on Sundermount. I wanted to go back to speak with it. We can ask it about your rune too. It has lots of ancient knowledge. It might know something.” Merrill looked up at Aerin hopefully. She just groaned.

“Aerin, maybe we should.” The older elf glanced at her sister in shock. “You’ve been searching for so long, and you’re still in so much pain. I mean, you don’t have to do anything. Just talk to it.”

“Talking to demons is usually when the problems start,” Aerin said flatly.

“Just talk to it. Please? For me?” Ellana begged. Closing her eyes, Aerin let her head fall back against the wall, exasperated breath puffing from her lungs.

“Fine. Let’s go talk to Hawke.”

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“So, let me get this straight. We’re going to find an amulet, that has a demon inside of it, so Merrill can ask it how to fix her magic mirror and you can ask it… stuff. And I’m here in case it goes south and one of you gets possessed.” Hawke huffed to herself as they ascended the mountain paths, Varric and Isabela not seeming too thrilled with the situation either. “Dealings with demons always goes south. Would you care to enlighten me as to what this ‘stuff’ is?”

Aerin refused to meet the Champion's piercing stare. “I need help in breaking a rune. It was cast using blood magic, and lyrium. All my sources indicate that I need more blood magic to dispel it. I’m trying to figure out if there’s another way, but short of going back to Tevinter, which I can’t, this might be my only options. As much as I don’t like it.”

“Why can’t you go back to Tevinter?” Varric wondered. “I’ve seen you move. Your stealth is almost imperceptible. I figure an assassin like you could easily sneak around.”

“Too risky. I have an exceptionally memorable face, apparently,” Aerin responded.

“Of course you are, I mean seriously, Varric, look at her. Any person with a heartbeat would remember those features,” Isabela chimed in.

“Fine,” Hawke muttered. “Still a horrible idea. Hey, Marethari is up ahead.” Merrill stiffened.

“Why are they still here? They’ve been camped here for years, they should have moved on ages ago.” Ellana’s curious face met her sister's. Their own clan had never stayed in any one spot for more than six or seven months, at most.

“Keeper. Your First is going to summon a demon to get advice about her mirror,” Hawke stated without preamble, approaching the older woman. Merrill ducked her face down to hide her glare.

“I had hoped you would succeed where I failed, Hawke,” Marethari replied, sadness filling her eyes. “I will do what I can to buy you time. Talk to her. Save her from this.” With that cryptic remark, the Keeper strode briskly away.

“Did you really have to say it like that?” the First muttered.

“Yes. Yes, I did,” Hawke grunted. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

***

“Fucking spiders. Why does it always have to be spiders,” Aerin grumbled, watching Hawke set
the last of them on fire. “I didn’t realize you were a mage as well.”

The human grinned. “You mean, you and I may be the only mages in Thedas who don’t wear robes?” Aerin smiled.

“Oh, we should stop here!” Ellana called back to them. “It’s a shrine to Mythal.”

Merrill nodded in agreement. “It would be wise to pay our respects.” The two girls moved towards the shrine.

“You’re not going as well?” Varric asked.

“I’m not Dalish,” Aerin answered, tone unwilling to entertain more questions.

“Hmm. Okay, Lightning,” he conceded. She raised her eyebrow in question.

“Nickname,” he affirmed. “It’s a good one, too. All violent and sparky and fast.” Aerin just shrugged and kept on walking.

A dark cave welcomed them into its musty depths, the smell of mold and dust enveloping their senses. “Are you sure you want to do this, kitten?” Isabela murmured uneasily. “It’s not too late to turn back.”

“I’ve sacrificed too much to just walk away,” Merrill’s voice was firm and determined. Isabela sighed.

“What is this place?” Hawke breathed. “It feels… wrong.”

“Looks like ancient elvhen ruins,” Ellana murmured. “Those arches, there. I’ve seen them before.” Descending a staircase, they caught a glimpse of strange looking stone idol, a humanoid figure with its legs crossed, two pairs of arms, and a grotesque face. “Why are candles already lit here?”

“No! The spirit, it’s… gone. It feels empty here. He couldn’t have freed himself, the power required… No one else could have set him loose either. Without doing something terribly wrong.” Merrill’s face was horrified, her eyes wide.

“It couldn’t have just vanished,” Hawke reassured. “We’ll track it down.”

“I’m sorry, da’len.” The group whirled around, only to see Marethari slowly approaching them.

“Keeper, what have you done?” Merrill whispered, hands clutched against her chest.

“The demon’s plan was always for you to complete the mirror. It would have used it to escape… into you. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“You stopped it?” Hawke jerked back in surprise.

“But not yet. It’s still here.” Marethari turned away, staring at the cavern walls. “I couldn’t fight it in the Fade where it was trapped. And I couldn’t banish it without making it stronger. So. I made myself its prison. Kill me, and Merrill is safe.” Aerin’s mouth dropped, Ellana and Isabela gasping. Varric just shook his head sadly.

“No!” Merrill buried her face in her hands. “You can’t ask- I won’t do this!” Heartbreak consumed her face, her voice quavering with unshed tears.

The Keeper smiled sadly. “You always knew blood magic had a price. I have chosen to pay it for
you. Dareth shiral.” She bowed, then bent at the waist as an inhuman scream emanated from her slight form. Vivid, intense light blazed along her limbs, blinding them all for a brief moment. When they opened their eyes…


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Aerin stared sullenly into the flickering fire, sitting on the edge of a floral couch, replaying the day’s events over in her mind. The Keeper, sacrificing herself to keep Merrill safe. Hawke, telling the clan their Keeper turned into a demon. The elves, charging them in their agony and fury. Varric, shooting Ineria in the chest, her body falling backwards, graceful even in death. Aerin, stabbing Terath in his stomach, his eyes glaring hatefully at hers, viciously cursing her name. Ellana and Merrill, standing in shock together, away from the carnage and devastation. The clan that had been so kind to them… all dead. *This is the price blood magic demands. I won’t follow this path any longer. If there’s no other way, I’ll die an elf rather than put anyone through that ever again.* A hand rested on her shoulder.

“Supper’s ready if you want anything. Orana is a really good cook,” Hawke replied. It was just the two of them in her estate, save her dwarf manservant and his son, whose exclamations of ‘enchantment!’ seemed oddly familiar. Ellana had chosen to stay with Merrill in her alienage home, offering what comfort she could to the woman. Aerin couldn’t understand why her sister would choose to stay around that- that thing.

“She’s family. And she's hurting, too,” Ellana had replied simply. Wearily sighing as she stood up, the elf followed the Champion into the dining room.

“Wow. It’s so… fancy in here,” Aerin took in the rich tapestries on the walls, the fine linens, the decorative silver along the side table.

“My mother’s doing, obviously,” Hawke smiled fondly at the art gracing the walls. “She was always a noble at heart.”

“Has she passed?” Aerin asked softly.

The other woman slowly nodded, pouring two full glasses of whiskey, warm honeyed depths beckoning. “She was killed a couple years ago, when I was busy,” she spat the word bitterly, “dealing with the Qunari. A blood mage took her. My sister died when we were escaping Lothering. Our father several years before that. All I have is my brother, Carver. He’s a Grey Warden now.” Aerin surprised both of them by reaching out to grab Hawke’s hand, giving it a comforting squeeze.

“I’m sorry. I lost my parents as well, when I was 11, right before the slavers took me. Ellana is all I have. I left her with the Dalish when I went to Ferelden to stop the Blight, and then again when I ran off to Antiva and Rivain. I should have… Well. She’s still here, at any rate.” Aerin took a long pull of the liquor. “It’s a wonder you haven’t broken yet.”

“My friends,” she replied with great warmth in her voice. “Fenris, Varric, Isabela, Aveline and Anders- you haven’t met the last two yet, she’s the captain of the guard now and he’s another apostate- and even Merrill. They kept me sane all these years. Cared for me when I couldn’t do it myself. I’d be lost without them.” *Lost.* Being with Hawke and her companions brought back all her memories of Aedan and the rag tag bunch he had gathered to defend Ferelden, a sense of home and belonging. Alistair. She still missed him, so much that the pain threatened to suffocate her if she dwelled on it. “You look like you know what I’m talking about.”
Blinking back the tears that threatened to fall, Aerin smiled. “I… had friends like that once. After our mission was complete, we were scattered. I don’t really know where half of them are now.”

“Duty,” Hawke murmured, staring into her whiskey as if the answers to her problems were buried deep inside. “Come on. Let’s eat, get drunk, and tell each other silly stories. I’m overdue for a girl’s night in, aren’t you?” Taken aback by the human’s offer of friendship, she just stared and blinked. Hawke smiled sadly. “You and I… neither of us have had it easy. I think we both probably know enough of what’s it’s like to feel like you’re losing yourself to the bigger picture. Being turned into an instrument of death. What to do? Except drink.” She held out the bottle and waved it around. Laughing, Aerin nodded.

“Alright, Hawke. Girl’s night it is.”

***

Aerin woke up in a large feather bed, covered in a pale lavender duvet, staring at a painted ceiling, head pounding and throat feeling like she had swallowed a bucket of rusty nails. Groggily, she pushed herself up. She was… naked. A snore to her left startled her completely awake. Hawke. Also naked. What on earth did we do?

Aerin wracked her brain, trying to figure out what had led to her current predicament.

“Oh, this is just precious.” Aerin pulled the sheets up over her, staring in horror as Fenris and Isabela strolled, smirking into the room. “And no one invited me for naked drunky times? Tsk tsk.”

“This isn’t- I mean, we didn’t- I don’t think, at least that… Oh gods.” Flopping back onto the bed, she pulled the covers the rest of the way up, praying for the mattress to swallow her whole. 

Fenris chuckled. Damn, that man has a sexy voice. She resisted the shiver that tickled up her spine.

“I’m sure you didn’t. This is normal when Hawke drinks. That’s why she usually only drinks at home now.” Aerin groaned in relief.

“Guh wha…?” The raven haired woman sat up, blearily blinking at her visitors. “Oh, hey guys. Where’s Aerin?” A second passed, then the blankets were viciously ripped off of the elf, who yelped in consternation. “Wakey wakey, Serrah Sirena!”

“How the fuck are you this cheerful this early after drinking?” she grumbled.

“It’s 1 in the afternoon, Aerin.” Fenris’ dry tone cut in. She groaned again. A glass of water was shoved in her vision, as Isabela took the opportunity to slowly look over her nude body, grinning like a madwoman.

“I want in next time Hawke.”

Grumbling about whiskey and Hawke and Rivainis, Aerin searched around for her clothes, as Isabela handed an envelope over. “Hawke, you got a letter this morning. About those mine you co-own.” It was Hawke’s turn to groan.

“Give it here.” Quickly scanning the parchment, she threw it to the side and began throwing on clothes and armor. “Trouble. Dead bodies coming back from the Bone Pit.”


“It’s the name of the mine,” Hawke sighed. “Will you come with us? I could use another warrior assassin apostate on my side. I can send Orana to Ellana so that she knows you’re with us.”
“Sure, just as soon as… Hawke, are my smalls on the chandelier? Why are my smalls on the chandelier?”

***

A month later, nursing a bruised rib and a newly healed arm from another ‘adventure’, Aerin leaned back, observing the people gathered around the table. It was just as an odd assortment as Aedan’s companions had been. But these people had been together longer. The ties that bound them were even more obvious, as where the schisms that were slowly tearing them apart. Each one of them lay at an opposite end of the spectrum- one a blood mage, another who struggled to free the mages, another who hated all magic but was in love with a mage, a guard captain who was struggling to keep her city together, an author, a landlocked pirate- it was the most unlikely group that Aerin could have ever imagined, but here they were, contentedly playing wicked grace, teasing each other mercilessly like one big… family. Family. That’s what they were. And they had welcomed Ellana and Aerin into their circle.

“I see the card sticking out of your shirt, Isabela. And I’ve seen your breasts enough, it’s not really as much of a distraction anymore as you think it is,” Anders raised an eyebrow, amused. Isabela pouted.

Aerin and Ellana had decided to stay, for the winter at least, the older girl deciding to resume her contract jobs to earn a living. The Vinmarks would be covered in snow now, making the trek back to Lavellan perilous. Not to mention both girls hated the cold with a passion. So the new year had rolled around, everyone coming together to celebrate First Day together in Hawke’s home. Ellana had elected to move in with Merrill, surprising Aerin. The older elf had declined, as the bubbly blood mage still made her wary. Instead, Hawke had offered her a spare bedroom, which Aerin had gladly accepted, excited that, for the first time since she had arrived in Thedas, she had an actual bed to herself and her own washroom. It was a luxurious dream. Bit by bit, by the grace of her new friends, she finally began to heal.

A soft meow distracted her from her rambling thoughts. Ellana and Merrill had gotten Anders a kitten for Satinalia. The mage had been absolutely delighted, although concerned that the kitten would get sick or eaten in Darktown, so it was living here with Hawke and Aerin for now. Smiling, she picked up the creature and let it snuggle into her lap. Seeing Anders brought up a lot of memories. She certainly hadn’t expected him to be the mage that Hawke was telling her about. He had changed much over the years as well, his hair longer, face more worn, the joking, flippant nature tempered by the spirit that resided inside of him. Abomination, her mind whispered. Yes. But still Anders somehow as well. The notion was rather unsettling.

Aveline sighed, pushing herself away. “Varric, you ass. I know you cheated. Well, I’m out.” She tossed a handful of cards on the table, getting up to pour herself another drink.

“This is really nice,” Merrill chirped. “Getting everyone together. It’s so rare we get to do this anymore.”

“With what all the blood mages and gangs and Qunari and bandits and crazed templars and-”

“We get the point, Hawke,” Varric laughed. “It’s been a really shitty couple of years, yeah? Can only go up from here though.”

“You say that now,” Aveline groaned. “Stop tempting fate.”

“Speaking of tempting fate and handsome dwarves, Hawke, I need your help with something.”
“Who said anything about Bodahn? When don’t you need my help,” she replied sarcastically.

“When I’m wiping my ass. I think. Anyways, remember that Hightown estate Bartrand barricaded himself in? Well, since he’s in the sanitarium now, I’ve been trying to sell the place. A minor noble bought place, sight unseen. But now they say the place is… haunted.”

“Must be some Fade shit,” Hawke mused, turning sideways in her chair to drape her legs over the side. “All the crap that happened there must have weakened the Veil.”

“Maker, I hope not,” Varric slumped in his chair. “I can’t fix the Veil through applied use of force. They’ve noticed small things, voices whispering in the walls, things moving on their own. My hope is it’s some relic Bartrand brought back from the Deep Roads. We smash it, things go back to normal.”

“Uggggh,” she groaned. “When will it ever stop?”


“That, Lightning, is a long story. It started with our expedition to the Deep Roads about 5 years ago.”

Chapter End Notes

NEW KITTY FOR ANDERS
“Got a letter from Orsino. Meredith is doing stupid shit again, and he wants me to come help.”

“What’s she done this time?” Aerin slid down the staircase banister to where a scowling Hawke stood, glaring at a letter as if it had offended her personally.

“Locked the mages in their rooms, restricted Orsino to the courtyard. Let’s go. I’ll stop to get Varric and Isabela. Probably the safest options.”

“Least opinionated on this situation at least,” Aerin snorted.

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“Hey, Izzy. How did you manage to wreck your ship, anyways? Oh, mighty Pirate Queen?”

Isabela tossed her dark curls over a bare shoulder. “I was drunk. I thought the reefs around the Wounded Coast were made of candy.”

“Seems plausible.”

“And a demon told me to do it. It bet me sixty sovereigns and a bottle of port.” Aerin burst into laughter, ignoring the stares she received from the impassable templars as the group strolled into the Gallows. She tried to ignore the prickles on the back of her neck, every sense in her body screaming at her not to be here. Massive bronze Tevinter statues, of despairing slaves, loomed over her, almost as if they would drop down on top of her, trapping her here forever in this mage’s hell. She swallowed, her earlier mirth fading fast.

“Thank you for coming, Champion,” a slim, older elf standing in a spacious, tidy office gave them a slight bow. First Enchanter Orsino. He’s taller than I imagined. “I have word that… I know some of my people are using dangerous means to oppose Meredith, but I cannot seek the templars’ aid without making every mage a target. All I know is that numerous mages have left the Circle at night, sometimes for days at a time. I’d rather not follow the Knight-Commander by leaping to the worst possible conclusion, but the idea of blood magic has crossed my mind. I’ve heard rumors of a meeting tonight, in Hightown. I would go myself, but should I leave the tower without permission, Meredith would call it proof of my involvement.”

“So… I shouldn’t slit my wrists and dance naked under the moonlight to just fit in?” Hawke smirked. Aerin coughed to cover up the laugh that got caught in her throat.

Orsino sighed, used to her flippant nature. “Just learn the nature of this meeting. You needn’t interrupt unless you find proof of something sinister. I pray not, or Meredith will have what she needs to justify the Rite of Annulment.”

As they left the Gallows, Aerin turned to her companions. “Are they really considering the Rite of Annulment?” Hawke glowered.

“The Knight-Commander is paranoid. And in her paranoia, she has tightened a noose around the mages who live here, until they are made Tranquil for the slightest offense. The mages are terrified, and when people get scared, they do stupid things.”
“Like blood magic.”

“Yep. Looks like we’re going to Hightown tonight.”

***

“Bring anyone who claims to be against her to Gardibali’s warehouse at night. We must ensure their loyalty, lest Meredith discover us before we are ready,” Aerin read. “Strange. These mages and templars were working together.” She tossed the note to Hawke.

“Of course they hold their meetings in a warehouse by the docks. Doesn’t anyone just go there to have sex anymore?” Isabela remarked.

“All that dirt and Maker-knows-what-else though,” Hawke shivered. “I don’t want any of that near my lady bits.” The walk to the docks took almost a full hour, between try to duck guard patrols, fighting off a gang ambush, and trying to keep to the shadows, which was apparently impossible for some.

“Venhedis, you are so noisy, Hawke,” Aerin hissed. “I need to find you leather armor. You’re a walking tin can in that.” The woman just stuck out her tongue as they crouched behind a side door for a city guardsman to pass. Sliding back out onto the streets, the group crept along the shadows, searching the signs for the correct warehouse. “Why can’t the guards see us by the way?”

“Aveline will yell at me,” Hawke said. “All of my ‘skulking about in unsavory places’. Pfft. Here it is.”

The warehouse was mostly empty, with only a few barrels and crates stacked hapzardly. Up ahead, down a set of rickety stairs, a circle mage was speaking with wild gestures, talking to a templar of all things. The templar’s eyes widened in recognition at Hawke, and promptly turned heel and ran off as more mages and templars filed out of the side halls to take his place.

“Well, shit.” Varric loaded his crossbow. “Don’t suppose they’ll just stop and… talk? Like normal people? No?”

“At least the templars can’t Silence us with all their mage allies,” Aerin grinned, gathering her mana into a wide lightning storm. Stretching her hand out, bright purple streaks lanced out from mage to mage, feeding off their mana, draining them dry.

“Ooh, that’s a nifty spell,” Hawke said appreciatively. “Teach me that one later, yeah?” Spinning her staff overhead, she brought down the blade hard into the neck of a fallen templar. Rushing out of stealth, Isabela dropped from the upstairs balcony onto the back of an exposed mage, dropping him like a sack of potatoes. With a final inferno spell, all the mages and templars laid defeated, unconscious or dead on the packed dirt floor. “Now where did Keran go…”

“I told them not to do it, I swear!” the templar from earlier jogged out of hiding. Keran, I assume.

“If I knew you were the one they were talking about, I’d have warned you. I don’t hold with kidnapping. Not after what I went through.”

“What are you talking about,” Hawke snapped.

“They said someone was spying, we needed leverage, someone they cared about. As a hostage,” Keran answered, defeated. “They took some elf, from Tevinter. He took out four men before they subdued him.” Aerin hissed, clenching her fists as she took a menacing step towards the templar.

“You bastards will pay if one of you hurt him,” Hawke snarled through gritted teeth, blue blue eyes
“Where is he?”

“The ruins on the Wounded Coast. We have a… base, there. They should have just talked you. You’re a reasonable person. You have to see how dangerous Meredith is. Thrask says she will cause open war with the mages if we don’t take her down. He’s the one who brought us together. He’s been slowly teaching us, one mage, one templar at a time, that we don’t have to hate each other. For the last six years.”

“You realize we’re on the same side here?” Hawke glared.

Keran sighed. “Then talk to Ser Thrask. I promise you, Meredith is the only one we’re trying to harm.”

Hawke turned to her friends, rage etched in every line of her body. “Let’s go. Now.”

***

“Broody is probably fine, Hawke. Something like this can’t bring that man down.” Varric’s multiple attempts at reassuring Hawke had all failed. She hadn’t said a word as they marched out of the city, half jogging the whole way to the Storm Coast. Clouds obstructed most of the sun, casting a gray light over the desolate, sandy beaches. Movement up ahead caught their eye.

“Grab something sharp and pointy,” Varric yelled back, “we’ve got company!”

_Corpses. Fuck._ “Have I ever mentioned how much I detest the undead?” Aerin threw a fireball at an approaching decaying warrior.

“Does anyone actually like them?” Isabela wondered, unsheathing her twin daggers before disappearing in a cloud of smoke.

“Found them!” Hawke pointed with her staff, sending a sweep of flame hurtling toward the templar and mage at the end of the path. Aerin raced toward the templar, parrying his strike, gritting her teeth when her returning blow landed on his shield, the impact jarring her skull. She pulled her mana in, shaping it into a swirling inferno, and flung it at the templar, melting his armor to his skin. To her right, the mage fell to the ground, twitching, skin charred from the pulse of lightning that had coursed through his body.

“Samson?” Hawke glared at the approaching man.

“Who’s Samson,” Aerin whispered to Isabela.

“Some former templar, banished from the Order for passing notes between a mage and his sweetheart. Mage was made Tranquil, Samson thrown out. He’s been helping mages escape the Circle since,” the pirate whispered back.

“Your friends are right, Samson. With Meredith gone, Kirkwall can be at peace again,” Hawke affirmed.

“I’d cheer to see her shipped off to Val Royeaux. I just don’t have to stomach to turn against all that’s right and natural to do it,” Samson replied, grimacing. _Yay. More blood magic._ Aerin sighed. _This place is worse than that stupid werewolf temple._

“Fenris!” Hawke gasped. “Oh, Maker.” She sprinted to where the elf lay, sprawled unconsciously across the sand.
“I suppose it was too much to hope that you wouldn’t come here. Though I can’t understand why
you’d side with Meredith now. You showed me we could stand up to her, when I realized you
risked your life lying to protect those mages… Please, Hawke. I have nothing but respect for you.
It’s Meredith we must see gone.” A ginger bearded templar slowly approached, laugh lines drawn
tense in the creases of his eyes, pleading with Hawke. **Fools. Why can’t they see we’re all on the
same side?**

“We’re on the same side, Ser Thrask. But I take… issue with your methods,” Hawke pointedly
stared at her lover, head lolling to the side, eyes firmly shut.

“I should have known…” the templar sighed. “I apologize for any distress I caused you or your
friends.” *He* kidnaps *Fenris and is just all, ‘I’m sorry?’ *Is he serious?* Aerin scowled at the templar
and the mages behind him. “Let the hostage go.”

“No!” a female mage shouted. “The elf dies. And the Champion.” Aerin growled and stepped
forward.

“Be very, very careful about how you proceed, shem.”

“Stand down, Grace!” Ser Thrask demanded. “We will not kill an innocent to achieve our ends, or
else we are no better than Meredith.”

“What do I care for Meredith? I’m here for the Champion,” Grace’s face was drawn into a vicious
snarl.

“Get in line,” Hawke quipped.

“You killed the best man I ever knew. But I learned all he had to teach.”

“Don’t tell me. Blood magic, right?” Varric groaned. "Andraste's tits, why couldn't he have taught
you something, like cupcake decorating? Nug herding? Mushroom farming?"

“Ooh, I like cupcakes.” Isabela crossed her arms, smirking, a tinge of exasperation coloring her
stance.

Raising her staff, Grace suddenly stabbed herself in the stomach, a miasma of red rising up out of
the wound and enveloping her body. Aerin studied the spell as it unfolded. *Shit, it’s all too
convoluted for me to unravel. Guess it’s just the old fashioned way then.* Grabbing control of
Thrask’s body, the blood mage flung him into the air, crumpling his armor to pierce his heart, and
slammed him into the ground.

“No!” Hawke screamed. “DAMMIT!” The clearing quickly became filled with a flurry of arrow
and fireballs, screams and blood. Gritting her teeth, Aerin did what she could, ducking in and out of
the magic and weapons and gore, but it was hard to focus her magic in such tight quarters. *Maybe
it’s time to get a staff? Ugh. Staff.* Returning to her trusted swords, she deflected an ice lance,
slicing up and through a mage’s robes into the unprotected skin below. The roar of an abomination
echoed from behind her. *Fuck this shit.* Drawing her fire to her, she poured all of her considerable
mana into the spell, watching the flames swirl around the demon, immolating it into a pile of ash
within seconds.

“Andraste’s knickerweasels,” Varric gasped. “Just how powerful are you, Lightning?”

“Knickerweasels?” she ignored the question. “Fuck kind of a curse is that?”

“Blondie,” the dwarf shrugged. “He’s got some good ones.”
“Why is that kid slicing his arm? Aren’t we done with this shit yet?” Aerin stomped toward the mage, hovering over Fenris’ body. “Oh.” The magic binding Hawke’s lover loosened, and the elf stood up wearily.

The prison was made with blood magic. And could only be undone with the same. She touched the chain that her amulet was looped through. So I was right. It can only be broken with blood magic. If I had to bet, the same amount that went into creating it. Four lives worth. The realization hit her like a ton of bricks to her gut. I’ll never be free. I’ll never be me again. She hit the ground, knees sinking in the soft sand, gasping for breath. Abruptly, her skin felt even tighter, her lungs constricting further, like a giant slab of rock was slowly compressing her body, burying her alive. Her head felt light, vision blurred. She heard a voice calling to her, but it was so very far away, as if she were underwater. She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t-

A slap rebounded across her face, the sharp sting jolting her back to the present. Gasping, she shot up. Hawke stood over her, trying not to panic. “Aerin? Talk to me. What’s wrong? Are you hurt?” Aerin shook her head to try and clear it.

“Serrah? Do you need assistance?” A smooth baritone interrupted her panic attack, a voice from somewhere far in her past. She raised her face, only to have two deep set, warm, amber eyes staring back at her. A high, elegant nose over full, soft looking lips. Curly locks of golden blonde hair. He was concerned, and gorgeous, and… the templar from Kinloch. The one who had been trapped and tortured. The one who begged Aedan to kill all the mages. He was older, face lined with stress, and slightly gaunt, but he was here. Well, this is perfect then. Aerin realized she was gaping. Closing her mouth, she shook her head, not trusting her voice. He offered her a hand with a wry smile. Tentatively grasping it, he pulled her effortlessly to her feet. Blushing, she stepped behind Hawke in a futile attempt to hide, ignoring the eyebrow her friend raised at her. The templar turned back to Hawke. “Is there any recommendation you would have me bring to Meredith, Serrah Hawke?”

She nodded. “Tell her, if you killed every man who doubted Meredith, Kirkwall would be a ghost town.”

“You think that reason enough to spare blood mages and their willing dupes?” He lowered his head and sighed. “Perhaps some of them might still be saved. Fine. Let’s go, men.” With a final glance at Aerin, who was noticeably not looking at him, he motioned to his templars, dragging their prisoners back to the Gallows.

“So… you and Knight-Captain Cullen have something going on?” Isabela grinned. “I get it, I really do. Got to love a man in uniform. And he is quite handsome.”

“And beyond uptight,” Varric reminded them.

“The tightly wound ones are the most fun in bed,” Isabela winked. “Would you know, Aerin?”

“Nope. Nope, nope, nope. I just remembered him, that’s all. He’s Knight-Captain now? He was at Kinloch when we were there during the Blight.”

“The Ferelden Circle that fell, right? Is that why he’s so… so… suspicious? Mage hating? Ser ‘mages cannot be treated people’?”

“He said that?”

Varric scratched his chin. “He did. Something about, ‘they can’t be treated like us, they are weapons with the power to light a city on fire in a fit of pique’.”

Aerin sighed. “He was tortured. For days, maybe longer. Blood mages and abominations killed
almost everyone in there, templar and mage alike. The carnage was so bad, I threw up. And Aedan. These damn circles… fucking templars, blood mages, the lot of them.” She threw a rock as hard as she could into the distance. “You okay, Fen?”

He nodded, rubbing his head. “Better now. I should not have let them take me.”

“Shit happens,” Hawke shrugged. “Come on, I need a drink. Or twelve.”

“Actually,” Fenris hedged, “I need to go to the Hanged Man anyways.” Everyone looked at him in surprise. Broody, as Varric so aptly had named him, rarely sought out the loud, raucous tavern. “My sister. I finally got a letter to her, she was in Minrathous. Sent her coin enough to come visit. She’s there, at the tavern, for the next week at least. But I’m concerned in’s a trap. Would you come with me? Just in case?”

“You’re buying the first round if shit goes south.”

“When does it not?”

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“I expected her to have white hair,” Varric whispered to Aerin, who nodded in agreement.

“It is a trap!” Hawke glared at Fenris- no, Leto?- with frustration.

“Ah, my little Fenris. Predictable as always.” The smooth cultured tone seized Aerin’s insides in jagged barbed wire. Fenris backed away from his sister, shaking his head, as a graying magister in charcoal gray slashed with blood red robes descended the stairs, as if he were in his own mansion and not some filthy slum tavern.

“You led him here!” The hurt and accusation laced Fenris’ deep baritone, as his sister guilty lowered her bright, ginger head. “I never wanted these filthy markings, Danarius, but I won’t let you kill me to get to them!”

The magister laughed. “Oh, how little you know my pet. This is your new master, then? The Champion of Kirkwall?” An overwhelming urge overcame Aerin, every muscle screaming at her to unsheathe her sword, plunge the blade deep into his heart, watch the light fade from his hateful eyes. Fenris’ rictus of abhorrence matched her own, lips curved into a feral snarl. His tattoos began to glow, bright lyrium blue.

“I’m going to wipe that smirk off your face,” Aerin growled. Danarius eyes narrowed in recognition.

“Well, if it isn’t Seraphina, Victorem of Minrathous. Escaped slave, and murderer. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that the two of you found each other. Will you kill me, as you killed your master, slave?” She gave him her most innocent smile.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Cocking an eyebrow at her, he turned back to Fenris.

“You weren’t always this way, Fenris. Once upon a time you had affection for me.”

“Unfortunately for you, this story doesn’t have a happy ending. Fenris is his own man.” Hawke leveled her staff at the magister. “It ends here, Tevinter.” With a roar, Fenris swung his greatsword up off his back, muscles bulging as he handled the massive weapon with ease. The guards with Danarius sprung to action as the rest of the bar’s patrons screamed and ducked for cover around the
“Fasta vass!” Danarius hissed, slicing his arm with a sharp dagger. From the blood, a fiery rage demon broke through, several lesser shades clinging to it’s trail. Aerin grinned, delighted with this chance to help bring a magister to his knees. Her swords winked in the flickering lantern lights, ruby red braid swinging around her shoulders, blood splattering her armor in glistening droplets as she bathed her blades in the blood of the enemies, slaying them, one by one.

In her vision’s periphery, she spied Fenris’s old master trying to sneak away in the chaos. Chuckling to herself, she disappeared in a haze, silently creeping until she was standing just inches away from his back, leaned in and whispered, “Boo.” As he yelped in shock, turning to face her, Aerin pummeled him to the ground, and drove her dagger deep into his thigh, pinning him to the ground. Smiling at her handiwork, watching the man writhe in agony, she called over her shoulder, “Fenris! Got you a present!” The other elf stalked toward the cowering magister, a predator coming in for the kill. Grabbing his throat, he jerked the man upright, ripping his thigh through the knife that was left embedded in the wood, reveling in the ear piercing screams of pain.

“You are no longer my master.” And with that, Fenris’ tattoos glowing once more. He reached into Danarius’ chest, hands a violent blur, and ripped out his heart, still beating in his hand, once, twice, then shuddered into death. Flinging the magister’s body and heart to the side, the newly free elf turned towards his sister, hands still dripping with blood, watching as she recoiled in terror.

“I had no choice, Leto. He was going to take me as his apprentice, make me a magister. You have no idea what I went through, what I had to do after Mother died. This was my only chance!” she begged.

“You sold out your own brother just for power?! Now you have no chance at all.” His face was torn in rage and disbelief as he stormed toward her, arm reaching for her throat.

“Fenris, stop! She’s your family. She’s just as much a victim as you are,” Hawke cried.

“She’ll go back to the Imperium. She’ll tell the magisters what happened to Danarius, and they will come after him,” Aerin murmured softly. “He will never be free, never be safe.” Tears slowly fell down Hawke’s face as she nodded.

Fenris’ head fell forward in exhaustion as he lowered his hand. “I would have given you everything,” he muttered harshly, defeat lacing his tone. Glowing yet again, he reached into his sister’s chest, and almost gently, clenched her heart and and pulled, staring as her body crumpled to the floor. “I am alone.”

“You’re not alone,” Hawke whispered, sidling up to her lover. “I’m here. I’ll always be here. And you have friends. You are not alone, Fenris.” He looked up at her, eyes sliding over at Aerin and Varric, smiling slightly.

The dwarf sighed. “Damn. Well, how about those twelve drinks now?”

Chapter End Notes

Hi Cullen! *waves* *drools*
To Numb the Pain

Chapter Notes

Bonus chapter today because I can't restrain myself. And also, I hit 100 kudos on this fic, which is huge for me. Aaaaand, I reached 200,000 words so far, so expect updates for forever, probably. This is the first story I've ever written, besides my emo poetry in high school and a few short stories in middle school, so I'm pretty excited. Thank you to everyone's who's read, kudo'd, and commented so far. You guys give me life. So just for you, a NSFW chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’ve got a present for youuu,” Hawke sang out as she pranced into the kitchen where a barely responsive Aerin sat on a countertop, sleepy face in a cup of peppermint tea.

“If it’s not chocolate or a contract on that fucking merchant in Hightown who keeps calling me babydoll, I don’t want it.”

“Oh come on, you’ll love it. I have to go to the Keep. You're coming with. Wear something pretty. Let’s go.”

“I swear Hawke, if you’re trying to set me up with another fucking guard or noble or bandit, I will shank you.”

“I’m not! I swear!” she giggled. “Hurry up! Aveline and Anders are meeting us there.” Dragging herself upstairs to change, Aerin followed the overly excited Champion out into the streets, grumbling the whole time, even after Anders met up with them at the edge of Hightown.

“Hawke put hot sauce in your tea again?”

“Not this time,” Aerin mumbled. “She’s way too happy about some surprise she has for me, and I’m suspicious and scared. She keeps insisting I’ll love it, but tell me, Anders, when have I ever loved anything she ‘gave’ me?”

The blonde mage cocked his head to the side, thinking. “There were those little hamsters she got you.”

“She put them in my bed. My sheets were filthy, and one died under the dresser, stinking up the room for a week.”

“The surprise picnic and beach day on the coast?”

“She forgot to pack the food. And we were attacked by Tal-Vashoth.”

“Umm…”

“For fuck’s sake, this time it’s amazing and you will love me for forever. Now shut up and let’s go. Aveline, over here!”

Warily glancing around the Viscount’s Keep, she first heard Meredith’s harsh tone, snapping at
some poor, hapless fool.

“You declare your Circle of Magi free, as if it were your right to do so, and thus stir up every mage outside of your kingdom. What other answer did you expect, Your Majesty?” 

“A ‘maybe’ might have been nice.”

Aerin froze mid stride. That voice. That sarcastic, smart ass voice. Not here, not now, he can’t-sucking in a breath, she looked up. Her stomach dropped as heart leapt into her throat. World spinning, she reached out a hand, Anders catching her before she fainted. She didn’t hear him asking if she was okay. She didn’t hear Meredith’s response. Her body was paralyzed, eyes drinking in every line of the man in fancy plate armor in front of her. His voice was the same, hair a bit longer, but still perfectly coiffed. His face was not the hungry, gaunt one she remembered. This man was healthier, well fed, slightly softer, but just as broad, strength visible on every square inch of his tall frame. His expression was the same, she thought with a slight smile, as when he used to argue with Morrigan.

“Alistair.” Her voice was low, trembling, and softer than a prayer. Yanking herself back to the present, she panicked, spinning on her heel and running off to the side of the hall, throwing herself behind a column just as Meredith stormed off and the king turned towards them.

“Well, that was awkward. Did someone just… run by? I swear I saw someone.” Alistair glanced over to where Aerin stood, flattened against the wall.

“Your Majesty, how do you do,” Hawke bowed.

“I’ve been better. Manlier, too.” A hysterical giggle rose into Aerin’s throat. He’s still the same.

“Weren’t you a Grey Warden once?” Anders asked.

“That’s the rumor. Weren’t you…?” Alistair squinted.

“That’s the rumor.” Oh for fuck’s sake, Ali, you met Anders. You told Aedan to conscript him, you gorgeous idiot.

“Your Majesty. It’s an honor to meet you. I fought at Ostagar.” Aveline. I didn’t know she was there, too. Closing her eyes, Aerin let the familiar sound of his voice wash over her. She felt warm, for the first time in years. Hearing his chuckle, she began to feel hope rising up within her. Stop it. I will never break this binding. Any future I might have secretly harbored, is dead now.

“I brought one of your former companions with me as well, but she seems to have run off.”

“Hawke. She might not want to be here.”

“Is it Morrigan? If it is, I can guarantee she doesn’t want to see me.”

“No, it’s- ow! Aveline!”

“Not Morrigan. It’s a she? Hmm... I know it’s not Leliana, she just sent me a letter from Val Royeaux. Wynne? No, she wouldn’t have run. I don’t even think she can run anymore. So… Maker.” He stared at Hawke, stunned. “Aerin?! Aerin!” His voice rang out through the hall, stunning everyone within into silence.

“Dammit, Hawke,” Aveline’s voice sighed.
“What? I thought it would be nice! How was I supposed to know?”

“Aerin!” His voice was getting closer. Swallowing, she gathered her nerves, all one of them left, and stepped out.

“Hello, Alistair.” He jerked back, as if lightning had arced through his body. Wide, pale blue eyes devoured her whole. Her blood red hair was longer, pulled back into her typical braid. The same cobalt blue and burnished gold eyes that bored into his soul. A new scar dotted the edge of her cheek. She looked… exhausted. Drained. And yet, still the most beautiful thing he had ever laid eyes on.

Hesitantly, with lurching steps, he stumbled up to her. “Aerin,” he whispered. Reaching out a hand, he glared at his leather gloves, quickly ripping them off, tossing them carelessly to the floor. He needed to feel her skin under his, to convince himself she was real. He grabbed her hands, and she flinched. Oh. Dropping her hands like they burned him, he opened his mouth to apologize, but she frowned at herself, then reached down to pick his hands back up, her slender hands cradled around his. His chest felt like it would explode. “You’re alive. And safe. And here, of all places. Where have you been?”


“Sweet Maker. I- is it- may I hug you?” his eyes hopefully held hers. She gave a shaky nod, unable to trust her voice. Slowly, carefully, he pulled her into his arms, feeling her body click perfectly into place. After all these years… “Aerin, my lo-” Her hand swiftly covered his mouth.

“Don’t, Alistair, please,” her voice trembled. “I.. I can’t- You’ll have to leave, and I’ll have to stay, and we…”

“Come back with me. To Ferelden. Please,” he begged. Both of them were completely oblivious of the people still in the busy Keep, of Teagan and Hawke that were desperately trying to give them space and listen in and the same time. Alistair knew if anyone heard him pleading with an elf, he’d be considered weak. Well, he was weak. Where this tiny woman was concerned, he would always be weak. He needed her back, she was as vital to his body as water itself. These past six years, he had done his duty, but lived as an empty shell, missing his heart and half of his soul. Couldn’t she see that?

I need her. I know she needs me. Does she need me? Found someone else? Pulling back, he stared intently in her eyes, afraid of her response. “Do you... still love me?” he whispered hoarsely.

Her eyes widened, glistening with unshed tears. “Yes, Alistair, I do. I still love you. More than reason itself,” she murmured. “But the things I’ve done, the person I am now… You wouldn’t approve. And- my rune. I found out. I can’t break it, ever.”

Barking a short, bitter laugh, she nodded. “Oh there is. The same amount of power is needed to undo it as what was put into its creation. The life force of four people. More blood magic. I can’t do that, Ali. I can’t.” And the tears fell. Tenderly wiping her face, he leaned down to press a kiss to her head, still smelling faintly of lavender and his Aerin. He breathed in her scent, filling his lungs, willing himself to commit it to memory.

“I don’t care. I love you no matter what. Just… come home with me, Aerin.”

“Why haven’t you married, Alistair?” She pulled back slightly to look up at him.
“You’re really asking me that? Aerin, come on. I can’t marry anyone. I compare every potential ‘bride’ to you, and they all fall far short of the mark. Not a single one I’ve found that I can even have a normal conversation with. It’s all ‘fancy dress’ this, or ‘shiny jewels’ that, ‘no Your Majesty I can’t call you by your name’.” He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. Her fingers twitched with the urge to touch his soft strands. “Please, I’m begging you. I’ll even get down on my knees if you want.”

Shaking her head, she stepped away. “I can’t. You need an heir, Alistair. A legitimate heir. A Queen. Someone I can’t be. I can’t ever be. I’m so sorry,” her voice hitched.

“No. No.” Lunging forward, he grabbed her face and smashed his lips to hers, all of his pent up frustrations and sorrow and love crashing down on her, a tidal wave of emotions that she was wholly unprepared for. Teeth clacking against hers, he swept his tongue against the seam of her lips, demanding she open herself to him. Unable to resist him, she let him in, moaning at the sensation of his tongue running across the inside of her upper lip. His breath gasped at the sounds she made, forcing him to release his own answering groan. One large hand trailed down to grab her hips, pulling her closer to him, grinding against her core, desperate to feel every inch of her against him. “I love you, Aerin. I let you go once, don't ask me to do it again. Please,” he murmured against her lips, pressing tiny kisses everywhere he could reach, “please come home with me.” With a cry, she yanked away from him, tears now freely flowing down her face.

“You can’t. I can’t. I’m so sorry, Alistair.” With a final, gasping sob, she turned and fled the keep, heedless of the aghast crowd that had witnessed the King of Ferelden all but rutting an elf in the Viscount’s Keep, and slowly lowered it.

“Ah. Right. I guess… that’s all then. Hawke.” With a brusque nod, he swept as away as regally as was possible for a man who had just poured his soul out, begging the woman he loved, and was summarily rejected. Hawke watched him go, guilt wracking her apart for the role she had played in this.

“Well, shit.”

***

Singing loudly, an elf with ruby red hair balanced on a high stone wall, teetering on the edge as she belted out words to a strange song. “I'm all out of faith, this is how I feel- I'm cold and I am shamed, lying naked on the floor. Illusion never changed, into something real. I'm wide awake and I can see the perfect sky is torn.” The two moons were high in the sky, the other residents of Lowtown giving the distressed, possibly mad elf a wide berth. All except one man.

“Get down from there before you break your fool neck, woman.” She raised her head, staring down at a handsome face with amber eyes and curly hair, in bright, silver armor embossed with the Sword of Mercy. A mostly empty bottle dangled from her fingertips.

“Whyyyy?” she slurred. “Am I bothering you, Knight-Captain?” She sang his title in crisp notes.

“You’re scaring me. It’s a long way down from there,” he replied, gently this time. Holding his hand up to her, he waited.

“Nnnnnope!” she giggled and pranced further along the wall. “I’m fine, Ser Templar. I do this for a living.”
“What, get drunk and dance on walls?”

“Yes. No. Maybe? You think people would pay me to do this?” Another giggle. “I could totally do this for a job.”

“I doubt anyone would have an interest. Now, please, serrah, get down.” She frowned.

“Aerin. Aaaeeerin. Say it.”

“Aerin. I’m-”

“Cullen. I remember you. Surprised to see you here, though. Glad to be under Meredith? Get those pesky mages right where you want them?” she asked, sarcasm dripping from her voice. He stiffened.

“We do what we must here to keep order.”

She snorted. “Right. Order. Like keeping mages from passing love notes to normal folk. Oh, but they aren’t people, are they, Cullen?” Her voice distorted his name, dragging out the vowels. He stomped down the anger that was rising in his chest.

“You are drunk. Please come down. I can escort you home.”

“Home,” she scoffed. “I have no home.” With a wicked glint, she glanced down at him. “Tell me, Ser Templar. If I were a mage, would you take me to your Circle?”

He looked at her, puzzled. “Of course. It would be my duty.”

“Hmm.” She gracefully dropped down off the ledge, landing lightly in front of him. “Even knowing I was once a slave? And that if I were ever caged again, I’d go mad? Regardless of the fact that I would have lived my whole life as an apostate and never once been tempted by a demon or blood magic? Knowing what Meredith allows the templars to get away with?” She smiled thinly, and tilted her head.

Glaring, he clenched his hands. “What do you wish from me? You saw how I was tortured in Kinloch. Irving was too lenient with his mages, and look what happened! Blood magic, abominations everywhere! I will not allow that to ever happen again!” He was vaguely aware he was shouting, but he didn’t care. Something about this tiny elf was making his blood boil.

“So instead you allow your templars to rape mages, and then cover up the crimes by taking the brand to the innocents?” she hissed, all of her repressed anger and frustration exploding in the direction of this unfortunate man. “I’ve heard disturbing stories about your precious Meredith,” she spat, “and I can’t help but wonder what your part is in it, as her second in command.”

He stepped closer to her, until their noses were almost touched. A stray thought of-oh, his eyes are pretty- crossed her alcohol muddled mind. “You do not know these mages. Half of them have already turned to blood magic, and the other half are not far behind. Annulment would be a kindness for them,” his tone was rough, low, grating, nostrils flaring in his fury.

“So rape is justified? Tranquility for minor offenses?” Jabbing him in his cold armor, she met him glare for glare. “Tell me, how many innocents have you taken? Can you even keep track anymore?”

They both paused, shoulders shaking, furious, in this dark corner of the slums, each one daring the other to say something else. Cullen snapped first. Roughly grabbing her by her arms, he slammed
her against the wall. “I have taken none against their will,” he muttered, actually seeing her for the first time since they started arguing. Her face was flushed from emotion and drink, her curved chest heaving, her slender neck arched back, her pulse flickering in the hollow of her throat. He drew a sharp breath in, aware of her body pressed against his. Her tongue darted out to lick her rosy, chapped lips. She watched fascinated as his pupils dilated, swallowing the golden amber in a haze of lust. Groaning, he leaned his head down to hers, capturing her mouth in a searing kiss.

Aerin gasped into his mouth. A small part of her screamed at her to push him away, stab him, run, but the overwhelming majority of her realized how lonely she felt, and how very sexually frustrated she still was from earlier. She had not had another since she left Alistair, had not desired any other. Until now. Her traitorous body responded to his lips and his hands, roaming down her body, fingers digging into her hips, leaving bruises behind. Groaning, her fingers trailed over his armor, looking for a purchase for her hands. Cullen pulled back, breathing hard, staring at her face. “I-”

Grabbing his hand, she turned, dragging him into a nearby abandoned building. Isabela would be so proud. As soon as the door swung shut, he was on her again, hand wrapped around her braid, yanking her head back to allow him deeper access to her mouth. With his other hand, he fumbled with her laces, loosening the ties just enough to let him slip a calloused hand in. While his tongue firmly traced every corner of her sweet, warm mouth, he gently stroked a rough finger over her soft folds. “Maker,” he moaned into her mouth. “you’re dripping already.” Dipping a tentative finger into her wetness, he felt her body twitch, knees buckling slightly. With a devastating smirk, he pushed her away just far enough so he could watch her face. Slowly, he pressed his finger inside her wet heat, crooking it upwards just so, her eyes growing huge as she made the most delicious sounds. His blood sang to see her like this, the tune hauntingly familiar, like a cool draught of lyrium.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he growled, “And I’ve only got two fingers inside you. Imagine if there was more.” He continued to pump his fingers inside of her, relishing in the feel of her walls clenching around him, groaning at the thought of what his cock would feel like in her tight sheath. Raising his free hand, he wrapped it securely around her throat, her eyes open in panic. “Let go, sweetling.” With a final flick of her pearl, and a squeeze around her throat, she came hard, her arousal flowing over his hand as he let her ride out her wave of pleasure. As she came down from her high, blinking dazedly at him, he smiled, suddenly tender. Withdrawing his fingers from her, he made a show of licking her juices, moaning at the sweet, musky taste. She watched him in lustful fascination, mouth slightly open. “Take off your pants,” he commanded in a low voice. She shivered, and scrambled to obey. Reaching for his own belt, he unfastened the buckle and shoved his pants down, pulling his heavy member out, purple, swollen tip already weeping with his come. She licked her lips. He chuckled darkly. “Not tonight, my dear. Turn around, hands on the wall.”

Spinning around, she stood, spreading her legs for him, feeling the chill of his armor contrasting with the searing heat of his flesh. Pushing her back down some more, he grabbed the side of her slender hips with one hand and guided his tip slowly inside. They both moaned in unison at the sensation of his large shaft stretching her apart, the song in her blood getting louder, buzzing over his skin.

“Gods,” she gasped, “you’re huge.” Cullen grinned with unabashed pride. Forcing himself to go slow, to let her accommodate to his girth, he felt his forehead break out in sweat, every muscle screaming in his body to slam into her, claim her. Instead, inch by inch, he slid himself into her until he was hilted deep inside, his balls nestled against her slick flesh. Pulling himself back, he
slowly eased himself in and out, finding a smooth rhythm until he felt her relax, then reared back, harshly slamming his hips into hers, reveling in her screams of pleasure. Over and over, he ravaged her tight heat, until all that spilled from her lips was a litany of his name, curses, and pleas for him to not stop, to give her more, more. With a gasp, he yanked himself back, spun her around, wrapped his arms under her firm ass, lifted her to the wall and shoved her back against it, driving his cock back inside in one smooth thrust. Now that he could see her face, mouth open, gasping his name, eyes darkened to the color of the midnight sky, he knew he wouldn’t last long.

“Touch yourself,” he groaned. “Please, I won’t…” Sliding her hand between them, he stared at where they were joined, watching her small fingers tease her clit as his cock thrust in and out, skin shining with their combined juices. “Aerin, come for me,” he gasped. Tilting his hips up, he thrust again, hitting that spot inside her just so, breathless moans rasping from her chest. Over and over, he fucked her, watching her fingers stutter against her pearl, until her walls seized around his member, harder than steel, spasming as she reached her completion. Aerin felt her vision go white, as every nerve ending in her body burned in pleasure, wrenching a broken cry of his name from her throat. One last jerky thrust of his hips, and he felt himself explode, roaring his pleasure into her ear, ropes of hot, sticky come filling her belly, arms wrapped around her body like she was the only thing grounding him to the earth. They both stayed like that for awhile, her held up in his arms, pressed between the wall and his heavy armor, trying to catch their breath and regain their senses. Slowly withdrawing, he watched as their mingled fluids dripped out of her, hitting the dirty floor. Shame flooded him as he realized what they had just done, how he had just taken her in this filthy slum warehouse. He fumbled for a handkerchief in his pocket and offered it to her.

“Ah, here. Keep it. Please.” Wiping herself off in silence, they both pulled their smalls and pants back on, then stood around awkwardly. “I’m so sor-”

She pressed a finger to his lips with an odd smile on her face. “Don’t apologize. I goaded you into this. If anything, I should be saying sorry. I don’t really know what got into me. Besides you, obviously.”

Ignoring her terrible joke, he vehemently shook his head. “I should have stopped. A place like this is not where I- we should have… done that.”

Her lips quirked up. “Would you have offered me a bed then? Silk sheets? Orlesian wine? No, this was fine, Cullen. More than fine. I think we both needed that, don’t you?” He offered her a shy nod, not willing to meet her eyes, rubbing the back of his neck. She chuckled. “We’re both adults here. And it was consensual. No harm done, right?” Awkwardly patting his arm, she smiled.

“Allow me to walk you home, at least. The streets aren’t safe at night here,” Cullen said, determined to be a gentleman for at least this. She laughed at him. Stunned, he stared at her. *Doesn’t she know I’m not joking? Or does she underestimate the danger?*

“Oh, Cullen. Don’t you know who I am? If anything, the streets are afraid of me.” Smirking, she walked out of the abandoned building, the templar close on her heels.

“Aerin-”

With a final wave, she effortlessly scaled a wall, twisting herself onto the roof, and disappeared from view. “Maker’s breath.” He stared at the space where she had been. *That was… unexpected. It’s fine though. A casual tryst, just like all the rest I’ve had.* Except this didn’t feel like all the rest he’d had. Something about that feisty elf intrigued him. And confused him. Shaking his head, he vowed to put her out of his mind. He had better things to do that moon over a crazy woman, no matter how beautiful she was. Besides, she wasn’t even his type- far too slender, mouthy, not much in the way of a chest or hips. All lean muscle, skin, and bones. He preferred his women to be soft,
compliant, and curvy. She was a momentary distraction, a pleasurable mutually beneficial diversion. Satisfied with this train of thought, Cullen confidently strode out of Lowtown, back to the Gallows.

Chapter End Notes

I'M SORRY FOR THIS ENTIRE CHAPTER.

“Where were you last night?”

A pillow landed on her head. Groaning at the sunlight streaming through her windows, she huddled away, burying her face in the covers.

“Don’t ignore me! I came by last night, but Hawke said you never came home. Now you’re here, reeking of- Creators, what is that smell? You smell like you fell in a brewery. Did you just drink all the alcohol in Lowtown?”

“Yes,” Aerin croaked, wishing the tiny demon in the shape of her sweet sister would go away.

“Ugh. Well, let’s get you up. Sweet Mythal, you need a bath.” Dragging her sister out of bed, Ellana gasped. “Were you attacked?! All these bruises.” Aerin opened one eyes, taking inventory of all the dark marks that now littered her hips and arms. Oh. So that wasn’t a dream. Well then. Kaffas. He… inside of me. I’ll need to get some herbs. But who to ask? Ugghgh. Anders. Anders will help me. Looking up, she saw that Ellana was still expectantly waiting on an answer.

“I, uh, must have fallen or something. I don’t really remember. I’m getting up. And I’m fine, Elle. Really. Doesn’t even hurt. Besides my head. And throat. Ugh.” Her little sister frowned.

“Hawke feels really bad for taking you. She didn’t know you and… him were like that. She figured you’d enjoy seeing one of your old companions.” Aerin waved it away.

“I’m not upset with her. Sure, a little warning might have been nice, but what’s done is done. Maybe it’s better this way.” Sighing, she forced herself upright, lurching in ungainly steps to her washroom. Grabbing a cloth, she wet it and proceeded to scrub her skin clean of the layer of Lowtown that had accumulated on it. What the hell was I thinking last night? How much did I drink? That ale at the tavern. I think I swiped a bottle from someone. Oh, and another bottle. I can’t remember anything after I left the tavern until Cullen found me. Gods, I wonder what he must think of me. And I let him just push me around! Fucking hell, I let him choke me. Must have been the alcohol. And emotional distress. I’m never going to be able to look him in the eye. Ever again. I need to find Anders, stat. Finishing her toilette, she rushed back into her room, throwing on clothes and her normal armor.

“Going somewhere?” Aerin looked up to see a distressed Hawke standing in her doorway.

“Hey. Hawke, you know I’m not mad at you right? You didn't know. I never mentioned him.”

Hawke grimaced. “I feel like a royal ass. I’m so sorry, Aerin. I never would have sprung that on you had I known.” Aerin sighed, crossing the room to pull her friend into a hug.

“I know, Marian.”

“Don’t call me that, s’weird,” she mumbled into Aerin’s chest.

“Marian. Maaaarian. Marian.”

“Stoooop!” Hawke pulled back, annoyed yet grinning.
“Make me,” Aerin stuck out her tongue. With a shriek, Hawke picked up a pillow and threw it at her. Laughing, the elf picked up another pillow to defend herself.

“Hey, I want in!” Isabela sprinted into the room, diving into the middle of them, tackling Hawke to the ground as feathers and giggles flew around the bedchamber. Breathless, and looking like human geese, the girls flopped down onto the mattress.

“Creators, what am I going to do with you lot?” Ellana stood in the entryway, trying to look stern but failing. The feathered trio grinned at each other. “Oh, no you don’t. No, nooooo!” she yelped as the others grabbed her, dragging her into the room, pummeling her with their empty pillows. The laughter floated throughout the house, where Fenris, Anders, and Varric, waiting for the girls in the foyer, looked up, smiling.

“Guess it’s all okay now, huh.”

“It’s like they’re all sisters.”

“More like they’re all children.”

“Hey Fen Fen!”

“Please do not call me that, Aerin.”

“Don’t be such a bore. Let’s go do something fun. Hawke says she has to go do stuff for Aveline. That’s boooooring. Let’s go find some slavers and kill them.”

Fenris snorted. “That’s your idea of fun? Actually, you know what, that does sound like fun. See you guys.”

Hawke stood outraged at the upper balcony railing, feathers still dotting her hair. “Hey! You’re supposed to come with me!”

“You can take the dwarf, the abomination, and the walking pair of breasts with you.”

“I’m more than just a pretty set of tits, elf! I also have a great ass,” Isabela huffed.

Laughing, Aerin tugged on Fenris’ arm, pulling him out the door. “See you guys.”

Taking the long way to Lowtown, the pair meandered around the streets, strolling in comfortable silence for about an hour. With a curious start, Fenris stopped in front of a shop they had now passed for the third time, turning to Aerin. “So, are we hunting slavers? Or just taking a tour of Kirkwall? Let’s see. On this side, we have a lovely view of a piss stained wall. Oh, looks like someone wrote their name with said piss. Ansel. Lovely. And over here, we have a… shit, he’s dead. That’s unfortunate.”

She shrugged, poking the corpse he had spotted with her toe. “I mainly just wanted company. But company that wouldn’t ask me a thousand questions or chatter incessantly. Quiet company.”

“They do talk a lot. Especially Isabela. And the dwarf.”

“It’s part of their charm. Hey, Fen Fen.”

“Aer Aer. See how annoying that is?”

“Air air doesn’t even make sense. Do you picture yourself staying here? Settling down with Hawke? Having a family?”
He stopped, startled at the question. “I, um, never really thought about it. I... it's hard to imagine. I’m not sure family is for the likes of us.”

“Former slaves?”

“I was going to say soulless shells filled with hate and fury, but I suppose that covers the gist of it.”

She sighed. “No normal life for us, huh.”

“Normal is overrated anyways. Life is what we make of it. We are free. That is enough.”

“You’re lucky to have Hawke.” Wordlessly, he nodded, following as she climbed up a wall, settling herself on a roof to watch the Waking Sea in the distance. “Thanks for this, by the way.”

“Anytime, Aerin.”

“Oh!” Reaching into a worn leather pouch at her side, her hands closed around a crumpled piece of paper, tossing it at him. “Got a contract in two days ago. Forgot about it with all the,” she waved her arms around, “bullshit going on. One assassination required for a certain Lord Rochelle. Business partner wants him out of the way, since Rochelle’s extracurriculars are becoming a nuisance. Mainly, his penchant for abducting little boys for his own pleasure,” she hissed. “I also heard he really hates elves. What say we pay him a visit?”

A rare smile broke out on Fenris’ solemn face. “It would be my pleasure.”

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Cullen stifled an internal groan. This was the sixth dead noble in almost a month. All the previous murders the city guard attempted to investigate, but it was always the same. No one ever saw the killer, no evidence left. The kill wasn’t always the same. Sometimes, it was a clean slice across a throat. Once, the unfortunate target had been bound and bled from a multitude of tiny lacerations, bloodstained papers stabbed in front of him implicating the noble is a massive slavery ring. This poor bastard, however, was the worst yet. Naked, his body was tied spread eagle on his soiled mattress, wholly castrated, his amputated member shoved into his mouth. The templar winced, turning away from the grisly scene, to where guardsman Donnic stood with another, all three men instinctively cupping themselves in sympathetic pain.

“So why exactly do you need a templar for this again?”

Donnic motioned to the ceiling. Scorch marks laced across the painted wood, just barely visible against the dark grain. Grabbing a chair to get closer to the burns, Cullen felt the faint tingle of magic that lingered in the air. “We’re thinking the killer is an apostate.”

“Of course they are.”

The other guard shooed a cowering servant in, trembling in fear. “Normally, none of the other residents of the house ever hear anything. Assassin sneaks in, all stealthy like. But this time, for some reason, they cast and there was screaming, waking up some of the staff. This woman said she saw something. Go on, lass, tell the Knight-Captain.”

“I- I saw, um- they-”

“Take your time, mistress,” Cullen replied gently. “No one will harm you anymore.”

Raising her head to the templar, she glanced over at her mangled master, and a slight smile of
satisfaction twitched at her lips. “No, he won’t. They could have killed us. We figured they would. No one ever lives to see their face unless they wants you too. But they took one look at us, smiled, and told us we were free.”


The servants face set into a stubborn line. “I didn’t see, ser.”

“Oh, for the love of- You just said they looked at you. You saw them smile. You had to have seen them.”

“I saw nothing, ser.” Growling in frustration, Cullen faced the city guards.

“By all accounts Lord Rochelle was a honorable man, well liked and respected. So why are they protecting the assassins?”

Another servant, a wiry, bent, older man peeked into the room, straining to get a glimpse of the body. “He dead, then? Good riddance,” he spat.

“Explain yourself, serrah,” Donnic ordered.

Hate gleamed in the man’s eyes and he grinned at the crime scene, cackling at the sight of the stuffed noble. “Fittin’ way, too. Lord Rochelle raped my son. Then murdered him when he got too old for his taste. Kept the lot of us locked up so we couldn’t run to the guard. Who knows how many others he’s murdered.” The armored men all blanched, caught unawares by the secret dealings of the nobleman.

Donnic watched the servant as he walked out of the room, rubbing his hands in glee, headed to tell the others of the good news. “Maker’s balls, I never… Well. We’ll get this cleaned up. Just another unsolved case. Looks more like we got a vigilante on our hands.”

“Meredith will not be pleased if answers are not provided. Especially if the murderer is an apostate. One that the people are protecting,” Cullen muttered. “I’ll do some discreet digging.”

“Very good, Knight-Captain.”

***

“AERIN!” The elf winced at the sound of an angry Aveline, stomping into the foyer of Hawke’s manse like an angry druffalo, walls shaking at the vibrations of her boots. “Get down here. NOW!”

Slowly peeking out of the kitchen, half a roll hanging out of her mouth, Aerin blinked innocently at the guard-captain. “Yeth?”

“Where were you last night?”

“Ummmm. Out? With Fenris.”

“Doing what?”

Normally an excellent liar, Aerin was somehow severely affected by the furious Ferelden warrior looming over her. “Stuff,” she squeaked.

Crossing her bulky arms, Aveline glared down at the smaller woman. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about Lord Rochelle’s murder last night, would you?”
“Who?”

“Don’t play coy with me. All these assassinations, from merchants to nobles, didn’t start like this until you arrived. And they’ve been increasing in number. And you’ve been gone an awful lot at night.”


With a loud groan, Aveline turned away, flinging herself onto the sofa, hand over her forehead. “Aerin. You have to leave this for the guard to deal with, not exact your own justice.”

“Not my justice. It’s others who wanted them dead. I just accept the jobs for the ones nobody will miss. I have standards,” she insisted. “Sort of.”

“I can’t cover for you forever, Aerin.”

“Do you have any evidence against me, Guard-Captain?”

“No. There was evidence of magic cast in Rochelle’s room, though. The templars are getting involved. They suspect an apostate.”

“Ooh, I forgot about that. Wasn’t me. Rochelle was the apostate. Well, I mean, I am too, but so was he. He cast at me. I don’t use magic on these jobs unless I’m vastly outnumbered and outclassed. Which never happens,” she smirked.

“You have to be careful. Are you doing this for the money? Look, join the guard, you’d get a steady paycheck. Help me keep the city safe.”

“The guard?” Aerin scoffed. “Where was the guard when Rochelle raped and killed children? For the past twelve years? Where was the guard when those merchant slavers were about to shove off shore, the people they stole never to be seen again? Your hands are tied by laws and bureaucracy, Aveline. While you wait for official sanction, people **die**. **Children**. I won’t allow it, not while I can do something about it.”

Knuckles rapped at the door, interrupting the women. Orana rushed from the kitchen to answer the insistent pounding. “Is Serrah Hawke here? I have need of her,” a smooth baritone inquired.

**Venhedis. Of course he’s the templar assigned to the case.** Aveline stood up, walking forward to greet the man. “Knight-Captain. Have you found anything yet?”

Rubbing his neck, lines on his face deeper than usual, Cullen shook his head, pointedly trying to ignore the redheaded elf across the room and the flush that was creeping up his neck. Aerin almost felt sorry for him. “Not a damn thing. None of the people in Lowtown or Darktown will talk to a templar.”

“Have you tried, you know, going down there not in your templar armor? And taking the stick out of your arse? That might help,” a saucy voice called from upstairs.

“Hawke. I came to ask for your help, not receive a lecture,” he glared.

“Can’t. Busy.” The Champion bounced down the stairs, blue eyes sparkling with ill concealed mirth.

“Just- come with me, please? People are more likely to talk to you,” he pleaded. “I’ve got to get
something, or Meredith is going to start a witch hunt.”

“I’ll help you,” Aerin said suddenly. Aveline cut a glare at the elf, while Hawke merely raised her eyebrow. “But- you need to ditch the armor. Get some normal clothes. Do you even have any normal clothes? Or do you sleep and bathe in that thing too?”

“You’re one to talk,” Cullen muttered. “I’ve never seen you out of your leathers either.”

“I have!” Hawke piped up, grinning at the furiously blushing templar. “All of her, in fact. It’s just as good as you’re imagining right now.”

Shutting his eyes, he tilted his head back, silently beseeching the Maker to save him. Aveline hid a smile, coughing into her hand. “Ah, are you sure this is a good idea, Aerin?”

“Sure. I can help Cullen seem more normal,” she ignored his protests, insisting he was normal, “get him to loosen up. Maybe he’ll do better. Come on, Curly. Hanged Man, tonight, three hours after sundown. Normal clothes, mind you. You can bring a dagger. In fact, I recommend you bring a dagger. Maybe two.”

A slight bow and nod was all the response she received before he turned on his heel and marched out of the house. “Aerin,” Hawke bit her lip. “Are you really sure this is a good idea?”

“He’s less likely to suspect me if I’m helping him. It’ll be fine. I’ll catch you later, I promised Ellana I’d spend the day with her today.”

Aveline sighed as she watched the elf slip out the door. “That woman is going to be the death of me. You both are.” Hawke just snorted.

“Admit it. You’d be so bored without us.”

***

This wasn’t the sort of establishment he’d ever normally frequent. Not that he had a habit of visiting any bars, really, but the Hanged Man was definitely not on his list. Grimacing at the dirt and drunks liberally covering every surface, he carefully dropped into an empty stool at the end of the bar, next to an elf who was perched on her own seat, leaning comfortably against the wall. He shivered, noticing the state of the wall.

“Come on, it’s not worse than the warehouse.”

“It is though,” he muttered. “Much more… sticky here.” Aerin snorted at that, coughing at the ale she swallowed wrong.

“Alright, Cullen. First off, relax. Slump a little. Stop looking so templar-ish.”

“That is not a word.”

“And stop talking so proper. Anyone can tell by just looking at you, that you don’t belong here.”

“And you do?” he scowled. She just grinned at him.

“The slums are my home, Ser Knight. Oy, Corff! Whiskey, two glasses.” She threw down a few coppers, passing Cullen a glass. The sharp tang from the liquor assaulted his nose, making him wince in pain of anticipation. “Got to get you to loosen up. Cheers, mate.” Downing her shot, Aerin watched in amusement as the blonde man choked and spluttered on the harsh liquid, wiping his
mouth and swearing.

“Maker’s breath, what did I just drink?”

“Best swill in Lowtown, isn’t that right, Corff? Hey, Cor. Didja hear about that nasty bit of work up in Hightown the other day? Some nob got stuffed, I heard. Any ideas on who?”

The blonde bartender leaned in closer, sliding a tankard of ale to another human next to them. “Rumor says it’s the Crow killer from Antiva. La Sirena. They say she’s beautiful, and deadly. No one ever survives once she decides you’re next. Can’t imagine what she’s doing up here though.”

“Is she a mage?” Cullen demanded. Aerin elbowed him in the side, with an admonishment to be nice.

“Nah. Not a mage. Heard an interesting rumor earlier today that Rochelle was, though. Who’d have thought?”

Nodding to Corff, Cullen sighed at his drink. “So the assassin isn’t a mage. I will question the household staff again, see if they can verify that he was an apostate. Crow killer? Not the Antivan Crows?”

“That’s what I’ve heard. She sounds like a badass.”

“More like a pain in my ass,” he grumbled. “Well, hopefully this will be enough to satisfy Meredith and to take the Order off this case. Thank you for meeting me tonight, Aerin.” Turning a warm smile on her, she felt her stomach heat. No. Not even. Stop it. You’re not drunk now. No excuse.

“Right. Come on, let’s get you back to the Gallows.” Frowning, Cullen let himself be dragged to the door by the much smaller elf.

“I do not need an escort.”

Rolling her eyes, she kept pulling him along. “You’re not wearing your plate. And it’s late. Lowtown isn’t safe to walk at night.”

“What about you?”

“I’m special.” Her smirk tugged at something deep within him, awakening an urge to feel his lips against his again. “Kaffas.” She speaks Tevene? “Gang members. Stay behind me,” she hissed.

Unsheathing his slender dirk, he chuckled. “I think not.”

“Goin’ for a stroll, girlie?” The leader of the bandits leered at her, the spaces of his missing teeth gaping. “Why don’t we-”

He never got a chance to finish. In one fluid movement, Aerin sprung up from the hard packed dirt alley, whipping a dagger out of her boot, flinging it straight for his heart. With a strangled gasp, the man fell. The grin on her face was absolutely feral as she twirled her twin swords in her hands. “Shall we, boys?”

Cullen had never seen her fight before. He was positive he had never seen anyone fight like this. She was a blur, dancing across the battlefield, flitting in and around the enemy, always just out of reach, her swords flashing like lightning. She was untouchable, some pagan goddess of death, men falling to her left and right, droplets of blood flinging in graceful arcs from the tips of her sword. A
dagger flashed to his side. Shaking his head to focus, he just barely parried the thrust from the attacking thug, concentrating on his steps. It had been a long time he had fought without his heavy silverite armor and sword and shield. Everything felt too unbalanced, he was going to-

*Shit*. He felt the blood dripping down his side before his mind registered the biting sting. Hissing at the pain, he quickly twisted his blade around the jabbing dagger, unarming the bandit, and stabbed him through the stomach with a rough jerk. Stumbling backwards, he realized he had managed to kill one man, getting injured in the process, while eight or nine lay unmoving around her slender frame, her blade poking the corpses to ensure they were in fact, deceased. And she was barely even panting, looking for all the world as if she had just gone for a gentle jog, not brutally slaughtered a small army. *Who is she? Could she be... No. Why would she have helped me if she was?*

“Hey, you’re hurt.” Noticing the blood soaking into his dark roughspun shirt, gleaming wet in the moonlight, she gently tugged his shirt up, grimacing at the laceration. “*Shit. This is pretty deep. Here.*” Reaching under shirt, she tugged the fabric binding her breasts loose, tightly wrapping it around his abdomen. “Let’s get you back, quickly.” Nodding weakly, he let her take his weight, arm draped over her shoulder, as she slowly helped him along the now deserted alley.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, feeling his mind growing faint with blood loss.

“Not your fault. I should’ve told you to wear battered leathers or something, not come down here like that.”

“Y’fight good.”

“Thanks. Hey! Guards! This man needs your help!” Spotting two city guardsmen up ahead, Aerin flagged them down. “This is Knight-Captain Cullen. We were attacked by a gang in Lowtown. He’s wounded. Get him back to the Gallows, now.”

Feeling strong hands lift him up, Cullen tried to open his mouth to thank her, but the urge to sleep was too strong. *I will have to tell her later, then. Maybe take her out somewhere? Get her flowers? Would she like that? Maker, I’m more injured than I thought if I’m thinking about wooing that damn woman.*

Chapter End Notes

In my head, Fenris and Aerin are like brother and sister.

Aveline would intimidate anyone into talking, I think. She’s an Amazon warrior goddess.
One month went by, bringing with it the very welcome knowledge that Aerin was, in fact, not pregnant, despite the fact that she had taken the herbs late. Cullen was making a fine recovery, having reached the Gallows for healing just in time. In fact, Meredith had made a house call to Hawke’s estate to personally thank her for saving her second-in-command. Aerin had never felt more awkward, an apostate standing in another apostate's home, with a courteous Knight-Commander praising her.

Spring was winding down and the oppressive heat of summer suffocated the city in the thick blanket of humidity. Adding to the stifling atmosphere were the tensions between the mages and templars that were growing ever higher, day by day. Aerin spent most of her time these days hiding inside, only venturing out at night, and worrying over Anders, as Justice became angrier by the minute, it seemed. She was relatively fond of the mage’s compassionate nature and his dry humor, despite her misgivings about the spirit he shared his body with, but he was walking a fine line on the edge of his sanity, and all his friends knew it.

She sighed, running her fingers through his blonde hair, his head laying on her lap, plaiting it and re-plaiting it for her own amusement. He tended to prefer her company over the others, as she was the most sympathetic to the plight of the mages, the abuses they suffered at the hands of the templars, even if she did eventually get sick of hearing it nonstop. She briefly wondered, if maybe in another lifetime, she could have fallen in love with him. If she had never met Alistair. If he had never taken Justice in. All what ifs. “The girls have been in that kitchen all day. I’m worried what will come out of it.”

“Abomination cookies, perhaps? Demon pastries with little leaves baked inside?”

“All done! Everyone, come in here!”

Groaning, Anders pushed himself up to sit. “What in the Maker’s name did you do to my hair? I look like a frippy Orlesian lady.”

“So pretty,” she cooed, petting his silky hair. Rolling his eyes, he quickly combed his hair out, pulling it back into the usual ponytail. “Ugh, you’re no fun anymore Anders.” His cat squeaked at him in agreement. Bending down to pick up the creature, a tiny frown crept across his face.

“Hard to have fun when Meredith is killing mages by the hour, Aerin.”

“And we’re trying to do something about it. But we can’t let it consume us.”

“Too late,” the former circle mage muttered, a dark shadow crossing his face.

“I said no.” Fenris stalked away from the kitchen table, staring in trepidation at the cake that Merrill and Ellana had baked. Or attempted to bake. Seeing as how the Dalish girls had never baked anything in their lives, what lay in front of them resembled something closer to an oblong chewy sock. With sprinkles. “I do not wish to die today.”

“It’s not made with blood magic,” Merrill rolled her eyes. “Just a piece? Pretty please?”

“How can you resist that?” Varric chuckled.
“Oh, Varric, you too!” The dwarf blanched and immediately remembered something he had to do, running from the room. Aerin snorted. A minute later, he ran back in, an uncharacteristic air of panic about him. “Hawke! We need to get down to the Gallows, now. Shit’s happening.”

“What?” Hawke popped her head into the room. But I don’t wanna.”

“Here,” he shoved a letter at her.

Groaning, she flipped it open, her face creasing into a deep frown. “What’s it say,” Fenris called.

“Champion, you have proven yourself a friend to Kirkwall’s mages and it seems I must call upon you once again. Meredith has gone too far, and I will not let her madness remain unchecked. I ask that you come to the Gallows at once. Perhaps together we can stop this before there is bloodshed. First Enchanter Orsino.”

“Shit.”

Anders eyes glowed an intense blue, fists clenching at his side. “It is time.”

“Shit. Again.”

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“The First Enchanter got into a terrible argument with the Knight-Commander. He stormed off to bring the matter to the Grand Cleric, but the Knight-Commander gave chase. I fear there will be blood!” An anxious mage ran to greet them, arms flailing, as the group strode in the Gallows.

“You think if we just handcuff them together for a few weeks, they’ll learn to get along?” Hawke mused as they sprinted through the courtyard.

“Worth a shot,” Aerin replied. The scene folded out in front of them, watched over by the terrible bronze slave statues, casting their neverending despair over the assembled. On one side, Meredith, backed up by several stern templars. On the other, Orsino, flanked by equally grim mages. Both screaming their hate at each other.

“I have every right! You are harboring blood mages, and I intend to root them out before they infect this city!” Meredith shouted, her blue eyes almost glowing with frustration.

“Where do you not see blood magic,” Orsino snapped. “My people cannot sneeze without you accusing them of corruption!”

“Trouble in paradise?” Hawke smirked. Aveline groaned behind her. Meredith moved to dismiss her, but the First Enchanter cut her off.

“I called her here. I think the people deserve to know just what you’ve done,”

“What I have done,” Meredith spat, “is protect the people of this city. I have protected you mages from your curse and your own stupidity. I dare not lower our guard now! I must find the source.”

“How much further will you go to root out something that is not there?” Orsino slammed his fist emphatically in his palm.

“You can’t keep pressing the mages like this.” Hawke sighed.

“What else shall we do? Tell me, Hawke, have you not seen with your own eyes what these mages can do, heard their lies as they seek power?” Meredith’s face was pleading, almost soft.
“Some of us want exactly what you want, Meredith. We’re not the enemy,” Hawke pleaded.

Stepping up, Orsino added, “You would cast us all as villains, but it is not so!”

Meredith’s face fell. “I know, and it breaks my heart to do it. If you cannot tell me another way, do not brand me a tyrant!”

Muttering to himself, the First Enchanted turned away. “I’m going to find Grand Cleric Elthina. She’ll put a stop to this.”

“You will not bring her Grace into this,” the Knight-Commander hissed, grabbing his arm.

“The Grand Cleric cannot help you,” Anders stepped out of the shadows. “I will not stand by and watch you treat all mages as criminals, while those who would lead us bow to their templar jailers,” his voice rang out as he snapped his staff smartly onto the cobbled courtyard. “The Circle has failed us, Orsino! The time has come to act. There can be no half-measures.” His eyes glowed a piercing lyrium blue, cracks appearing along the surface of his skin, voice deepening into an otherworldly register. Justice! Dammit, Anders, not now! Aerin begged silently.

“Anders. What have you done?” she whispered. He gave his friend a sad smile, the waves from the plaits she had so recently toyed with still visible in his hair.

“There can be no turning back.”

The ground shook, a beam of pure energy erupting from the Chantry above the city, sucking all the bones of the building into a whirling vortex high in the sky, falling in on itself… and exploded outward. A supernova of fire and debris and dust rained down across the city. For an eternal moment suspended in time, no one breathed, frozen in their horror.

“Well?” Orsino begged. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“I removed the chance of compromise, because there is no compromise.”

“The Grand Cleric has been slain by magic, the Chantry destroyed,” Meredith murmured. Raising her voice, her voice harsh, stance unyielding, she called out, “As Knight-Commander of Kirkwall, I hereby invoke the Right of Annulment. Every mage in the Circle is to be executed- immediately.”

“NO!” Aerin screamed along with Hawke.

“You have to stop her, Champion! The mages in the Circle had nothing to do with it!” Orsino gasped.

“And I demand you stand with us! Even you must see that this outrage cannot be tolerated!” Meredith commanded.

Hawke’s expression was frantic. She turned to her friends, but none of them were a help. Whirling to face Anders, she stared at him through a glimmer of tears. “Was this why you needed me to distract the Grand Cleric, Anders?” Her tone was icy, devoid of any emotion.

“If you knew what I was doing, you would have stopped me,” he responded simply. “I couldn’t let that happen.”

The First Enchanter was beyond outraged, “You fool! You’ve doomed us all!”

Anders shot him a scathing, pitying glance. “We were already doomed. A quick death now or a
slow one later— I’d rather die fighting.”

“Think carefully, Hawke. Stand with them and you share their fate,” Meredith warned. Hawke stared at Anders, lost in her mind, screaming internally that she didn’t want this, never wanted this. All around her, her friends were encouraging her to side with the templars, no the mages, no let them all burn. It was too much, her thoughts were reeling, she couldn’t think, just need to— Aerin stepped up to her friend, gently placing her hands on her shoulders, anchoring her to reality.

“What do you believe, Hawke?” she asked softly. Blue eyes met her own. Hawke nodded, shakily taking a deep breath, and turned to Meredith.

“I’m not helping you, Meredith.”

Fenris made a disgusted sound, Aveline’s face fell. But they both vowed to not desert the one they had chosen to follow and love. “It is a mistake,” her lover muttered, “But I won’t abandon you.” Hawke’s face lit up.

“You are a fool, Champion,” the Knight-Commander’s face grew red in her fury. “Kill them all!” The templars lunged into action. All around were the sounds of metal grating against metal, the strings of bows twanging, the tingle of ozone in the air as magic was woven. Aerin threw herself at a nearby templar, blade seeking the weak seams of his armor, finding its mark easily to rend fabric and leather, sinking into the fleshy skin below. One down, fifteen to go. Magic swirled around her as fire coated her blades, burning hot enough to almost melt through armor. A clang sounded behind her. Aerin twisted her neck back to see a templar trying to sneak up on her, sword outstretched, only to fall to the ground as an arrow embedded in his back. Nodding at Ellana, she returned to the fray. All this stupid plate armor, stupid templars, stupid Silencing spell. A wave of nausea rolled through her as she felt her magic torn away, the Fade out of her reach.

Rolling to stand in front of Merrill, she barked, “Stay behind me! You too, Anders!” Hawke was seemingly unperturbed by the drain, blocking and stabbing templars with her bladed staff with ease. Isabela ducked under a swing of a sword, flipping to the man’s back, shoving her daggers up into his kidneys, dark eyes flashing across the yard to find her next unsuspecting target. Arrows rained down upon the rest, Varric and her sister keeping to the shadowed edges, picking the templars apart one by one. As the last of them fell, Orsino observed the carnage, wretched and desolate, suddenly much older than he was an hour ago.

“I don’t know if we can win this war, but… thank you,” he sighed, nodding to Hawke and her companions. “Meet me at the Gallows after you’ve dealt with your… friend.” The Champion turned to where Anders sat away from the rest, face expressionless.

“What would you do?” Varric asked Aerin as they all watched the two apostates talk.

“Kill him,” she replied, emotions draining from her weary soul. “Then again, maybe if he hadn’t, none of this would have ever changed. And the mages would have been annulled anyways. But all that loss of innocent lives…” she shook her head. “I understand why he did it. I just…” Varric nodded.

“I don’t know. There had to have been a better way than that,” he spat. “Still think he should die.” She hesitantly agreed. But he was my friend? Is friendship really so cheap? What about second chances?

“He should help fix it,” Merrill insisted. “I think Hawke agrees.” Sure enough, Hawke had her hand outstretched, waiting for Anders to accept, which he did, gratitude shining in his eyes. Aveline made a strangled sound, Fenris' handsome features twisted in matching revulsion.
“Let’s get to the Gallows.”

As they raced through the burning city, Aerin watched in horror as abominations stalked the streets openly, tearing fleeing cityfolk apart, spreading their unholy fire as they hunted. Rounding a corner, a huge rage demon bored down on the group, reeking of sulphur. With a grating scream, it reached out its terrible claws, ready to sink its teeth into their souls. Abruptly stilling, the monster wailed as it dissolved into ashes. A black haired man with familiar blue eyes wearing the blue and griffon of the Grey Wardens wrenched his sword out of what remained of the demon. “Carver!” Hawke flung herself at her brother.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you, Marian,” he breathed. “Thank the Maker you’re alright.” She punched him.

“Didn’t know you still cared, you brute.”

He lowered his eyes. “Look, I’m sorry for what I said last time, how I acted. But… you’re the only family I have left. I have to stand by you. You have my blade, sister.” She sniffled. “Please stop that.” He awkwardly patted her on the head. “So?”

Hawke nodded. “Come with us. But if you die, I will kill you. The docks should be our destination. We can find a boat there to take us to the Gallows.”

“Creators, this is…” Eyes shining with unshed tears, Ellana stared hopelessly at the bodies lining the street, at the fire consuming everything in its path.

“I know, Elle.” Tucking her sister under her arm, drawing her close for a quick kiss and hug, she murmured into her soot stained hair. “Stay close to me, okay? We’ll get through this.”

“Aerin, I-”

“Stop, Anders. You-” her face contorted contemptuously, glaring as her old friend flinched away as if she had stabbed him. Shoulders sagging, she shook her head. “I know. I... Come on. We need to get to that boat.”

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Aerin gaped. The Gallows courtyard burned. Corpses, everywhere, mages and templars alike, too many to even count now, lay scattered across the paved stones, blood staining the once pale stones a deep rust. Was Cullen…? She stamped down that train of thought. Too much at stake here to worry one man that was only a one night stand. Standing in agitated silence, she watched as Orsino begged for Meredith to sit down and talk like civilized folk, while she demanded their surrender with ardent fervor. Surrender? So they can willingly be killed like good little sheep? A tall man caught her eye. Sighing in relief, she saw Cullen, standing just behind his Knight-Commander. Please, Creators, don’t make me kill him. It didn't make complete sense, as to why she was unwilling to entertain why his death was so appalling to her. He meant nothing to her, just another templar.

“Revoke the Right of Annulment, before this goes too far,” Orsino lowered his gaze, imploring with the stern woman. “Imprison us if you must, search the tower. I will even help you. But do not kill us all for a crime we did not commit.”

“The people will demand retribution,” Meredith claimed. “And I will give it to them. It’s too late.”

“We can still prevent this, before you both tear Kirkwall apart,” Hawke entreated.
“I should have expected this from you, Hawke. So be it. You will share the Circle’s fate. Prepare your people,” she spoke to Orsino. “The rest of the Order is already crossing the harbor.” A smirk crossed her cruel face. Aerin felt her wrath build up under her skin. She’s enjoying this, the bitch. She wants to kill all the mages. Merrill tugged on her arm, shaking her from her murderous rage, pointing to where Hawke and the others were following the mages into the Gallows.

“Does all this feel like a dream to you too?” Merrill mumbled, chewing on her bottom lip. Aerin nodded. The Dalish girl wrapped her arms through Aerin’s, hugging the older elf. And for once, Aerin didn’t care. Isabela had a slight curve to her lips as she watched the pair.

“Shut it, you two. Hey, Hawke. You never told me your brother was so cute,” she grinned.

“Aerin thinks you’re cute!” He immediately blushed from where he stood across the clearing, along with Aerin.

“Is this really the time for that, Hawke?” Aveline rubbed her temples as Ellana giggled in the background.

“Yup. Always. Especially right now.” Carver shook his head at his sister’s antics, smiling shyly at Aerin. Oh. He really is handsome. “Hey, Carver. You should buy her a drink after this. Regale her with tales of your heroics. Give her flowers. Spar with her so I can watch her pummel you into oblivion. Romantic stuff.”

Aerin laughed. “There’ll be time for that later, friend.” Hawke brightened, momentarily feeling her spirits lift, then sighed as the reality of their situation crashed back down upon her, drooping against a wall.

“Hawke?” Aveline called gently. “It’s worth it. Let’s bust some heads.”

“Right. Merrill, Varric, Isabela, Anders, stay to the outside, pick off templars as you’re able. The rest of you, stay close. We’re cornered. The templars know it. We know it. But this is bigger than their hate- or fear. We didn’t want this, but sometimes… Sometimes you just have to stand.”

“Na via lerno victoria.” Fenris’ deep voice rang out.

“Only the living know victory.” Aerin grinned at the elf. “That means no dying allowed! Let’s do this. Drinks on Varric later!”
She sat on the courtyard stairs, a shaking Dalish girl tucked under her arm, silently observing the ruins of the battle, remembering the insanity that was that night. First Enchanter Orsino, who turned to blood magic in his desperation, then into an abomination. The bloody statues that had come alive. His Knight-Commander who had red lyrium crafted into a sword, then was devoured by it, her statue now kneeling eerily in the ruins of the courtyard. It was all too much. Why is this world so convoluted? Cullen sighed, moving among his men and the injured, helping bandage wounds and set breaks, offering hollow words of comfort or the blade of mercy when no other recourse was found. He had stood up to Meredith. He finally took a side. The woman he had trusted, looked to in his times of doubt, his numerous crises of faith, begging for guidance, she would have led them all on the path to darkness. This is not what being a templar was about. All these broken bodies. They were protectors. Weren't they? No. He knew. If Hawke had not stood up to Meredith, defying her wishes, he would have followed through with the Right of Annulment. He would have willingly slaughtered every last mage, man, woman, and child, for no other reason than his superior had ordered him to. What kind of templar was he? What kind of man had he become? This was not what he wanted.

Looking up, he saw Aerin staring at him, expression inscrutable, and he blushed. Really? I'm blushing? After everything? He moved to approach her, but Hawke reached her first, extending her hand to the weary woman. Accepting the apostate's hand, Aerin stood up, pulling the girl next to her to her feet as well, and jogged down the stairs. Glancing at Cullen one last time, she smiled and nodded once, then was gone. He was confused. He had seen her cast, fighting against Meredith. Mage. Apostate. At first he thought she was on fire. Then he realized, she was the fire. The power that rolled off of her was like nothing he had ever felt before. It was terrifying, abhorrent, chaotic, and beautiful. He felt like he should be sick, like he should despise her, knowing that he slept with her, trusted her at his back, someone who could have turned into an abomination at any moment, and yet… Now he that was left standing there, watching the empty space where her brilliant eyes had just been, smiling at him, the only thing he wondered was why it was suddenly so hard to breathe.

Chapter End Notes

I realize the Kirkwall arc is pretty short. I wanted to keep the story moving, because what's coming next is super exciting. Don't worry though, the Kirkwall crew isn't going away anytime soon.

Anders is my favorite romance option, btw. Fenris is a close second. The only reason why Hawke is romancing Fenris is because if Fenris was single, he and Aerin would fall in love and just run away killing slavers the rest of their lives and ruin my story and I CAN'T HANDLE A LOVE RECTANGLE.
“So, you and Junior, huh?”

The streets were still covered in soot and ash, the already filthy buildings of Kirkwall now blackened by the fires that had taken days to completely snuff out. Trudging along, bodies aching, Varric, Aerin, and Fenris shuffled along, dragging themselves down the deserted streets of Hightown. They all had been spending every minute of their day trying to help clean up the city. Entire sectors of Kirkwall had been razed to the ground, bodies were being pulled out of the wreckage and stacked by the dozens. All the little children… She closed her eyes. The Gallows had all but been annihilated. There were so few mages left to guard, but also less templars. Death, at every turn.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, dwarf.”

“Even I’ve seen the looks he’s been giving you. Like a sad puppy, really.”

Aerin rolled her eyes at the men. “He’s friendly. That’s all. Stop looking for fodder for your torrid romances.”

Varric shrugged. “Eh, you could do worse than him. He used to be an angry pain in the ass, but he’s leveled out a lot since his Joining.”

Fenris grumbled, “No, he’s still a pain in the ass. Aerin has better taste that anyways.”

“Aw, Fen Fen, you do care!”

“I take back everything nice I have ever said about you.”

“So, who do you have your bright blue eye set on, hmm? Wait. It wasn’t Anders, was it? Shit. It was, wasn’t it?”

“Varric, no. Why does it have to be anyone? I liked Anders, but not like that. And now, he’s… well. You know.” Anders had not left Darktown once since the Gallows fell, even though precious few dared to approach the man in his clinic anymore. For the better, really. If Cullen ever got wind that the apostate turned terrorist was still in Kirktown, it would not end well.

Cullen. Every now and then she caught a glimpse of him, trying his best to direct relief efforts. In the absence of a viscount, and a Knight-Commander, the Ferelden Knight-Captain had assumed leadership of the city, albeit unwillingly, to surprising success. Well, surprising to him. Not so much to the ones who followed his orders. He was losing weight, hollowed, dark circles under his eyes indicated he wasn’t sleeping. Hawke and her companions tried the best as they could to help lessen his burden, doing the dirty work, tending to the wounded, foraging for food for the destitute, and dissuading looters, freeing him up to help rebuild the infrastructure.

Cullen and Aerin had exchanged precious few words with him being so busy since that fateful night. And when they had, he was obviously nervous around her. Varric had been highly entertained when Aerin had accompanied them to the Keep and Cullen, confidently ordering soldiers and nobles about, had taken one look at the petite elf and stumbled into a series of ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’ and rubbed his neck so much, the dwarf worried he might start a fire. They had only had
one real conversation of any substance. She had been standing in front of a ruined building, helping pull the large wooden beams out of the wreckage, knees buckling under the weight, when a bulky armored arm had reached out, catching the wood against his shoulder. She had looked up into warm, amber eyes, a lopsided smirk on his face, highlighting a new scar, the deep pink line just barely healed, on his upper lip. *Oh, dear.*

After they had pulled the beam to safety, stacking it in a pile with the rest, he had just stood there, silently observing her. “Something on my face?” she self consciously tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

“Oh, no. Well, yes. Soot, and dirt, but everyone here looks the same. I look worse, I imagine.” Gazing at his face, there was a slight smudge of ash on his upper cheek. Leaning in, she dragged her thumb across it, trying to wipe it off but just smearing it instead. He flinched at her touch. Jerking her hand back, she stared, embarrassment heating her cheeks, at a point just over his shoulder.

“Oops, sorry, I made it worse. Um. Is there something you needed, Knight-Captain?” He winced at his title, her sudden formality.


“Apostate?” Cullen nodded, suddenly unable to continue. Aerin sighed, crossed her arms guardedly, and looked back up at his weary face. “And what will you do, Ser Templar? Your Gallows isn’t exactly in the best shape to hold me. Not nearly enough templars in there to keep me down.”

“We have more templars coming from other cities,” he informed her, brow furrowed. Her eyes widened slightly at that.

“I see. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, after all. You did tell me you always do your duty. I hope you don’t expect me to go quietly, Knight-Commander.” She cocked her head at him, resting her hand on a hilt, every muscle poised for action.

“No. I did not think you would.” He smirked at her again. *Dammit, man, stop doing that!* It made her stomach do funny things, watching that scar pull his full lip up to devastating effect. “Ah…” *Kaflas. He saw me staring at his mouth.* Cullen blushed, reaching his hand up to rub his neck anxiously. “I wanted to warn you, actually. I wasn’t the only one who saw you cast. And Hawke, as well. The incoming templars probably won’t take too kindly to the Champion and her companions being apostates.” *Oh. He’s telling us to hide.* She watched him with a curious expression.

“Why the change of heart?”

His eyes clouded with pain and barely concealed disgust. “You were right. Meredith, she was… I followed her, overlooking the crimes she let my Order commit, because I was too blind in my fear and hatred of mages. I became a templar to protect people. Mages and common folk alike. Instead, she turned me into… No. I let myself be led astray. You and Hawke helped me see that. Too late. If I had listened earlier, maybe I—”

“You’d have been kicked out of the Order. Maybe executed. She was unstable, especially towards the end. Besides, what’s done is done. What matters now is that you did stand up to her, and what you will do from now on. Second chances, and all. Everyone deserves one.”

“Right.” He gave her a determined nod. Smiling, she leaned in close enough to smell the scent of
elderflower and oakmoss, from his soap, and cloves, from the oil on his armor, underneath the stench of sulfur and ash.

“Thank you, Cullen,” she murmured, standing on her tiptoes to press a chaste kiss to his stubbled cheek, well overdue for a shave. His eyes widened as her breath brushed against his skin. “Take care of yourself, templar.”

“Knight-Commander!” a messenger had ran up to him to then. “Lord Perran is waiting for an audience with you back at the Keep.” Cullen sighed.

“To work, then?” Quirking one last half smile at him, she had turned away and jogged down the blackened street, ruby hair swaying gently, a hint of lavender and honeysuckle in the breeze.

Sighing, Aerin shook her head free of the memory. “Come on. I need to finish packing and bathe at least one more time before we leave Kirkwall tonight.”

“I’m gonna miss you, Lightning.”

“I’m sure we’ll see each other again, Varric. Don’t cry.”

***

The sun beat down on the Vinmark Mountains, a faint breeze the only relief for the weary travelers as they slowly picked their way down the slope, gaze trained on the vast, rolling grassy hills opening up beyond them.

“How much farther?”

“Few weeks, at least, Hawke. Creators. You would think with all your running around Kirkwall that this would be a piece of cake,” Merrill giggled.

“I am a human. Not a fucking Void-taken mountain goat,” she groaned. “My thighs are killing me.”

Anders agreed, wincing at he rubbed at his muscles. “I’ve grown too soft hanging out in cities.”

“It’s your own damn fault we’re all out here,” Fenris snarled. “If it hadn’t been for you, none of this would have happened and Hawke would not have been forced to leave her own home like a common criminal in the middle of the night!”

“Well, pardon me for actually instigating change instead of just rolling around, waiting for them to kill off all the mages quietly!”

“Stop! Both of you. Please,” Ellana begged. “I can’t handle this anymore. We’re out here now, that’s all that matters.”

“She’s right, you know. Yelling about the past won’t change the future,” Aerin sighed. “We should reach Wildervale tomorrow. Where does everyone want to go?” She hated this. Their eyes, glazed with exhaustion and pain and suffering and so, so much rage and frustration. Hadn't they suffered enough? What crimes could they have possibly committed to deserve all of this? Brief moments of happiness and contentment, swallowed by the void that was the Blight, Qunari, slavery, abominations, the threat of Tranquility, death tainting everything they touched. What else did they have to endure before they could rest? Her friends. No, family. These people were her family now, even though they had only been together for less than a year. They had accepted her and Ellana, watched over them, fought with them, laughed and cried with them. And now, they had fractured
at the seams. As desperately as she wanted them all to stay together, she knew it wouldn’t last. Nothing good ever did. When would she ever learn? *Life is pain, princess. Anyone who tells you different is lying, or selling you something.*

“I’ll be heading out alone, I imagine. I’m the one everyone is hunting. I don’t want to put any of you in more danger than necessary.” Anders started walking again, heading towards the faint glow of a small town on the distant horizon.

Fenris sneered. “How noble of you.”

“Fenris.” Hawke’s voice, quiet and subdued, was enough to silence the elf for now.

“I think…” Ellana took a deep breath. “I think I’ve had enough of human cities. For a long time. I want to go back to the Clan. Merrill said she wants to come with me.” The other Dalish girl nodded. “Aerin?”

“I…” She helplessly threw up her hands. “I don’t know. Visiting the clan is nice enough, but staying there permanently… I think I’m too used to cities now.”

“Come with us,” Hawke begged. “Isabela is going to finish rounding up a crew, and then we can all go be pirates or something.”

“I still can’t believe she just stole a ship like that. Did you know I hate the ocean? Like really, really hate.”

“Plenty of ships with dead owners after all that mess. No one will notice one is gone. What do you want to do then?”

“You’re always welcome to tag along with me,” Anders smiled hopefully.

“No, I- I don’t know, Anders… I’ll think about it. Which way are you heading first?”

“East. Wycome, I think. It should be easy enough for me to blend in there.”

“That’s where Isabela said she’d meet us,” Hawke noted. “We can travel together there, at least. Then you can decide, Aerin.”

***

Saying goodbye to her little sister was harder this time. For the first time, she wasn’t leaving Ellana in the safety of the clan. She was leaving her on the side of a river bank, with days, possibly weeks left for her and Merrill to travel before they reached Lavellan through wild lands, overrun with wolves and bandits and gods know what else. The pale sunlight, shining through dark clouds, reflected off the rapids of the Minanter, the roar of the river echoing behind them, suiting her bleak and turbulent mood. Not far away, a ferryman stood patiently on the rocky shore, chewing on a pipe, waiting for the Dalish elves to finish saying their goodbyes.

“I’m going to check on you every night in the Fade until I know you’re safe. Creators, I… Please be careful, Elle. I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to you. Merrill. You do whatever it takes to keep her safe, understand? Anything.”

The blood mage’s eyes were huge as she nodded. “Of course. Oh! I’m going to miss all of you so much!” Sobbing, the girls threw themselves at their friends, Fenris patting them on the head, still awkward.
“We’ll see each other again, Merrill. I know it,” Hawke murmured. “Chin up.”

“I love you, Aerin.”

“Love you too, Elle.” Silently she watched as the two small girls—no, women—placed a few silvers in the grizzled ferryman's palm, carefully stepping onto the sturdy raft, the others hanging behind her, waiting. Turning to stare at each other, the sisters didn't look away, not even after the ferry reached the opposite shore, and faces could no longer be distinguished. A hand rested on her shoulder, gently gripping her in comfort.

"They'll be fine, Aerin. They're both too stubborn to be anything but," Fenris murmured. Shakily nodding, she picked up her pack.

"Let's go. Not much daylight left."

***

They smelled Wycome before they saw it. The smell of fish drifted across the flat lands, bringing painful, unwanted memories on the breeze. Six years since she had last been in this city with Zevran, fleeing Ferelden and Alistair and her first family of friends. And now she was here again with the scattered remnants of her second family, soon to be even smaller. They made camp for one last time under late summer stars together, spreading their bedrolls on the dying grass, sheltered by a few small weathered boulders.

“So, make your decision yet? Can’t put it off forever.” Fenris watched her from where he laid, across the small campfire, propped up on his elbows. Anders and Hawke turned toward the pair, intently listening.

“I…” Aerin bit her lip. “I can’t go with you Anders. I'm sorry, I’m still too… too pissed about Kirkwall. I get why you felt like you had to do it. You know I supported your cause. Creators knows Elthina was too spineless in her dealings with Meredith and Orsino. Maybe, if it was just her, but… the entire chantry. How many innocents died that night? I can’t…” She lowered her head, staring at the dry grass, hating her black soul for being such a hypocrite. “Maybe one day, we can move on from this. But that is not today.”

Releasing a deep breath, the mage slowly nodded, his bright, warm, golden honeyed eyes almost glowing in the firelight with melancholy. “I understand. I had hoped… Well, it doesn’t matter. I will always cherish the memory of our friendship. All of you. Maybe not you,” he scowled towards Fenris, who growled back.

“Somethings will never change,” Hawke sighed. “So, what? You coming off on your own? Or coming with us?”

“I’ll try the ship thing,” Aerin shuddered. “For awhile, at least. Maybe I’ll do better on the ocean now.”

“Water’s not such a big deal when you’ve seen an entire city destroyed by abominations, huh?”

“Something like that. Night, guys.” Anders smiled, bending down to kiss her hair.

“Thank you. For being my friend.”

He was gone when they awoke the next day, the only indication he was every there a small indentation in trampled grass. “That’s done then, at long last,” Fenris muttered. “Come on, we need to get a move on. Isabela should already be in the city waiting for us.”
“How’re we supposed to find her?”

Aerin snorted as she stomped out the remains of their fire, kicking ash over the still glowing embers. “Just following the sounds of brawling.” The sounds of the city reached out to greet them, the grassy path melting into a well worn dirt road, small cabins popping up with greater frequency as they neared the coast. Wycome was a decent sized town, overflowing with bars and taverns, more than she had ever seen in one city. Wine and ale poured freely, the sheer amount of drunk people stumbling about before noon staggering.

“How’s balls, is it a celebration of something I don’t know about?”

“Nope, just Wycome. Freest and drunkest city in the Marches.” Hawke shook her head in amazement, narrowly side stepping a stumbling woman who slurred at them to join her, dark red wine staining her linen gown. Fenris wrinkled his nose in silent disapproval and disgust, watching the revelry and debauchery that spilled over into the avenue, and firmly pushed the girls along in the direction of the docks.

Stepping onto the rickety boardwalk, Aerin’s head swung around, examining the district they found themselves passing through. Two to three story wooden buildings lined the muddy street, wide planks laid along the road to allow the carriages to slowly pass over. Most of the buildings were taverns and inns, this close to the docks. Swarthy men and women, skin darkened by the long days spent in the sun and eyes sharpened by experience borne of years of raiding and brawling, watched the trio as they passed, staring curiously at the tattooed elf with the giant greatsword strapped to his lean frame. An eye trained on the silent observers, Aerin kept walking sedately until a loud commotion from across the road caught her attention.

“Fuck you, asshole. I won that hand fair and square!” Hawke grinned as an unfortunate man, bleary eyed and completely soused, smashed through a window, falling face first into the mud.

“Think we found her.” Sure enough, a dark haired Rivaini in a familiar ensemble of thigh high leather boots and a cream corset stalked out of the bar, curved daggers glinting at her side. Reaching down to the fallen man, she deftly snatched up the pouch of coins laying in his open hand, smirking as she tucked it into her shirt.

“Robbing the unconscious now, are we?” Fenris drawled. Turning sharply to find the source of the voice, Isabela’s face lit up as she spotted her friends.

“There you lot are, finally! I’ve been stuck in this bloody place for over a week now. I was getting bored. You know how I get when I’m bored. Just you three? Where did my kittens go?”

Following the pirate as she led them down the road to the waterfront, Aerin sighed. “Ellana and Merrill headed to the Dalish. Kirkwall was too much for them.”

“It was too much for all of us,” she muttered. “So, there she is. Meet the Tempest. Isn’t she gorgeous?” The pirate sighed dreamily, gesturing grandly at the harbor, filled with everything from tiny fishing boats patched together with driftwood, to sleek clippers with their low sails and narrow hulls, to a massive galleon moored further out, thick masts towering towards the sky. The vessel the Rivaini indicated was a modest sized, two masted brigantine that rocked gently in the shallow waters, bright scarlet flags hoisted high and whipping in the crisp wind.

“Where’d you get that name?” Hawke laughed.

“From a story. There was a female rogue, that her opponents always underestimated. She fought such glorious battles, forcing all her foes to kneel in front of her strength and beauty. Very
romantic. I thought it was fun.”

Aerin choked on her breath. “You’re fucking kidding me. You named your ship after me? Izzy, I’m touched.”

Fenris stopped in his tracks, a sudden bellowing laugh shaking his body as he gasped out, “Oh, this is rich.”

Isabela eyed the laughing elf nervously, unsure of how to react to this previously unheard of sign of gaiety of life in the brooding man. “You mean you were the Tempest? I heard about it in Denerim.”

“Aedan Cousland told me, that what I was nicknamed outside of Tevinter,” she giggled. “This is so great.”

Chucking still, Fenris leaned on a post, gazing out over the water. “So where to first?”

“Figured we’d just sort of sail around first, teach you guys the ropes, get you used to the ship. Stop in at Llomerryn to figure out where the jobs are coming from. Then, wherever we want. Or wherever the gold is. World is our clam. Or oyster. Mm, oysters. Dammit, now I’m hungry.”

The crew, rough and surprisingly cohesive despite the short time they had been together, shouted greetings to their captain as she came aboard up the gangplank, immediately roaring orders in a stern and authoritative tone none of her companions had ever heard before. "Oh, that's hot," Hawke grinned, watching the other rogue appreciatively. Fenris sniffed. Giggling, Aerin stumbled as she felt the floor roll gently under their feet, bracing herself against the smooth railing as she struggled for balance. Gods, those are a lot of ropes. Ok. I can do this. Just... don't look at the water. While you're on a ship. Surrounded by water. This is going to be fun, dammit. I hope.

Chapter End Notes

I walked on a replica of a Spanish galleon once. And squeed the entire time. I have a slight obsession with pirate/Regency-era romance novels. Ooh. Pirate Captain Alistair vs the Royal Navy Lord Captain Cullen anyone?
The next few months were some of the most carefree times she had ever experienced. Autumn and winter aboard the Tempest passed with blinding speed as they traveled around the Amaranthine Ocean and the Rialto Bay, mostly running smuggling operations, hiding out at sea and in Llomerryn, a lawless island notorious as a pirate haunt. Fenris and Aerin had found the raider town rather overwhelming, the constant fighting and carousing and general debauchery grating on their nerves after a few days. “It’s like a town full of Isabellas,” Fenris had remarked with horror. Hawke didn’t care much one way or another. She was tired, an exhaustion no amount of sleep could cure, missing the rest of her friends, her soul still weary from Kirkwall.

The city had taken a lot out of all of them, Aerin mused. Such fond memories, tainted by so much destruction. Isn’t that how it goes for me now? First Denerim. Now Kirkwall. What’s next? How many more cities must I watch burn? When can I finally find a place to call home? Grunting, she tugged on the thick rope in her hand, tying it off securely to the railing. Sailing wasn’t so bad in short doses, she decided. The fresh sea air and the freedom on the ocean was exhilarating, but she missed solid ground and food that wasn’t dried and preserved and the assurance that she wouldn’t be swept overboard to die a horrible watery death. The last storm they had run through left her feeling panicked and anxious, constantly scanning the skies for signs of more angry clouds. It had been a close call, the ship rolling and pitching all night, as the crew took shifts trying to keep the brigantine afloat in the pitch black darkness. They had lost two men to the rough waters. Aerin decided she had had enough of the pirate life after that.

So now the Tempest was cutting through the waves, heading for the small city of Bastion, at the southern tip of Antiva. Hawke decided she and Fenris would come with Aerin, wanting to travel a bit more, see countries she had only read about in books. They could find a place to live, pick up some work, maybe settle down. It was as good idea as any.

“Should reach land tomorrow,” Isabela sighed. “I’m going to miss you, Aer Aer. Y’know, if you ever had a mind to pick up pirating as a career, you and me could make a fortune. Just think of it!”

“Yes, the gold, the adventure, the risk of drowning and sharks. I’ll stick to land i think,” Aerin replied wryly.

“Don’t let her change your mind, I need to get off this blasted ship as much as you do. Maybe more,” Fenris muttered, glaring at the offending water that surrounded them for miles.

“I won’t miss you, elf,” the pirate stuck her tongue out at him.

“Keep your tongue away from me, I don’t know where it’s been.”

Giggling, Aerin leaned against the rail, affectionately watching the pair bicker. “You two act like an old married couple. It’s endearing, if slightly annoying.”

“Well, now I’m offended.”

“Shut it, elfy.”

***
Footsteps softly padded through the empty streets of Starkhaven, deserted this time of night, most of the respectable populace tucked in their beds. A light spring breeze gently drifted over two elves as they quietly wandered the pristine, well lit streets back to the alienage, tired after a job well done, pouches of silver tucked securely into their belts.

“Got a tip a merchant caravan is looked for sellswords. Heading to Ansburg. Paying good coin, too. Honest work, instead of this skulking about that you insist on dragging me into.” Fenris stretched, yawning slightly.

“Ansburg,” Aerin mused. “Could go find Lavellan after that, pop in for a little visit.”

The trio had stayed in Antiva for awhile, before heading to Rivain. Then back down the to Free Marches, settling in a tiny town about three days west of Wycome. It hadn’t worked. After only two weeks, everyone was ready to run, too restless to stay content in a quiet, country life. So instead, they bounced around the Free Marches, living as mercenaries and assassins, running from the templars, picking up other odd jobs as they came along. It was an easy matter to start a rumor that La Sirena was in town, and contracts would begin trickling in. When too many met their mysterious end within such a short time frame as to attract suspicion, they would move on again. They had just arrived in Starkhaven three weeks ago. Aerin estimated maybe four more weeks before they had to leave again. *Maybe Ostwick next. Heard it’s nice there.*

Pushing in the door of their little apartment, Fenris called out, “We’re back!”

A voice called from the kitchen, “In her- OW! Andraste’s bloody tits, this stupid fucking-” Aerin walked into the kitchen, amusement dancing across her face.

“Making supper again? Let’s try not to burn down the building this time, hmm?” Hawke scowled. “Domestic things,” she said it like it was a dirty word, “are stupid.” Rolling her eyes, Aerin conjured a thin layer of ice to lay over her friend’s burnt hand, already blistering. “Well, it’s done anyhow. I think. Hopefully we don’t all get sick. Or die. Wouldn’t that be ironic? The Champion of Kirkwall killed by a sauteed chicken.” Hesitantly poking at the charred meat, Fenris cautiously filled their plates, muttering under his breath that it was nice knowing them all.

As they ate, the conversation drifted to mundane things. The next job, how long they would be gone, where they would go next when their welcome had run out. “How did tonight go?”

Aerin shrugged. “Nothing out of the ordinary, just spying on a nobleman’s wife fucking his cousin. Guy was pissed, wanted to take out a contract on her. But no other dirt on her, so… We should probably take that caravan job. Money will be getting tight soon.”

Hawke yawned, nodding. She generally found her own odd jobs during the day, since her attempts at stealth were still pitiful, leaving Fenris and Aerin to pick up most of the Sirena's jobs. Saying their goodnights, the couple disappeared into their little room, Aerin bedding down in main room of their pitiful apartment. Sighing, her thoughts drifted toward the future.

She was aware she couldn’t stay with Hawke and Fenris forever. Even though they never made her feel like she was, Aerin couldn’t help be think she was just a third wheel. Without her, they would have remained at sea with Isabela. But where would she go? The life of an assassin was a dark, lonely one. Tolerable when she had Zevran, and now Fenris, but alone? She felt out of place with the Dalish. Where else could she go? *Hmm. I haven’t been to Orlais yet. Maybe I’ll like it there? Or Nevarra. Probably not Nevarra. The Mortalitasi creep me out. I wonder where Zev is. Oh well. These are problems for later, at least. Tomorrow I need to find that merchant and see if he’ll hire us.*
The sun was warm and bracingly hot, blinding in her eyes as Aerin briskly walked along the crowded street, heading east to the business district, ignoring the people that she passed who stared at her. She was used to it by now. Lost in her own mind, she didn’t notice the dark man standing in a side alcove, watching her closely. A shrill wolf's whistle made her pause and turn, bristling, to glare at the degenerate who dared attempt to catcall her. A familiar grin under blonde hair leered at her.

“Zevran!” she squealed, sprinting across the street and throwing herself at him. “Gods, I missed you! It’s been forever!” He chuckled, his warm, Antivan accent soothing her heart.

“I missed you as well, bella. Been looking for you for awhile. You’re getting more difficult to track. I’m so proud of you,” he kissed her head as she giggled. “Are you in a hurry? We should catch up.”

“Yes, please! I have to see about a job now, but meet me in the tavern just outside the alienage at sundown? I’ll introduce you to Hawke and Fenris.” He raised his eyebrows.

“So the Champion is here? Interesting. Very well. I’ll meet you there later.” Blowing another kiss, he melted back into the shadows. Beaming with joy at having her friend back, Aerin practically skipped the rest of the way to the merchant, a huge grin across her face.

The tavern was crowded, but Fenris managed to convince a group of elves to vacate their booth, courtesy of his friendly, menacing glower. Sliding into the now empty table, Aerin sat sideways, leaning against the wall to get a better view of her the assassin. He brought her more news, of Ferelden, the state of the Crows, how House Arainai had virtually disappeared into the murky depths of the guild. She smiled at that. “Are they still after you?”

He nodded. “I suspect they always will be. Some of them, at least, are on my side. Unwillingly, perhaps, but whatever works.” He grinned. “I have a proposition for you, Aerin.”

“Oh?” she raised her brow. “Is it a she? Does she have as nice a pair of tits as Isabela? Otherwise, no dice.” He laughed, ridiculously pleased at this new side of her, suspecting their shared Rivaini acquaintance had much to do with it.

“I’d be hard pressed to ever find a woman with as magnificent breasts as our pirate.” Hawke scowled, staring down at her own chest. Fenris nudged her affectionately. “Actually, it does involve Isabela. We have a mutual friend, who needs… help. Of the sneaky, dangerous sort. He pays well.”

“Oh? Do I know this friend as well?”

Zevran’s expression grew somber, eyeing the two across from him. ”They’re trustworthy, Zev. It's okay.” Nodding, he lowered his head, staring down into his ale, voice lowering.

“It’s Alistair.” She sat up straight. “He… found some information of... personal import. Information that leads him to the Crow archives in Antiva. He asked me to put him in touch with people that can take him there. Isabela’s offered to take him on her ship. I believe she’s bamboozled your dwarven friend into joining her as well. Your skill would be most welcome, I should think. I know you and Alistair…”

Aerin sat mute, staring at a splinter on the rough table. She felt… she wasn’t sure how she felt. She
shouldn’t go, of course. There was too much between them. It was better to leave their past behind. But, if Alistair was truly trying to break into the Crow’s archives, the man that couldn’t even sneak up on a drunk, snoring Oghren—he was dead. But if she went... If she didn’t go, and he died, she would never forgive herself. Sighing, she let her head fall forward, banging it against the table. Hawke pat her hair sympathetically.

“I’ll go. I… vishante kaffas, I have to go. What the hell is he thinking? The Crow archives? World-renowned assassins? And that clumsy warrior is just going to go waltz in the front door, I expect?” she groaned.

“Isabela estimates they’ll land in Antiva City the first week of Bloomingtide.”

“So a little under four weeks.” She drummed her fingers on the tabletop, thinking. “What about you guys?”

Hawke shrugged. “We have that job with the caravan, right? Might as well stay here for awhile, save up some money. You know I’m rubbish at stealth.” Her lover nodded.

“Well. If I leave tomorrow, I can make it to Antiva City in about three weeks. Maybe less, if the weather holds. You coming Zev?”

“Unfortunately, no. I have a previous appointment in Qarinus, of all places.” Aerin frowned.

“Why is it always Tevinter? Be careful. Please.” He gave her a beauteous smile.

“When am I ever not? Now come, regale me of your tales of what you have done in my absence.”

“Regale. Funny word for ‘torment me by telling me horrifying stories of blood magic and abominations’.”

“Fenris, be nice.”

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Aerin sat on a roof, feet dangling over the edge, bottle of whiskey rolling between her fingers. To the passersby, she looked like just another drunk person, lazing about between jobs. Her eyes scanned the harbor below, patiently waiting for the two masted brigantine to dock. The Tempest. There she is. She watched as the sturdy ship slowly rowed into the shallow waters, throwing anchor at the far side of the docks. Jumping down from her perch, she took another swig of liquor as she casually sauntered down, heart pounding like thunder.

Will he be upset that I’m here? Happy? If he asks me to come back with him again… Shaking her head, she cleared her train of thought, thinking that it was useless worrying over what ifs. Pausing at the end of the road, she studied the people walking down the gangplank. A striking Rivaini woman, black waves pulled back in a bright red scarf, wearing an overly tight cream corset, black leather pants, thigh high leather boots, and wickedly curved daggers sheathed at her sides. At the back, a stocky, roguish dwarf with blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, a red brocade jacket embroidered with gold, and an intricate crossbow strapped to his back. And between the two… Alistair. He was wearing lighter armor than he had been last time she had seen him, splintmail, like he wore the first time she had met him. Except this set was in silverite tinted reddish gold, inlaid with dragon bone. A dark burgundy cloak was clasped around his broad shoulders. He walked with such confidence, each step firmly planted, head held high, just as a king should, she smiled. Aerin left her own navy blue cloak hood up as she approached them.

“Right on time, look at that,” Isabela grinned. Alistair watched her curiously.
“Is this the other you told me about then?”

“Your Majesty,” Aerin bowed. “Come, it’s not safe out here.” The King stared.

“I know that voice. Aerin.” His tone was almost accusatory.

“Not here.” Waving her hand at them, the trio picked up their bags to follow the elf through the narrow, winding, dimly lit streets to a small inn, the smell of spices and smoke rolling out of the windows. Peeking in the back door, she ushered them inside and up the tiny stairwell. Only after she inspected the room and its furnishing and deemed it safe were the others were let in. A long breath rumbled out of her chest as she turned to face the king. “Don’t you have any armor that’s less… shiny and royal? You stand out like a lighthouse.”

Alistair flushed. “Ah, not really. Kings aren’t supposed to have ratty armor, don’t you know?” She frowned.

“I’ll see if I can scrounge up anything. While no one knows you are here, your very appearance is... Ugh,” she turned to Varric. “Hey dwarf. It’s so good to see you again.”

The dwarf chuckled. “Here I thought you had forgotten I existed. I’m short, I know, but not that short.”

“I missed your chest hair,” she teased.

“I know you did, Lightning. So what’s our move, Your Majesty?”

He sighed, sitting down on a nearby chair, never taking his eyes of off Aerin. “Zevran put me in contact with a man who gave me information about… Maric. He may not have died in a shipwreck. The information indicated he was kidnapped by the Crows. I need to get into the archive, make sure the information is real.”

“I don’t suppose you’d just let us go in there and get it for you? Gods, Alistair, you’re a king, you can’t just-”

“I know what I am, Aerin.” His tone was more forceful and sharper than she had ever heard from him. “But I have to go. I need to see it with my own eyes.” Slowly nodding, she exhaled. “Alright. Izzy. Will you come scout with me tonight?” The pirate slammed the liquor in her cup back. Where did even get that? Wiping her mouth, she stood up.

“Let’s go stir up some trouble then.”

“No trouble. Not yet,” Aerin smiled. Unfastening her swords, moving her daggers to their place on her hips, she handed them to Alistair. “Keep them safe.” Drawing her hood back up, she slid out the door, Isabela on her heels.

Alistair let out a groan once the girls were gone. “Of all the people, why did she have to be the one to come?”

Varric chuckled. “She’s the best, Your Majesty.”

“Alistair. Maker’s balls, please call me Alistair.” The dwarf liked this king. He was much more down to earth than those other poncy nobles he’s met. Although, he felt for the poor guy. In love with someone he couldn’t have, not like he wanted. It was a miserable existence. “Do you know… has she… found anyone else? In Kirkwall?”
The rogue leaned back, thinking. “I asked her once, why she hadn’t found anyone. Pretty girl like her, strong, smart. She can be kind of… cold, standoffish, but under all that, she’s got one of the most beautiful souls I’ve ever seen.” Alistair nodded in agreement. “She told me she already had the love of her life, so nothing else would ever compare. And that with how broken she was, she didn’t deserve that love anymore.”

His heart stopped beating, he was sure. The sheer pain that blossomed in his chest, wrenching his heart into pieces, like a thousand knives dragging down his flesh, pressing into his lungs- Alistair was positive he wouldn’t survive. Oh Maker. What has your life been like these last several years? He had heard about Kirkwall, the devastation the city had endured. What had she seen? Where had she been since leaving? Varric was watching him closely. Alistair cleared his throat. “Why—” his voice broke, “why does she think that? That she’s not deserving?”

“Caused too much death, I expect. Hawke said a similar thing once. All the constant fighting and killing, gets to you after awhile. Especially kind souls like them, tears them down. Too bad she’s too damn good at what she does. If she doesn’t find a new line of work soon, I worry…” he sighed.

A frown creased Alistair’s face. “What exactly does she do these days?”

“Didn’t Zevran tell you? He and Lightning ran together these past few years before Kirkwall. Then Fenris picked up where the Antivan left off. Zevran’s the fearsome Black Shadow to the Crows and she’s—”

“La Sirena,” he breathed. The legendary assassin. Traveling all over Thedas to those who have need of her service, as long as you have the coin to pay. It was said her kill count was in the hundreds now. “Maker.” Burying his face in his hands, he tried to not believe it. Not his sweet Aerin, who laughed at his stupid jokes, and rolled around in the dirt with every puppy she saw, who promised him she wanted a better life than the neverending war she had known. But what else did she have? What other skills? And all alone…

He had to find a way to remind her of who she was, bring her back. Even if he never got to hold her again, even if he had to completely let her go, as long as she was safe, and whole, he would be content with that.

Chapter End Notes

MOAR ALISTAIR.
“Kaffas. Is here really just going to waltz up there and what, tell them he’s the King of Ferelden and to let him in?”

A masculine voice drifted up to them. “My name is Alistair, and I’m the King of Ferelden. Son of Maric the Savior? You’re… not really convinced, are you?” Aerin groaned and banged her ahead against the stone wall where Alistair had told them to wait.

Varric sighed. “Let’s go, kids.” They were breaking into the archives tonight. Aerin wanted more time to figure out a safer back entrance, but Alistair insisted they didn’t have time, and to go in through the front door. Tonight. The three rogues quickly vaulted onto the low wall.


“On it!” he called, kneeling to aim Bianca. He fired. “Two down! Three nights in Antiva, and already the shooting starts. Getting a late start, aren’t we?” Isabela and Aerin ran ahead to where more shouts were echoing. The elf sprinted up behind a guard that was trying to sneak up on the king, withdrawing a dagger and smoothly sliding it up in the back of his ribcage. Across the yard, the pirate had her arms locked around another man’s shoulders in a lover’s embrace, dagger slicing into his throat. Alistair frowned.

“You two didn’t have to kill them.”

The Rivaini rolled her eyes. “You killed him the moment you gave him your name. Who does that anyways?”

“Fine, fine. Let’s get this over with—”

“Is that his commanding voice?”

“-before the Crows find us raiding their archive please?”

Aerin snorted. “If you had let me find a back way in, we’d already be in there. Maybe.” The archive was circular, appearing like a giant library, rows and rows of shelves lining the room filled with scrolls, notes, recipes, and books. On the floor, glass cases held strange artifacts, or maybe trophies. She wasn’t sure which. Didn’t care much either. “Wait!” she yelled, grabbing Alistair’s arm as he went to step into the room. “You should know better than to just stroll into a place like this. Let the dwarf work.”

Varric got down on his knees, searching the tile floors for- “Got it!” Pressing a hidden trigger, metal darts shot out at knee level just where Alistair was about to step. The king’s face paled. “Keep watching.” A deep rumbling sound vibrated through the entire room, the grinding of metal gears coming from below. Giant, circular blades rose from the floor, spinning like windmills of death, while curved blades swung from the ceiling. “It’s called a Dragons’ Creché. A building designed to kill you. They take decades to construct.” Alistair made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a squeak. Letting Varric lead the way, the others watched as he efficiently dismantled all the traps. “Falling mountain. Tripwire. Poison wind. Wheel of liquid pain. Thief’s folly, pretty obvious one too. Fire fountain- really? With all this paper?”
“If they can’t have it, no one will?” Aerin guessed. “You need help, Alistair?”

“Ah, no. Just give me time.” The king pulled down scroll after scroll, scanning each one briefly before tossing it with a sound of frustration in a growing pile behind him. They all froze as a blinding light flooded the room.

“Halt! Found all the traps but missed the alarm,” a smug voice called.

Aerin glared at Varric. “You suck.” He pouted.

“Hello, Claudio,” Isabela sneered.

The black haired man looked delighted, disturbingly so. Aerin decided she wanted to kill him. “Isabela! If you’re this desperate for coin already, I’m sure I can you an alley somewhere.” *Yep. Definitely gonna kill him.*

“Wait!” Dammit, Alistair. “Are you Claudio Valisti?”

His eyes widened in recognition as he burst into a huge grin. “King Alistair? Ah! I wasn’t expecting you to come personally!” He strode up to the king, patting him on the back.

“I had to know it was real.” Alistair’s voice was low, serious.

“You are convinced then-”

“Yes.”

“And Velabanchel-”

“Yes.” Claudio glanced over at the rogues.

“So you don’t trust them, then.” Aerin felt a pang in her chest. *Well, why should he trust you? You don’t know this man.* It was true. The man she loved and knew was a simple Grey Warden, sweet and innocent. This man was a king. Of an entire country. “Go. You have magnificently escaped our pursuit. Know that I cannot aid you further.” With a deep bow, Valisti exited the room, taking his guards with him.

“Let’s go.” Alistair turned away, scroll tightly clutched in his hand.

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Aerin watched Alistair. He wasn’t even blushing. They were sitting in a damned brothel, half naked women lounging on cushions, draped alluringly across chaises and other men, and the man wasn’t even ruffled. That proved to her more than anything that she didn’t know him anymore. What else had changed?

“Prince Claudio Valisti,” Isabela muttered. “He was my ex-husband’s business partner.”

“The one you had killed?” Varric asked. Isabela sat up, a rare sober expression on her lovely features.

“Alistair. Whatever he’s said, whatever he’s done, you mustn’t believe-”

“I know.” He stood up, walking out onto the balcony, taking a gulping breath of the warm night air.
Varric followed. “Look, I get it. But this job would be best handled by someone who can afford it. Not the man with a reputation, a crown, to protect.”

“My reputation is the least of my concerns, Varric,” Alistair muttered, forehead pressed to cool stone.

“Well, I tried. So Velabanchel?”

“It’s the Crow’s prison. On an island. No one’s ever escaped. Or infiltrated it successfully,” Aerin replied. “It’s a suicide mission.”

“Should we bake them a cake with a file hidden inside instead?” Varric asked, stroking his chin.

“That never works,” Isabela scoffed.

Alistair’s low tone cut across their banter. “I’m breaking in tonight. With or without your help.”

Sighing, Aerin stood up, shaking her head in the cloudy smoke from the hookahs the prostitutes favored here. “Good thing I specialize in suicide missions then.”

“You’re coming?”

“You’re kidding right?” she stared at him. “After all that work we went through putting you on the throne, I’m not going to let you kill yourself to get out of it. Aedan would be so mad at me.” She gave him a lopsided smirk. Alistair smiled back, a tentative, cautious thing. He still wasn’t quite sure where they stood, but he knew there was no one else he’d rather have guarding his back.

***

Aerin hated ships. So much. “How are we even alive?” Isabela groaned. By some miracle, they had gotten into the heavily guarded fortress, defended themselves against dozens of guards—actually ran from would be a better word—and gotten a frail and matted old man out back onto the Tempest with minimal blood loss. “So who is that man? I’m guess it wasn’t the one you were hoping for, was it?”

“No, it- ow! Aerin!”

“Stop squirming, you’re making it worse!” she snapped, trying to clean the deep gash in his upper arm. “You’re such a baby, I swear.”

He glowered. “Am not.” She rolled her eyes, picked up a needle and heated it with her fire until it glowed like an ember. “No, it’s not Maric. Prince Claudio was the one who sent me the information that he’d been captured by the Crows. The old man recognized me as Maric’s son. I’m hoping he’ll have answers.”

“The question is why… would Valisti give you that information? What does he get out of it?” Aerin mused, carefully stitching up Alistair’s arm. He tried to ignore the sensation of her cool fingers trailing across his flushed skin, unnerving and yet so familiar. Tying off the thread, she bit the ends to cut it. “All done. Shall we go talk to our new friend?”

Down in the galley, Alistair towered over the gnarled old man. “Looking for King Maric, right? He was my cellmate,” his voice was gravely from the years of disuse and abuse. “It was the Witch of the Wilds who freed him.” Aerin and Alistair's eyes both flew open. “She took Maric away. He didn’t fight her. Never saw him again.”
“Flemeth.” Aerin’s head spun. She hadn’t thought of Asha’bellanar in years. What did she want with Maric?

“Flemeth isn’t the only Witch of the Wilds,” Isabela replied. “This witch is another one, right? An Antivan legend?”

“Her name is Yavana, the Beast of the Tellari Swamps. Hey, boy. I had children once.” His gaze dropped, ghosts flitting across his rheumy eyes. “Maric, before he disappeared, he left a message. He said he had to do it. He said he was sorry.” Alistair’s face was unreadable as he stormed out the galley.

Aerin climbed out of the belly of the ship behind him, watching him from a few paces behind as he stared out to sea. “Imagining it’s a big bowl of soup?” she called. The memory made him chuckle.

“I definitely feel like a bowl of Ferelden pea and lamb stew. Boiled and mashed until it’s unrecognizable.” He lowered his head. “My father escaped, Aerin. I… I need to know if he’s alive still. I need to know…”

“If he abandoned you?” Alistair gave an very unkingly snort.

“You can’t abandon someone you never had. No. If he abandoned his kingdom. Isabela,” he raised his voice to where the captain was leaning against a barrel, “will you take me to the Tellari swamps?”

“For you?” she batted her eyelashes, “Anything. But just the once. Anselmo! Celso! Hands out of your trousers and up on the mast!”

“She’s different when she’s being captain. I sort of like it.”

Aerin grinned at Alistair. “Like them commanding do you?” He blushed and began stammering. Oh? So the old Alistair is still in there somewhere? A wave of guilt crashed into her. I shouldn’t be teasing him like that. Not after… “Ah. I’m sorry. That was inappropriate of me.”

He smirked. “I always did prefer it when you were though.” She laughed. Laughed. How long had it been since he heard that sound? It still had the same effect on him. His chest swelled, his limbs got all tingly, and a ridiculous grin plastered itself across his face and eyes. She blushed, turning away to look back at the ship.

“Alistair…”

“No, it’s alright.” He leaned his hip against the rail, watching her. “I get it. I wish things could be different between us, but I understand why they can’t. But I… Well, I don’t know if it’s possible, but I’d like to still be friends? Or something. Acquaintances? Battle buddies? Traveling partner?”

“Friends. Friends would be nice.”

“It’s settled then.” He held out a gloved hand. Aerin slipped her hand into his and gave him her best court curtsy as Alistair grandly bowed over it.

“‘And the dashing king swept the beautiful lady into his chiseled arms, clutching her tight as his overwhelming masculinity made her tremble-’”

“Quit poking for more book fodder, Varric.”

“Can’t blame a man for trying.”
“Yes, I can.”

***

The Tellari swamps in western Antiva were the same as she remember from her time in the Dalish. Except they were much further inland than she had ever been before. The air was thick, like walking underwater, mud squelching up to their knees, trying to suck their boots off into the murky depths. Alistair jumped at every little sound, still as adept as stealth as ever. She watched him brandish his sword at a chittering squirrel who looked as if it were scolding him.

“What are we looking for exactly?” Isabela glared at the offending mud, now covering her entire backside.

“Something unusual,” Alistair muttered.

“Like a witch on a broomstick?”

“That would do.”

“Or a crocodile gnawing on our corpses?”

“Not so much that.”

Aerin hissed, “Shh!” Something’s coming. Something big.” She held her breath, tracking the shadow of-

“DRAGON!”

A massive, dark purple dragon, three times of the size of they had fought back in Haven, landed before them, ripping out the tall marsh trees with ease, flinging them to the side as if they were matchsticks.

“Venhedis. Alistair, RUN!” Aerin took up a defensive stance, rushing the nearest leg as Isabela took the other. The dragon screamed as the Rivaini’s dagger dug into the tender flesh between its claws, whipping its tail into her stomach, slamming into a tree 100 paces away. “Izzy! Alistair! Why aren’t you running? Get out of here!” the elf shouted. "Dammit!" Varric wheezed as a massive claw pinned him to the ground.

“No,” Alistair gritted out, raising his shield and sword to his eye level. The dragon whirled on him and Aerin’s heart stopped. Nothing. The creature merely stared at the king like he was an interesting bit of string. Realization dawn on his face. “Yavana?”

“No,” a sultry voice called out, “I am Yavana.” A voluptuous, black haired woman dressed in a corset, a strategically placed loin cloth that fell to her feet, and thigh high leather boots appeared. Her jagged pauldrons were eerily reminiscent of Asha’bellanar’s armor. She wore a skull of some four horned beast on her head, another skull, of a ram, perched atop her staff.

“Oh, hello,” Isabela groaned out. Aerin leaned down to help her friend up out of the mud.

“Why didn’t it kill us?” Alistair watched as Yavana sent her dragon away.

“She can smell the old blood in you, son of kings.” She cupped his face, trailing her fingers across his stern jawline. “Mmm…”

He jerked back. “Don’t. I know Morrigan. I didn’t trust her, and I certainly don’t trust you.”
“Oh, you know my sister? I didn’t know.”

“I also know Flemeth. Your mother. The one who likes to possess her daughters.”

Yavana laughed sharply. “Is that what my sister told you? The poor child. It is a gift. It doesn’t concern you either way. Go back, son of kings. Nothing but misery awaits you here.”


The witch paused. “Very well. Follow.” Leading them through the dense swamp, Yavana strode confidently in front as the travelers stumbled into a clearing, an ancient, crumbling temple in the middle. The peaked roof and smooth columns reminded Aerin of the Greek temples from long ago. Glowing red eyes set in the massive armored skull of the dragon watched them from atop the roof. “The Silent Grove.” She swept her hands out in a grand gesture. “Built after the fall of the Imperium, by those who knew the dragons would need protection from the ignorance of mankind. How many dragons have died since? It was nearly a tragedy for us all.” Aerin and Isabela both made matching choking gasps. “In destroying what it does not understand, mankind would destroy itself. The blood of dragons is the blood of the world,” Yavana glared.

“What does any of this have to do with Maric?” Frustration laced Alistair’s voice.

“Years ago, my mother saved your father’s life. He was permitted to restore his kingdom and play ruler until his children were grown. But after, he was to come here. It is what he agreed to.”

“So what happened? Did you kill King Maric?” Varric growled.

“I did not. I cannot speak for others. Now you have all the answers anyone will ever give, so I give you this mercy: Abandon your quest. What you seek is forever beyond your reach.” Alistair roared and charged the witch.

“Don’t you dare turn us away!” With a lazy wave of her hand, thick vines shot out of the ground and securely wrapped themselves around Alistair’s body and limbs. Kaffas! Aerin raced toward him, slashing at the plant with her daggers.

“I permitted this much out of respect for your father. Take consolation in the fact his life had meaning. Most do not,” Yavana called over her shoulder, disappearing into the temple. Alistair furious gaze followed her, as if he were trying to burn down the place with his mind. Aerin laid a hand on his shoulder, only for him to shrug it off as he began to stomp back to the ship.

“You’re not stupid Alistair,” Aerin murmured once they had walked a good distance away, “You knew she wouldn’t bring out Maric with a hug and a cup of tea. What were you expecting?”


Whirling around, she saw Prince Claudio standing there, immensely pleased, twelve soldiers poised to attack behind him. Damn this swamp! I can’t hear anything here! Unsheathing her swords, she moved to block Alistair from the Antivan.

“My thanks for showing us the path,” he smirked. “My master has been looking for this place for years. Take the king. Kill the others.”

“Over my dead body,” Aerin snarled, gathering her magic. A burning pain lanced through her body, vision growing dim momentarily from the shock. Looking down, she saw an arrow lodged in her shoulder, shot from behind. Gritting her teeth from the pain, she continued to weave. Suddenly
her world went fuzzy. *Fuck. The arrow was poisoned.* Through hazy sight, she watched the prince viciously kicked the injured pirate in her face, flinging her backwards into the mud.

“Stop! We surrender!” *Like hell we do,* Aerin tried to say. But her voice wasn’t working. Nothing was right now. “If you want me alive, let them go. And I’ll surrender.”

“Alistair…” Varric’s voice was filled with worry.

“Get Aerin to safety, go back to Ferelden. Find Teagan, he’ll pay you, and tell him what happened. Thank you all.” Aerin tried to scream, tried to stand and fight, but all she saw was a span of dwarven chest hair as her vision went totally black.

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A blinding flash of magic filled the stone room, illuminating the ancient murals carved into the walls. Aerin launched up onto her feet, gasping, “Alistair! Where-”

Yavana watched her. “Go. Your friend needs you.” *She healed me?* Nodding her thanks, she turned and ran out of the Silent Grove with her friends, also restored to health.

“The hell was that?”

Varric grunted. “Rivaini was able to suck out a decent amount of poison, but the Witch was our only hope. You wouldn’t have made to the ship. She healed all of us, after I made a deal with her to help us.” Aerin was confused. *That was a close one then.*

“What’s our part of the deal?”

“Not entirely sure.”

“Up ahead,” Isabela whispered. “Varric, there’s a ledge up there. Hide and pick them off. Aerin,” she pointed at a few low hanging trees over their camp. The elf grinned. “Claudio’s mine.”

Giggling to herself, she watched as the Antivans began to panic as one by one, they began sprouting arrows from their chest. Reaching into the Fade, she pulled a small, intense ball of fire out and blew it over the camp, watching the orbs strike several guards in their chest, melting through their armor and burning their hearts out. *That’s a fun one.* Alistair grinned as Isabela dropped out of the tree above him and lashed out at Claudio.

“Didn’t I tell you to go?”

“So? You’re not my king.” Claudio growled as he fought back against the pirate, trying to distract her by taunting her with the abuses of her past, knocking her to the ground as she faltered. Aerin grit her teeth, muscles poised to leap in to protect her friend, barely noticing out of the corner of her eye as the last guard fell, arrow through his face. With a snarl, Isabela swung up with her dagger, leaving Claudio’s arm suddenly bereft of a hand. Kicking him over, she stood tall.

“Any last words?”

“Ghkk-”

“Alright then.” Alistair shouted for her to stop, but-

She buried her dagger into his heart.

“You killed him.”
“Well, I didn’t like him very much.”

Sighing, the king held out his hands for Aerin to untie. “He had answers about Maric.”

“Oops.”

“The truth is never out of reach.” Yavana’s sultry voice called out from behind them.

“Don’t tell me,” Aerin muttered. Varric raised his eyebrows. “Necromancy,” she spat. The mage simply smiled, and lowered her staff, tendrils of smoke curling gently around the prince’s body, raising him to stand.

“Tell me the name of your master, Prince Claudio Valisti of the Order of Crows.”

A whispery voice, haunting echo of the man who had been, wheezed out from still warm lips. “I… cannot.”

“You will tell me,” she hissed, “or I will let maggots eat your essence as they eat your flesh and protect only enough of your soul to keep you aware.” Aerin blinked. *Shit, lady.*

“I… Aurelian Titus!” The corpse gasped out, just as it burst into flame, flesh melting off scorching bone, and exploded.

“Uhh…” Alistair stared at the pile of ashes that was Claudio.

“You’ve been looking for that name for awhile, hmm?” Aerin noticed the smug look on Yavana’s face. Varric perked up. “So our deal is fulfilled.”

Nodding, she motioned for them to follow. “Come. You have earned another chance.”

Back in the Silent Grove, Aerin examined the large room. The carvings she had briefly spied earlier were of dragons, roaring in triumph, breathing fire, majestic in mid-flight, powerful in their domination. In the center lay a massive hole with a circular set of stairs that descended into darkness. *Cozy.*

“Your future lies below. Your friends cannot follow.” Aerin scowled at the witch, mouth opened to tell her what she thought of her opinion. Alistair nodded at the rogues, mouth twitching at the elf’s expression, then slowly walked to the staircase, muttering about creepy holes and witches and frogs. Yavana disappeared altogether.

“I hate this shit. This place. Can I just burn it all to the ground?”

“Maker, I would kill for a bath,” Isabela stretched out on the floor.

“I would kill. For stress relief, at this point.” The elven woman glared at the entrance to the cavern below until, less than an hour later, Alistair returned, holding his sword, still coated in blood. “I take it went well?”

“I killed her.”

“Gathered that.”

They walked outside, the early morning sun incongruously shining down cheerfully on the clearing. Alistair wandered absently, the rest trailing after the withdrawn man, until they were standing at the edge of the entrance of the swamp, staring into the shadowy forest. “I’m so tired of being a pawn,” he whispered. Voice raising into what Aerin now considered his kingly voice, he
continued, “This is what I'm going to do. I’m going to find Aurelian Titus, and I’m going to kill him too. He’s earned that much. Then when that’s done, I’m going to find Maric. And then I’m going home… to be king.”

“‘Bout damn time.” Varrie grinned.

Aerin studied his face, the tension lining his brow, pale blue eyes glittering with determination. *Ali*… “Aurelian Titus. Tevinter. Thirty sovereigns says he’s a magister. And blood mage.”

“No one’s taking that bet, Lightning.”

Chapter End Notes

Friends for now. HOW LONG CAN THEY RESIST THE PULL OF THEIR SWEET, SWEET LOVE?
Alistair had told her not to come. So did Varric, and Isabela. Hell, she knew she shouldn’t have come. Hadn’t she sworn she never would come back here, after all? But she couldn’t let him walk into Tevinter, of all places, without magical support, without her. So here she was, waiting on the ship while the other three went into town dressed to the nines for a ball. She glared at the decadent city, frustrated that she couldn’t go with them. But her appearance was still too recognizable. So she contented herself with standing below deck, watching the city through a porthole, and pretending to light it on fire. It helped. Sort of.

Hours went by as Aerin paced up and down the length of the ship, occasionally popping above deck to glare at the city some more. *I shouldn’t have let them go alone. I could have gone in disguise, hid my hair, or- ugh, no. My bloody eyes are too unique. I swear, if they don’t come back soon I’m going to-*

A cry went up above deck. “Captain on deck!” Aerin flew up the stairs topside. Breathlessly, she took in all three of her friends, bloody and disheveled, but whole. A grim Alistair, rich finery torn, carried an unconscious mage swung over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

“New friend?”

“One of Titus’ lackeys.”

“Gods, all this blood. Did you kill everyone in the ball?”

“Pretty much. Isabela, will you make sure he’s secure? I want to talk to him when he wakes up.”

Aerin watched the Tevinter being carried into the hold. “If he needs to be persuaded…” Alistair frowned.

“I’d rather trying talking him to death first, if that’s okay, before we go the stabbing to death route.”

“You’re no fun.” As Alistair spluttered, Aerin let out a small giggle. “Still so easily flustered.” Patting his head, she left him standing there, confused and sore and dirty. *Maker, that woman.* Shaking his head, he descended into his quarters to change and see to his prisoner.

***

“Is the ‘Vint still sulking?”

Alistair smiled. “He’s still mad Varric tricked the location out of him. Seheron.”

“This isn’t going to end well, Ali. The Qunari are… well, I’ve heard stories from Hawke. They’re fanatics.”

“I know, but…” he scrubbed his head with his hands. “I found the man who stole my father. The man who, intentionally or not, started Ferelden on the path to civil war. Sometimes you need to flush a rabbit out of its hole so you can chase it down.”
“And if the rabbit runs back into its hole to gather a hundred other bunnies to come after you?
“Then we’ll be living high on rabbit stew for months to come.”

Varric muttered from nearby, “I hate rabbits.”

“Especially when they use blood magic,” Alistair agreed.

“How do you not like bunnies?” Aerin demanded. “They’re so cute and fuzzy.”

“Yeah, but those beady eyes. And teeth.” The dwarf shuddered.

“CAPTAIN! TWO QUNARI DREADNOUGHTS INCOMING!”

Aerin’s gaze caught the others.

“Well, shit.”

***

“The blood of dragons runs in your veins, kadan.” Alistair stared at Sten- no, the Arishok now, still as stern as ever but with darker skin from the northern sun- with horror on his face, the wind from the ocean ruffling his strawberry blonde hair. “It is… a troubling theory.”

“One you’ll explain to me later?”

“I will try.”

“Right. That will have to do for now. Isabela, ready to go?”

“Ready. But I’m not sure I’m Isabela any longer.” Alistair blinked in confusion at the captain, a small, sorrowful smile playing at the edge of her lips. Aerin smiled.

“Name are just words. They change all the time.” Giving Isabela’s arm a quick squeeze, she went to the railing, staring at the two dreadnoughts that now sailed with them. To Aurelian Titus. The Qunari had boarded their ship, taking everyone prisoner. Aerin’s magic was too wild, too unfocused to take down that many Qunari without taking the crew out too, or sinking them. I really need to get a staff. Their captives had dragged Isabela away, locking her up separately, but threw Aerin, Alistair, and Varric in the same cell, as Sten- no, Arishok, dammit- wanted to speak with them, to warn them to stop looking for Titus, then keep them imprisoned to keep them safe. Or something. Naturally, they all escaped, including Isabela, who left them to go find her crew. The Arishok had attempted to stop them, forcing Alistair to fight while Aerin and Varric kept the terrace clear of the other Qunari. Alistair defeated him, rather magnificently she thought, with only a polearm. And asked him to help them instead. The Arishok had miraculously agreed. So now he was on board Isabela’s ship- or whatever name she chose now- while the rest of the Qunari followed. The whole experience was rather surreal. An alliance with the Qun? It’s never happened before. But the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

“They’re gathering below.” Varric tapped her on the shoulder, motioning for her to come along, down into the brigantine. Down in the captain’s office, Alistair and the Arishok sat across from each other, discussing the Qunari leader’s theory for why Titus had Maric and wanted Alistair.

“The blood of dragons is in your veins.”

“King of Ferelden, Grey Warden, and now dragon-blooded? Your Majesty is quite the special
“Thank you, Varic.”

The Arishok leaned over the table. “Your chantry writes of King Calenhad the Great, a strong and wise man who inspired loyalty as much by words as by his sword. But we know Calenhad for what he was—ambitious, clever, but not wise. He was born destitute, striking bargain upon bargain, traded story for story, until at last, he gained a secret he might trade to a witch, to learn the ways of power. The witch sent him to the cave of an ancient great dragon. Calenhad plunged his dagger into the creature, and drank. And he grew strong until none could stand against him. And that is the secret of your kings and the source of their power, how they changed the world. The secret has faded but the blood remains.”

Alistair sat, stunned, disappointment written on his face, brow creased in thought. This was his ancestry? A power mad king? Not the Silver Knight, great hero he thought he was? “So what does Titus want with my blood? To awaken the great dragons, like Yavana told me? It’s tainted anyways, by the ritual that made me a Grey Warden.”

“Does it matter? It is enough that he wants it. We will reach Ath Velanis in two days. My dreadnoughts will bombard the fortress and we will hold the shore for one hour, then depart. We are not fools.”

“We have to go inside the fortress. We have to find Maric.”

“Then I wish you luck, basalit-an.”

***

The Tevinter stronghold of Aurelian Titus’ dragon cult sat on a lonely, rocky crag in the middle of the Colean Sea. Varric was out there, alone, sneaking into the fortress to search for Maric while the rest of their suicidal group and the Qunari were on the shore, doing their best to draw as many of the cultists out as possible. Bodies, both human and Qunari, littered the beach, the rain washing the blood down the sand to tint the ocean spray a dark red.

“Eyes front!” Isabelled yelled.

A tall, powerfully built man in full body, dark charcoal engraved armor stormed out of the fortress, black cloak flapping in the gusts of wind. “You seek me?” he bellowed, “You have found me.”

“Titus,” Alistair growled. With a deafening roar, the Qunari warriors caught sight of the magister and charged. “Wait!” he screamed.

It was too late. A molten fire erupted from Titus’ eyes, lancing out in jagged streaks of lightning, melting dusky lavender flesh off bones until just horned skeletons were left, charred and steaming on the rocks. Dragonfire… “Your father’s blood serves. As will yours, for the Imperium.” The dragonfire rained down from the sky, an inferno of shooting stars. The king stood in the midst of the chaos, screams echoing off the rocks as men burned all around, every muscle clenched and straining.

“Run?” Isabela suggested.

“Not a chance,” Alistair snapped.

"Worth a- what the fuck?"
Just then, Titus’ screamed, a blood red light emanating from his chest, swirling around the magister, before exploding out into the stormy night.

Everything went black.

Aerin woke up.

Yawning, she sat up in a spacious four poster bed, the midmorning sun streaming through the windows. For a moment, she was content to just lay there, observing the dust motes dancing in the light. The smell of freshly cut wood still lingered in the walls of the bedroom, the sanded boards smooth to the touch, scent of bacon wafting through the door. And smoke. Slipping to her feet, she smiled at her nudity, the memories of the night before coming to her in a haze. Slipping into a simple cotton robe, brushing her long black hair out, she padded out of the room into the kitchen.

“Good morning, love. I, ah, figured I’d make breakfast. Or try to at least.” Alistair gave her a sheepish grin. All the windows were open to let the smoky air out, a cool salty breeze blowing in, the bacon in the pan a sad, charred slab. She giggled.

“You’re hopeless, Ali.”

“But you still love me, right?”

“Mmm.” She walked over, wrapping her arms around his warm, scarred torso, relishing in the feel of his skin under her hands. “I do.” He reached one arm up to tilt her face up, roughly gathering her up in his arms to pull her close, fitting his lips over hers, swiping his tongue inside just the way she liked. Sighing in bliss, her dark brown eyes smiled up at him. “Come on. Toast will do just fine. Let’s eat outside.” A chocolate brown mabari bounded up them, barking happily as they made their way to the patio. The house sat at the top of a cliff, nestled on a green meadow blanketed in a riot of wildflowers at the base of a snow capped mountain, the balcony overlooking the calm ocean far below. Peace, solitude, a family, home. Just what they both had always dreamed of. Snuggling down into a large wooden chair, he pulled her onto his lap, Aerin tucking herself against his chest, beyond content in this simple moment.

“So…” Alistair drawled. “We’ll have been married three years next week. Three whole years you’ve put up with me. No small feat, I must say. I thought maybe tomorrow, we could ride into town? Do something fun? Go to that new bakery I know you’ve been dying to try?”

She grinned and poked his stomach, still well toned but lacking the crisp definition it had once held when their life had been nothing but an endless battle. “That I’ve been trying to try? What about you, Ser Raspberry Tart?” He chuckled, his eyes crinkling, poking her back.

“You’re the one eating for two.” She glanced down at her belly, gently rounded and barely showing.

“Mmm.” Pulling his head back for another long, languid kiss, she smiled against his lips, feeling his large hands cup the swell of her stomach.

“I bet it’s a girl. She’ll have black hair and your eyes and smile.”

“No,” she giggled. “Blue eyes. Like yours. And your nose. Please, gods, let her have your nose.”

“You hear that little one?” He tapped gently on her stomach. “You need to listen to your mama. Maker. I’m going to be a father. We’re having a baby. Can you believe it? I can’t.” His grin was positively euphoric as he gazed dreamily down at her, tracing the curve of her face, mesmerized by his woman who he called wife. “I have everything I could have ever wanted right here in my arms.
I’m never letting you go again.”

The warm prickle of tears burned in her eyes at his fervent tone. Curling back into his warmth, she murmured, “I wish this was real.” Lulled by the sound of the ocean beating against the shore and his steady heartbeat, she closed her eyes, inhaling deeply of his warm cinnamon musk, praying no one would come for her. Just a little while longer.

“Aerin?” Voices called to her across the meadow, almost drowned out by the crash of the waves far below them. She looked up.

“Hello, Varric, Isabela. Who’s your friend?”

“Maevaris Tilani. Mae, this is Aerin. And Alistair. Not the real one though, I don’t think.”

“No,” Aerin shook her head, “It’s not.” Not-Alistair frowned down at her.

“Love, what’s going on?”

The tears that were held at bay silently spilled over. “I’m sorry, Ali. I would give anything for this to be real.” Dropping down to press an aching kiss to his familiar lips, she gave him one last longing look, heart breaking all over again at the pain and confusion in his eyes, then stood up straight, wiping her eyes. “Let’s go.”

Isabela looked at Aerin with tears in her own eyes, Varric’s face full of sympathy. “Lightning…”

“It’s ok. Fill me in?” she pulled the Fade around her, belly getting taut as it was before, ears elongating, hair turning the color of blood, changing her robe back into her normal, hardened leather armor, swords dangling comfortably at her side.

“Found Maric. He’s… attached to this thing called a magrallen, a magical orb from the time of the Dreamers, when magisters could enter people’s dreams and control their minds. Titus is powering the magrallen with Maric’s blood. Basically, he wants to create a cult of Dreamers, warp everyone’s minds, and remake the entire world so that mages can rule the ungifted with impunity and be thanked for it. I, uh… shot it. With an arrow.”

She snorted. “Of course you did. Sounds unpleasant.”

“I know you,” Mae frowned. Aerin glared at the slender, curly blonde haired magister, dressed in a scaled black and teal ballgown, and snarled. She could feel the mana churning inside the other mage here in the Fade and knew she could sense the elf’s as well. Magister. Tevinter. And Varric’s friend? How does that work?

“Probably. Although I would think after so many years, memory will have faded,” her voice replied, aloof, their mutual dwarven friend glancing anxiously between the two. Mae smiled.

“You’re very powerful.”

“I have my moments. Varric, you said Titus is a Dreamer?” They passed through a lone doorway and entered another part of the Fade, an old, dense forest. Sighing in relief that she wouldn't kill the other mage, he nodded.

“Yep. They’re pretty rare. We met one, a kid in Kirkwall’s alienage. Helped him escape the templars and get to the Dalish.”

Aerin sighed. Dreamer. So, this is Titus’ dream we’re in. I wonder if fight back with the Fade, what
“Now, who do we have here?” A tall man walked into the clearing they were passing through, leading a pale gray stallion by the reins. His clothes were of expensive fabric and cut, richly embroidered, a heavy fur cloak fastened with a gleaming gold etched collar, bejeweled sword at his side and a quiver of arrows slung over his back. “Have you heard this one? A prince comes upon a dwarf, an elf, a Rivaini, and a magister in the forest.”

“Alistair?” Varric stared.

“Your Majesty, thank you. Have we met?”

“I’m still figuring this out, so… if I slap him, will it wake him up?” Isabela sighed, exasperated with the whole situation.

“Oh, dear beauty, if you want me to wake up with you, there are more pleasant ways.” Aerin let out a choking sound that was half snort and half a cough. He turned to study her. “You can as well, if you wish,” he leered.

“I vote for slapping him too.”

“Trouble, my son?” A fierce, older man rode into the clearing astride a black war stallion, wearing a thick cream brocade tunic, arms protected by thick gold plated dragonscale pauldrons and bracers. A fur lined cloak similar to Alistair’s swept behind him. “I am King Maric, sovereign of Ferelden. Whoever you are, whatever reason you are here, you are not welcome.”

Varric held up his hands in a defenseless, pleading gesture. “Please, we’re not bandits. We’re here to help. There are demons coming.”

“Ha!” Alistair chuckled. “That’s one we haven’t heard since, what, the Blight?”

The old king frowned. “Let them talk, son.”

“Your Majesty, this is the Fade,” Mae said softly. “Your body is in a state of oneiric suspension and your mind ensorcelled. You must remember.”

Isabela stepped up to the prince. “Alistair, listen to her, you’re the bloody king!”

“Silence!” he roared. “My father is the king, and Cailan will be king after him. You speak treason!” He whipped out his sword, leveling the tip at her throat.

“Ali.” Aerin cautiously stepped up beside Alistair. “Love. Look at me.” He turned his furious gaze to her. “It’s me, Aerin. Remember? I know this dream is tempting. All, her voice cracked, “all you ever wanted, right? It’s alright to dream this. But don’t be fooled by it. Don’t live your own lies.” His posture fell.

“Aerin…?”

“Isn’t that right, Your Majesty?” she swiveled slightly to eye the king.

“He knows?” Isabela whispered.

“I… always hoped you would find me, Alistair. I swear I thought you were part of the dream. The elf is right. None of this is real.”

“Father.” Alistair’s voice was broken. Aerin felt her heart shatter. Wasn’t there a limit as to how
many times it could break in one day? Apparently not. *I wish I could make this real for you, my love.* “No. Of course it isn’t, is it? It was too good to be true. Fooled again, I suppose.” His voice hardened, "You said there were demons?"

“Aurelian Titus. This is his dream. He’s here.” Aerin replied.

“Then we take the fight to him,” Maric’s gravelly voice finished.

“Any ideas how, specifically?” Alistair asked.

Aerin nodded. “I can find him.” Closing her eyes, she pushed her essence out into the Fade, searching for the magister’s aura. A dark, churning power pulsed out in the distance. “Got it.” Raising her hand, she twisted the atmosphere ahead of them, creating a simple door.

“You’re a Dreamer?!” Mae gasped. The other two rogues stared.

“We need to hurry,” Aerin replied, ignoring the question as she stepped through the portal. It led to a long, dimly lit hall, stone columns regally rising up to a vaulted ceiling, like the interior of a temple or shrine. *I hate cultists.* “Hello, Aurelian. Fancy meeting you here.” She grinned.

“You should have run,” he smirked from where he stood at the end of the corridor. “There are void places, gaps between dreams. There, you might have lived.”

Alistair shrugged and swung his sword up to guard. “We’ll take our chances.” With a loud cry, the magister reached out, summoning a horde of demons from the shadows. Dozens poured out into the hall, screaming their rage and bloodlust, talons reaching for the warriors and rogues.

Aerin smiled, and pushed. The Fade shimmered around her as light erupted from her fingertips, weaving around the vast chamber. With a lazy wave, all the demons froze in place, snarls suspended in time. And then, they all disintegrated into dust.

“What is this?!” Titus roared. “I am the only Dreamer here!” His dragon’s fire pulsed out of his hands, slamming into her and her friends, burning through the barrier she had hastily thrown up. Groaning in agony from where she lay on the ground, she saw oily black tentacles wrap around Alistair’s neck and limbs, restraining him in mid-air.

“No!” the shrill scream wrenched from her throat. Gritting her teeth, she tried to force herself to stand, to no avail.

“Enough! Leave him be!” Maric and Mae flung themselves through the portal, the last ones through.

“You?” Titus sneered, “You are but a remnant. Die by what wrought you.” Summoning a dragon, a wave of fire and energy bombarded the old king. Aerin had to shield her eyes from the intense heat and light. When she was able to look back, expect to have to mourn a dead man, her eyes flew open. Maric stood there, tall and secure in his strength, untouched.

“What have you done?”

“Your reign is over, Titus. It never really began.”

“No! The world is mine. Tevinter will be as it was in legend. The magrallan’s magic is our legacy!” He began casting in furious hysteria, desperation clouding his harsh features.

“But it is empowered by my blood.” Maric advanced steadily on the magister, oblivious to the
magic that was piercing his body over and over, magic that would have obliterated anyone else. “You are not the dreamer here.” He raised his sword.

“I am.”

And with one mighty swing, Maric beheaded Aurelian Titus. The great stone hall vanished. Aerin looked around at the eerie barren landscape of the Fade, the sky tinged with green. Gathering her strength, she pulsed out her magic, healing everyone in this dreamscape.

Maric nodded his thanks. “Any hold Titus held on us is gone. You can leave.”

“What about you?” Alistair sharply looked at his father.

“I saw his body, in the magrallen chamber. It… doesn’t look so good, Your Majesty,” Varric murmured softly.

“No,” Maric looked down. “I suppose the magrallen in the only thing keeping me alive. The people I love are all here, anyways- your mother, Cailan, Loghain. None of them are back in the real world.”

Alistair’s face fell, crestfallen, light reflecting off his watery eyes. “I am,” he whispered.

“You’re the king now, and probably a damn sight better than I ever was. Your mother and I never wanted this life for you, but... Alistair. Seeing you again, knowing Ferelden is in good hands, it’s enough. You don’t need me.”

“No. I don’t,” he straightened, voice deepening. “But you can’t live in a dream. Come back. Try again. You deserve a second chance. We can do it together.” Maric nodded, eyes filling with pride at his youngest son. He glanced over at the elf, who gave him the most beatific smile he had ever seen. They love each other, the old king realized with a start. Maker, it’s just like... Maybe history is doomed to repeat itself. I hope not, for their sakes.

“If that’s what you want, I’ll try.” Father and son clasped their hands, bringing each other in for a tight embrace. Aerin felt tears burning her eyes as the Fade disappeared from view.

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“Thank you. I don’t think I could have done this without you.” Alistair stood leaning against the rail of the ship, watching as the docks of Denerim slowly slid into view. Aerin rested her back to the rail and smiled at him.

“I’m glad I could help. And that you got closure. I’m so sorry things didn’t work out better. I guess reality was too much for his body.” He picked up her hand, turning it over his own, before pressing a kiss to her palm. “The magrallan. Do you remember the Tevinter ruins where the werewolves were?”

“I’ve spent years trying to forget,” he remarked dryly.

“There was a magrallan there. Remember a white orb? That we couldn’t figure out?”

“Huh. So there was. What will you do now?” She shrugged.

“Might go back to the Dalish for a visit. Maybe check out Orlais, Nevarra. Plenty of work out in Orlais, I suspect.”
“Aerin. You don’t have to do that anymore. Stay in Denerim with me.” She frowned, and opened her mouth. “No, not like… that. Maker knows I want that, but… I get it, I really do. I can find you work in the city, honest work. Join my personal guard. Go to Redcliffe, become a knight. I’ll get you an apprenticeship somewhere, doing whatever you want, just… please. Don’t go back to that. It’s not who you truly are.” His icy blue eyes bored in her soul, begging her to turn back from the path she had set herself on. All the love she held for this man welled up inside her, threatening to consume everything she was.

“Alistair,” she murmured, heart pounding in her throat, looking down to where her hands were clutched in his large, rough fingers. Hands she once knew like her own. She rubbed little circles into his skin. “I- I can’t stay here. There’s too much… of us here. But, I’ll try, okay? I have a few previous contracts in Antiva I have to finish, but after… I’ll try.”

He gave her a melancholy smile. “That’s all I can really ask, I suppose.” He glanced down, noticing the chain around her neck. With a trembling finger, he reached out to carefully pull it up. The ring. She’s still wearing it.

“I’ve never taken it off.” His nostrils flared as he inhaled sharply. They stared at each other, unblinking. With a strangled cry, he pulled on her wrists, her chest colliding into his, as he dropped his mouth over hers, devouring her in a frantic kiss, filled with all the love they still held for each other, even after all these years apart. It was wet and messy, full of lips and tongue and teeth, hands clasped desperately against her face, her hands digging into his shoulders, every inch of her body touching his. Oh, how she loved this man, the other part of her soul, the light to her darkness. She would kill for him, and all he wanted her to do was live. Memories of the Fade dream came back to her, the heartache of having to let him go again making her moan with an anguished sob into his mouth. His hands drifted down to her hips, tightening painfully into her flesh, as he attempted to pull her inside him, wanting her as close as possible, loathe to let her go again. How many times could they survive this? How many more times before they willingly let the world burn, just so they could finally stay together?

Shouts drifted out from around them, jerking them back to the present, cries of the dockhands and sailors as the ship dropped anchor in the shallow harbor, the thud of the gangplank as it was lowered to the dock. They slowly pulled away, eyes locked on the other, breathless.

“I love you, Aerin. Forever and always.” Tears finally spilled over her eyes as she forced back a sob.

“Alistair. When… the Calling. When it’s time. Send word to me? I want to come. Please?” He nodded, lips curved in a sad smile. “I love you, Alistair.” More than anything in this world or mine.

"Goodbye."

Chapter End Notes

*sobs*

IT’S OVER!

Jk. Not yet.

In other news, I finished writing the story last night. There's a total of 70 chapters, and
I giggled like a maniac the last three chapters I wrote. It's all sickeningly sweet fluff. And smut. Desperately needed after all the angstfest that is this fic.
A short, lithe elf raced through the field, whooping joy. “Aerin! You’re back!” Aerin smiled as her sister launched herself at her, wrapping her legs around her weary body as she squealed with joy.

“It’s only been a few nights since I saw you last.” Ellana got down off of Aerin and punched her in the arm.

“Not the same. And you never tell me anything anyways, always ‘I’ll tell you when I see you’. You’re here in person now, so spill. Where have you been the past year and a half?”

They held hands, swinging their arms as they walked back to the rough, grassy field where Clan Lavellan was camped. Aerin could smell the stench of the Tellari swamps, so close to where she had been just 18 months ago, and she shivered with the memory. At least it’s winter now, and it’s not as humid. “Everywhere. After I left Alistair, Isabela dropped me off in Hercinian. Had some business I had to finish up there. Then I headed to Cumberland, Nevarra, joining a caravan protection detail. From there, I went to Orlais. Did a bunch of odd mercenary jobs, taking me to Val Chevin, Val Royeaux, everywhere. I just left six weeks ago from Jader, hopped a ship to Wycome to come find you. It’s been too long. Brought you something. Might be a little stale, but still should be good.” She dug a frilly, slightly crumpled silk wrapped box out of her bag.

Ellana tore into it and squealed. “Chocolate!”

“Bon bons,” Aerin agreed. The younger woman popped one into her mouth and moaned.

“Iths tho good,” she mumbled around the sweet. “So, mercenary jobs? No more contracts?”

Aerin shrugged. “I did a few, mainly when money got tight and I found someone who really deserved it. Like nobles funding slavers, child molesters, general trash like that. But I promised someone I would try.”

“Alistair?” She smiled and squeezed Ellana’s hand. “How long are you staying?”

“Not sure yet. At least through the winter. How’s Merrill?” At the mention of her name, the blood mage popped out from behind a rock.

“Hi, Aerin! Welcome back! Ooh, is that chocolate?” Aerin grinned, and tossed an identical box to her. Merrill gasped and the girls scurried off with their treats. Laughing to herself, Aerin made her way over to the Keeper. Still like little kids, those two. Or maybe squirrels.

“Keeper,” she bowed to the old woman, who was sitting by the fire, a thick fur tucked around her thin frame.

“Da’len, welcome home.” That always made Aerin feel warm. Home. It was true. No matter where she roamed, even if she never quite felt as if she belonged here, she always had a place with the clan. “Tell me, do you bring any news of the shemlen lands?”

That made Aerin groan as she dropped to the fire next to Deshanna, the past several months catching up with her all at once. Rubbing her eyes with the heel of her hands, she muttered, “It’s all a bloody mess out there. For starters, Orlais is now caught up in a full fledged civil war. Duke
Gaspard attempts to seize control of the throne from Empress Celene. The fighting has intensified in the last few months, villages are burning, bodies everywhere. I was just there, it’s why I left in the middle of winter. The country is in chaos. There was...” She paused, reaching behind her to throw more peat moss into the flames. The familiar sweet smell did nothing to relax her. “In Halamshiral. A shem noble killed an elf because a child threw a rock at his coach. The noble mysteriously died, assassinated, no doubt. The elves rebelled. The Empress... burned the city. Killed all the elves.” Her fists clenched in the grass, fury straining in her voice. Deshanna sighed, sorrow lacing her breath. “And then, there was an incident, an uprising, at the circle in Orlais, the White Spire. An old friend died, along with many others senior mages. She was... she reminded me of you, actually. Wynne was... one of the best people I’ve ever met. I don’t think I ever told her that.” The Keeper laid a comforting hand on her arm.

“I think she knew, da’len.”

“I hope so,” Aerin murmured before continuing. “In Rivain, the chantry found out about the seers and so-called hedge witches that lived there. So they annulled the circle. Killed them all. With all of that,” she waved frantically, “the mages, their College of Enchanters, called a conclave, and somehow voted to declare themselves independent from the chantry. I didn’t even know they could do that. The Seekers left the chantry as well. There’s rumors the templars might be next. There’s fighting everywhere, mage against templar. All mages are apostates now. It’s like Kirkwall multiplied by Thedas. Innocents are getting caught in the crossfire, and villages are burning. People are dying. Children.” She punched the ground. This fear. Of magic, themselves, templars. It will be the death of us all.

“Creators,” Deshanna whispered. “What will be done?”

“The Divine is calling a Divine Conclave, in Haven. To try and reach an accord. You know, I can’t even blame the mages? The circles are a horrible place. This had to happen eventually. I just wish...” Aerin trailed off and shook her head. "The conclave starts at the end of Wintemarch, in Haven. The Temple of Sacred Ashes. I’ve been there before. Creepy place, but apparently the Chantry turned it into a pilgrimage site."

Letting out a slow breath, the Keeper stood. “That is... a lot. I will confer with the elders, see what path we should take.”

“Hide?” Aerin suggested glumly.

“Possibly. Although if the fighting is as widespread as your words suggest, that may not be an option for long. Rest awhile, da’len. Your voyage was long.” Nodding to her, Aerin watched the Keeper go gather the older members of the clan. Ellana walked over, a smudge of chocolate around her mouth. Smirking, Aerin leaned over to wipe it off.

“What was that about?”

Aerin told her.

“Sweet Mythal...”

With nothing else to do, she decided to grab a quick nap. The last year had worn on her. The war in Orlais had been everywhere, chevaliers and soldiers lying dead on the side of the the roads, families and children fleeing for their life. Then she had traveled through the Free Marches and found more of the same, but with templars and mages instead, families and children still fleeing for safety. The innocent were always the ones to suffer. She stopped to help where she could, but it wasn’t enough. It was never enough. Stretching out, she found some comfort in the familiar sounds
of her clan moving around her, chattering and singing, as the Fade took her.

***

“We should just stay away from all the cities, the shem fighting won’t come all the way out here!”

“Getting ourselves involved in this fiasco will bring nothing but harm to our clan.”

“But what if the fighting does come here? What if the templars come here?”

Voices rang out in a cacophony of noise, everyone frightening and panicking at the thought of war.

“Peace, brothers and sisters!” Deshanna held up her hands to call for order. The clan was gathered tightly around the main camp fire, to listen to the news that Aerin had brought and hear the elders’ decision. “This conclave their Divine calls may yet work. We do not know. But as the soon as the decision is made, I would hear of it. Aerin, you are best suited to make contact with me, and you know of the ways of the shem cities. Will you go? Attend this conclave, and bring me news of the result?” Aerin groaned internally. *I don’t wanna.*

“Of course, Keeper.” *Balls. Templars, mages, in Haven, in the fucking winter. Shoot me now.*

“Ellana, will you go with your sister? The danger there is great. I would feel better about sending you if you were not alone,” she told Aerin.

“I will, Keeper.”

“It’s settled then. Aerin and Ellana will go spy on the meeting. And we will have the answers as soon as they do, so we may better prepare for what is to come.”

“This is going to suck,” Aerin muttered to her sister.

“It won’t be so bad. Plus, I get to see the places you traveled to in Ferelden. The Temple sounded fascinating.”

“Ellana.” She turned to glare at her sister. “Haven was covered in snow in the summer. It will be winter when we’re there.”

“Oh. Fenedhis.”

***

Their journey saw them south to Ostwick, where the two elves caught a ship to Highever. Aerin pointed out the castle to a wide eyed Ellana, where her old friend and Hero Aedan had grown up and his brother now ruled as Teyrn. Once they made landfall in Ferelden, they were able to trade some of the weapons and poultices their clan had gifted them with for heavier clothing and furs. The country was already covered in snow, making the way much more arduous than they had hoped for.

“Blast this blizzard, I can’t see a thing,” Aerin groaned. The entire world was white, and cold. Up ahead in the distance, just outside of West Hill a thin plume of smoke rose through the swirling snow, muffled sounds of revelry drifting from the wooden building. "An inn. Let's go, we can wait out the storm for the night there." From the packed interior of the dining room, apparently they weren’t the only ones with the same idea.

“No space left,” the innkeeper sighed. “You and every other traveler bound for the conclave are
here. I’m sorry. There might be room in the stables, if you’re so inclined.” Nodding her understanding, Aerin paid for two bowls of stew and ale, precariously balancing them on her hands to a small empty corner of a table. Sparing a quick glance for the other occupants at the table, she wearily sunk down onto the bench across from Ellana.

“We’ll have to sleep in the stables, Elle. No room here.” Her sister shrugged.

“Fine by me.”

“Or you two could bunk up with us, lass,” a rough voice leered. Aerin raised a haughty eyebrow at the man. Lanky hair, a roughspun tunic over faded leather pants, matted fur coat, and a face that probably had never known a razor or soap—how charming.

“Thank you for your invitation, ser, but I think my sister and I will be content with the horses. Probably smell better.”

“Why you knife eared bitch—” he angrily stood up, rearing back to land a punch on her. She moved faster than anything he and his buddies had ever seen. One moment she was eating her stew, next she was standing in front of the man, holding his wrist in an iron grip. Her hood fell back, exposing her blood red hair and electric blue gold eyes.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” she said softly.

“Maker, it’s her! I’d recognize that elf anywhere! She traveled with the Hero of the Blight, she did! She helped take down the archdemon alongside King Alistair!” Whispers surrounded her. Ugh. Keffas. Giving a terse smile to her new admirers, she released the man, giving him a slight shove back. Turning back to her food, she sat, doing her best to ignore the chatter that was growing louder.

“You’re a hero here, Aerin,” Ellana smiled gently, proud of her sister.

“Don’t wanna be,” she grumbled. "Just want to eat, and find a warm place to sleep.”

“My lady? They say you traveled with the Hero of Ferelden, during the Blight. Did you ever pass through South Reach? With Warden-Commander Cousland?” Aerin warily glanced up, eyeing a well dressed man that was bowing slightly. A merchant? Minor noble, perhaps?

“I did, yes, though I’m no lady. May I help you?”

“It is you, then.” A huge grin spread across his face. “You saved my wife and children from darkspawn. They were on their way to meet me in Denerim and the caravan they traveled with was attacked. They told me the Hero and his companions stopped to defeat the darkspawn, that the most beautiful elf they ever saw shielded them from one of the monster’s blows, saving them from certain death. That was you, wasn’t it?”

Aerin tried to remember. “I’m sorry, I don’t rightly know. There were a lot of darkspawn that year,” she said apologetically. He nodded.

“I’m positive it is you, though. Your eyes, my wife described them. Very unusual. Ah, in a good way,” he hurriedly amended. “Are you and your companion headed to the conclave?” She nodded. “I have space in my wagon. It’s not much, but there’s a place to curl up out of the wind, extra furs to keep you warm on the way. If you’d like.”

A genuine smile lit up Aerin’s face. “That is a gracious offer. We wholeheartedly accept.” To her right, Ellana sighed contentedly.
Haven was nothing like she remembered. No bloody altars, no creepy kids with fingerbones, no bodies of decaying knights in the back of the shops. Most of the houses that were here had been razed to the ground and rebuilt. In the back of the town, the chantry still stood, proud and tall, somehow brighter. The place looked like a refugee camp. Tents had been hastily erected, campfires scattered throughout, and myriads of people milled about, humans, dwarves, elves; Aerin even thought she spotted a Qunari or two. The girls decided to make a camp just outside the village walls, on the shore of a frozen lake. Close enough to where they could see the town, but far enough to where people probably wouldn’t bother them.

“I’m going into town to see what I can find out about the conclave so far. You coming?”

“I think I’ll stay here, see about hunting something for supper.” With a quick kiss to her sister’s forehead, she left for the village. Ellana was a true Dalish, she had to remind herself, and well skilled in the art of hiding from humans. And she was a master shot with her bow. She would be fine alone. I hope.

Passing a training encampment, she noticed a bunch of recruits training in the field. What is going on? Another army? Puzzled over the presence of soldiers, she walked through the gates, nodding to the guard on duty. Up ahead, she spotted a familiar face, someone she did not expect to see here. Then again, maybe she should have, since there was obviously a story to be found.

“Varrie!”

“Lightning!” The dwarf’s face split into a giant grin. She ran the rest of the way to him. “What are you doing here?” Burying her face in his coat, she giggled.

“Spying for my clan and causing general mischief. Why are you here?”

“Long story. Basically I’m the Chantry’s prisoner.” She let out a squawk of outrage. “The Divine’s Left Hand, the Seeker Cassandra, she kidnapped me from Kirkwall in an attempt to find out how all this bullshit really started. And she wanted to find Hawke.”

“Is Hawke here?”

“Hell, no. She’s far away from here. Although if anyone asks,” he lowered his voice, “I have no idea where she is.” Aerin nodded. This was the dwarf she knew, a man that willingly kept himself a prisoner to ensure his friend remained safe. “There's talk they're starting up another Inquisition.” At her confused look, he continued, ”The Inquisition was a chantry organization that created the circles and templars in the first place. Supposed to restore order. The Divine is considering bringing it back if the conclave doesn’t go well.”

“So that’s what the soldiers are for,” she mused. “I’m assuming this Inquisition is just planning on beating everyone back into line then?”

“That’d be my guess,” Varric replied.

“More war,” she mumbled glumly. “So, you can’t leave? Are they treating you well at least?”

“Well enough. I have free rein of the village and tavern, just can’t go outside the walls.”

“I had heard of reports of the most beautiful girl in the world roaming this tiny village. Then I find
out it’s just you.” Aerin began to spin around, hand reaching for her dagger. Then, the sweet Orlesian voice found recognition in her mind.

“Leli!” she squealed. Leliana giggled and rushed to hug her friend.

“Oh, Aerin, it’s so good to see you! Let me look at you.” She pulled back, green eyes twinkling in delight. Her old friend looked very much the same, although her face had more hard lines and angles than before. Her eyes were a bit steelier as well. But otherwise, this was still her old Leli. “You look the same as ever. Not even a wrinkle. So unfair. Are you here with anyone?”

“I would answer that, but you probably already know, don’t you, Sister Nightingale,” she teased.

“Of course, but I prefer to hear it from you, La Sirena.” They grinned foolishly at each other.

“Go, go catch up,” Varric waved them away. Giving her dwarven friend another hug, she followed Leliana into the chantry, smell of incense coating the air. She was led into a small room, off to the side, watching as the bard pulled out two glasses and a dusty bottle of brandy.

“To old times,” she murmured as they clinked their glasses. “So, Varric says you were in Kirkwall as well? I don’t suppose you know where Hawke is?”

“No,” the elf answered honestly, “I last saw her was in 38. We were in Starkhaven, traveling around. I hope she’s okay, wherever she is.” Please let her be safe. The next few hours passed easily, as the friends caught up on each other’s lives, Aerin telling her about her adventures with their friendly Antivan assassin, and her travels through Orlais, and Leliana explaining more about the mage-templar war and the conclave.

“Divine Justinia believes we can resolve this here. We have to. Otherwise…”

“The Inquisition.”

“Yes,” Leliana breathed. “It is our last hope. You know, we could definitely use your help.”

“Your Chantry has need of an apostate assassin’s skill? How appalling.” Aerin grinned. “Sorry, Leli. You know how I feel about this whole thing, Chantry included.”

“It was worth a try,” she replied wryly. “Besides, all mages are apostates now, technically. Come, let me introduce you to Josephine. She’s serving as our ambassador.”

Josephine Montilyet was a beautiful, curvaceous Antivan noble, and possibly the nicest woman Aerin had ever met. The ambassador was delighted that Aerin could speak her native language fluently and extended an open invitation to come visit her anytime, bribing her with the promise of chocolate and liquor. “How can I refuse?” she laughed. Saying their farewells, Leliana walked Aerin back out of the chantry.

“It seems surreal to be back in Haven. I almost don’t recognize it.” Leliana made a sound of agreement. “How’s Aedan, by the way?” Nightingale's face softened.

“He is well, as far as his last letter. Currently far west, beyond the Hunterhorn Mountains.” Aerin’s eyes bugged out. “He’s looking for a cure, so we… so we might have more time. And Alistair. And all the others.” Damn Calling. “I will tell my scouts to leave you and your sister alone. I’m assuming she is your sister? You should bring her to me, I’d love to meet her.”

“What, so you and her can swap stories of all my weak moments? I think not,” she replied in mock horror. She sniggered as a thought popped into her mind. “You have scouts trailing a Dalish elf?
That’s going to end well.” Leliana grinned unrepentantly.

“It’s good training for them.” With a final hug goodbye, Aerin walked back into the village, her heart feeling warm and full.

*I’ve got a good feeling about this.* Back at camp, she stumbled upon a cross Ellana sitting next to a frightened, tied up scout. She poked the man with her booted toe.

“This *shem* was following me. Wouldn’t say why, either.” Aerin giggled.

“Let him go, Elle. He’s one of Leliana’s. They won’t be bothering us anymore.” Her sister perked up at that.

“Your bard friend? She’s here? Can I meet her?”

“It’s a conspiracy, I swear,” Aerin grumbled. “I’ll take you tomorrow evening. The conclave starts tomorrow, so she’ll probably be busy all day. Did you catch anything for supper? I’m starved.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the beginning of the last, and longest arc! The Inquisition starts now. *trumpet fanfare*
“Mistress Aerin! Sister Nightingale is requesting your assistance with a situation back in Haven!” A messenger sprinted up to the side of the chamber where Ellana and Aerin stood. Frowning, she glanced up at the end of the vast chamber where the Divine would be appearing soon. They had such good vantage points, Aerin was loathe to give it up. *It must be important, though.*

“Alright, calm down, I’m coming. I’ll find you later, yeah?” she glanced back at Ellana, who just gave her an impatient wave. Turning around, she followed the messenger back down the mountain trail, pulling her thick leather and bear fur cloak around her tighter to shield against the piercing winds, back into the chantry in Haven and down into the musty dungeons. “What’s wrong?”

Leliana sighed. “We caught a Crow today, in an attempt on the Divine’s life. I was hoping you could find out who his benefactor was. I know they’re resistant to most tactics I am aware of, but I was wondering if you knew of anything else, had any tricks up your sleeve.” Aerin nodded, and approached the cage, new iron bars shining with oil in the torchlight. A nondescript man in plain clothes sat calmly, regarding her, hands chained to the wall.

“Hello,” she said in Antivan. “My friend wishes to know who your patron was. I don’t suppose you’d just be a dear and tell me?” He stared at her, unblinking. She sighed. “I didn’t think so. Do you know who I am?” Nothing. “Your Crows have a name for me. La Sirena, they call me. After an old legend. Romantic, isn’t it.” *There, a small tic. He does know of me.* “They tell such tales, don’t they? How I sold my soul to a demon, how I am a demon, that I was granted the power to devour others… piece by piece until their body is dead, but their spirit lingers on. Forever, really. So. We can do this the easy way. You tell me, and I kill you cleanly. Or I pick your bones dry, and bind your soul to a demon so it can feed off of your emotions for the rest of eternity. What will it be?”

His eyes grew wide, reflecting the firelight clearly and he trembled. “Please, no, Lady Sirena. The job was contracted by the Revered Mother Emilie, of Val Foret. Mercy.”

“Thank you.” She opened the cage, withdrew her dagger and smoothly drew it across the man’s throat, the straw under his body soaking up the blood. “Did you catch that?”

Leliana nodded. “Can… you really do all that?” Her stance was a bit more defensive than usual. Aerin giggled. “Leli, really? No. But the Antivans do love their stories. Somewhere down the line, the Beast of the Tellari Swamps and La Sirena got crossed. It gets wilder every year. Pretty soon I'll have purple wings and fangs.” The bard let out an imperceptible sigh of relief.

“Mother Emilie. I believe she’s here, at the conclave now. I will send agents to collect her. The Divine’s address starts soon, no? You should hurry back.” Pausing to wipe her hands and dagger off, Aerin swept back up the dimly lit stairs, out of the Chantry, and stepped onto the bridge that would lead her to the Temple.

The ground shook.

A flash of green light exploded.

*I’ve seen that light before.*
Debris, stones and trees and snow and ash, erupted from the mountain up ahead, forcing Aerin to duck under a nearby wagon for cover. She watched as a particularly large stone, easily the size of a mabari, landed squarely on a fleeing woman, crushing her underneath.

_Gods, what just happened?_ As the barrage of projectiles ceased, Aerin scrambled up, trying to figure out where the explosion came from. A swirling maelstrom of sickly green Fade light and debris swirled violently in a suspended tornado high above the Temple of Sacred Ashes. _The Temple._

_Ellana._

“NOOO!”

With a gut wrenching scream, she began to sprint up the path, dodging around stunned people who stood paralyzed in her way, shoving the ones she couldn’t slip around. Her world narrowed into one focus. Find Ellana. The Temple was just over that hill.

With her heart threatening to break her ribcage, every breath ripping through her lungs like broken glass, fear numbing her limbs, she crested the ridge.

The Temple was gone. Leveled to the ground. Nothing could have survived. Even from here, she could see the twisted wreckage of bodies, warped and melted, frozen forever in a rictus of agony. Aerin fell to her knees.

“DEMONS!”

_Why should I care? Ellana is… no. Maybe she survived! Why didn’t I bring her with me? Why did I agree to bring her here in the first place! Oh, sweet Creators, this is all my fault that she’s… that she’s…_

“You, elf, with the swords! Do you know how to use them? We need your help! Demons have overrun the mountain!” She staggered wearily to her feet. _Ellana would want you to help. To save people. I can do this one thing._ “Take me there.”

***

Two days. Two days had passed and there still was no end in sight. The Breach, as the people were calling it, had spawned dozens of smaller rifts. Rifts from which wave after wave of demons poured from. The fledgling army was not prepared for this. Every able bodied man and most of the women took up arms to try and defend this place. It seemed futile. The demons were endless. Every muscle burned. Grabbing a health potion from the bare boned supply chest, she downed it, feeling the enchanted herbs and lyrium work its way through her battered body.

“Have you heard? A women fell from out of a rift, in the Temple.”

“I bet she’s the one behind all of this.”

“She killed the Divine!”

“I saw ‘er as they took her away. The tattoos on ‘er face. Dalish.”

“Figures. They just want to see all us humans dead anyways.”

“They locked her up. Probably goin’ ta kill her soon.”
A woman. Survived. Dalish? Aerin’s weary head turned towards the conversation. Were there any other Dalish here?! She couldn’t remember. It has to be Elle. They can’t kill her! Forcing up stiff limbs upright, she moved as fast as she was capable, on a warpath to the chantry. She skidded down a rocky slope, the bridge that would lead her to town just ahead.

There were people up ahead arguing, a man’s voice ringing out, “Justinia is dead! We must elect a replacement, and obey her orders!” Aerin stumbled a few more steps.

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here!” She froze. She could picture her right now, saying that, stomping her foot as if she were a child of five, not a woman of twenty-five. Ellana.

“ELLANA!” Aerin found the strength to run, sprinting with all of her might, people literally jumping to get out of her way.

“Creators. AERIN!” The two girls crashed into each other, heedless of their injuries and the crowd around them. Leliana wore a faint smile on her face, witnessing the reunion. Ellana sobbed into her chest, while Aerin could only clutch the younger girl in mute shock. “They said… no one had seen you… since the explosion,” the Dalish spoke between hiccups. “I was so worried.”

Regaining her voice, Aerin pulled back to look at her sister, touching her face, her hair, her arms, just to make sure this was real and not a dream. “I’ve been up on the mountain since the explosion, fighting off the demons. I thought you were… Gods.” She hugged Ellana to her chest again. “I figured if you were… you’d want me to help. Fight.”

“You’re right.”

“I’m always right.” They weakly giggled, a slight hysterical note in Aerin’s voice. A fierce looking warrior cleared her throat.

“We can stop this, before it’s too late,” her Nevarran accent spoke.

“How? You won’t even survive long enough to reach the Temple. Call a retreat, Seeker,” a man in chantry robes threw his hands up in exasperation. Aerin looked around at the people, noticing Varric was with them. And that must be the Seeker Cassandra he mentioned. A strange, tall bald elf was at the back, dressed in ragged furs, leaning against a smooth, wooden staff. She could feel something odd swirling around him. Resolving to keep away from him for now, she turned back to the conversation.

“How do you think we should proceed?”

Ellana blinked at the Seeker. “Ummm. Me?”

“You have the mark,” the bald elf replied. Mark? What? She glanced down at Ellana, for the first time noticing her left hand, and the Fade energy that crackled around it. Now that she was aware of it, she could feel the Fade tugging at her senses. Creators. What the hell is that?

“The mountain path. There are soldiers lost up there, right? We should find them.”

As they climbed up 42 ladders into an old tunnel, Ellana filled Aerin in on what happened to her.

“I don’t remember anything. Last I remember is you leaving with the scout, then I was waking up in the dungeon, with the Seeker and Sister Nightingale standing over me, yelling. The people, they think I…”

“No. You couldn’t have done it. Gods, you’re the one who cried for hours the first time I killed a
mouse. Do you remember? You couldn’t have killed all those people. Not willingly, at least.”

“But I don’t remember…” she shook her head. “This mark. I don’t know what it is, but it can close rifts. I can close the Breach.”

“It’s hurting you.”

“I can bear it.”

Aerin snorted. “Oh, how the tables have turned. Demons up ahead. And the missing patrol. Care to show me your fancy new toy?” She watched, fascinated, as her sister held her arm up to the pulsing rift, a beam of magic linking her mark to the tear, and with a final crackle, the rip imploded on itself and disappeared. “Just like magic. Hmm. The Fade feels weird here. Like… a bandage over a wound. Or stitches.”

“You can feel it too?” The hobo elf asked, surprised. Aerin shrugged, unwilling to speak to him.

“For fuck’s sake, what is up with all the ladders?” Varric glared down at the exit.

“Stop whining, Varric,” the Seeker growled. “Let’s keep moving.”

“I think she likes you,” Ellana stage whispered to an incredulous dwarf.

***

“That’s her, the sister of the Herald!”

“Wasn’t she with the Hero? During the Blight!”

“My brother saw her, in the temple! Took down the pride demon, all by herself!”

“Maker preserve us.”

Aerin scowled at all the attention. She hadn’t meant to kill the pride demon alone. But it went after Ellana, knocking her into a crumbled section of wall. So soon after regaining her sister, Aerin had lost control, flinging herself at the demon in a rage of steel and molten fire. Scant seconds later, the monster lay in pieces, while the army looked on in shock and awe. And fear. Definitely fear. She groaned. Ellana was still unconscious from the recoil of stabilizing the Breach. But she had stabilized it. Her mark had stopped expanding, and so had the Breach. They had time now. Time to figure out what the hell was going on.

Ducking into the dark chantry, she headed toward the back, popping into Josephine’s office. “A messenger told me to come here?”

“Ah, sí, into the war room.”

“That’s a warm, inviting name for a room.” The ‘war room’ was more like a war closet. Just large enough for a thick wooden table covered with a map of Thedas. A couple bookshelves lined the far wall. “Cozy. I don’t remember this room from last time. Is it new?”

“When the chantry took control of Haven, they did some renovations to this building and the surrounding town.”

“I noticed that. Probably for the best. Bloodstains and despair are hard to get out of the wood. So what’s this about then?”
Leliana strode through the door, the Seeker close on her heels. “Ah, you’re here. Good. As of right now, this… venture is being run by myself and the Seeker. You heard the chancellor yelling earlier?” Rolling her eyes, Aerin nodded. The whole village heard Chancellor Roderick yelling. All day, every day since Ellana had fallen out of the reach. Leliana sighed. “The mage-templar war is no longer our primary concern. That… thing in the sky is. We need to close it. Find out who’s responsible. Who killed Justinia.” The former bard’s eyes glittered with fury and loss. Aerin felt a pang of sympathy for her friend. Justinia had been like a mother to Leliana.

“So,” Cassandra continued, “we need your sister. We need her to seal the Breach.”

Aerin blinked at the women. “Have you met her? Just ask. If it involved being helpful and saving lives, she’ll say yes. Regardless of what I say or want.” The Seeker made a relieved grunt of approval.

“That is comforting to know. Will you help us? A warrior of your skill would be most beneficial.”

Aerin frowned. “Seeker. You’ve seen that I am a mage as well. An apostate in a chantry organization?”

“All mages are apostates now,” Leliana reminded her.

“Well, technically, yes, but there’s a vast difference from a circle mage who was recently emancipated and an apostate who has spent her whole life purposely avoiding and running from the templars.”

“You have my word, no one will arrest you,” Cassandra crossed her hand over her heart.

“She needs better reassurance than that, Cassandra,” Leliana smiled. “Aerin. No one will take you anywhere you do not wish to go.”

Studying the Left Hand carefully, the elf sighed. “I’m so going to regret this. Fine. I will help defend against the Breach. But this mage-templar war is beyond me. After the Breach is closed and dealt with, I will be gone.” The women nodded in agreement. “That settles that, then. Do I at least get paid? Or something? Fed?”

The ambassador chuckled. “Fed, yes. We have some hunters going out today actually. There’s a herd of ram that’s been sighted around the lake, if you wish to join them.”

“I can do that.”

“Nothing else to do until the Herald awakes.”

“Herald?” Aerin was confused.

“That’s what they’re calling her,” the Seeker replied. “The Herald of Andraste.”

Snort. Giggle. Aerin descended into full blown hysterical guffaws while the Seeker glowered at her. Josephin buried her face behind her writing board in an attempt to hide her smile, and Leliana openly grinned.

“You-” gasp, “a Dalish,” cackle, “-Andraste?!” is all she got out. “Oh, sweet Mythal, this is too good. I can’t wait to see her face when you tell her.”

Cassandra grumbled to herself. “If you are quite finished. The Commander has heard of your skill and was hoping you might be willing to assist him in training the troops in your spare time.”
“Commander? Sure, why not. All I have is spare time. Where is he?”

“The camp down by the lake.”

“Of course, Seeker.” Turning to leave the room, Leliana smiled as Aerin walked out, the elf still snorting with laughter, between the words ‘Ellana’ and ‘Herald’.

“Will she be a problem?” the Nevarran woman turned to the Nightingale.

“No.”

“You sound very confident.”

“I know her,” Leliana replied simply. “She is strong, independent, ruthless, violent, and unyielding. She also always acts in the best interests of those she calls friends, and innocents. She is on our side.” Satisfied with that, Cassandra left the war room.

***

Evening had settled around Haven by the time Aerin returned with the other hunters, dragging eight rams behind them on a makeshift sleigh. Taking a few moments to clean herself up, she wandered down to the training camp. Most of the recruits had been released for the day, the empty sparring ring lit by the moons reflecting off the snow and the swirling, green light of the Breach. **Guess I’ll find this Commander tomorrow. Wonder how capable is he is if he's asking me of all people for help.**

Stepping into the ring, she unsheathed her swords. She knew she had gotten lucky against the pride demon. She shouldn’t have lost control. It was sloppy, and carelessness leads to mistakes, which leads to injuries or death. Her own, if she was lucky. Others, if she was not. Pulling all her emotions up, she slowly burned them away, finding her center and focusing on the emptiness. **Guard up. Parry left. Riposte. Whirl, duck, roll.** Finding her rhythm in the familiar dance, she gracefully moved from one form to the next, silk gliding over steel.

A lone figure leaned against the fence, watching her, captivated by her fluidity. Cassandra was the one of the most powerful warriors he had ever known, but she had the finesse of an axe- harsh, deadly, with the heft of brute force behind the swing. This woman moved with the fluidity of a stiletto dagger- elegant, sleek, built for speed and precision. He was mesmerized. How long he stood there, watching her, he didn’t know. The larger moon was high in the sky when she finally stilled, sheathing her swords and lowering her hands like a prayer.

“That was impressive. Although I should have expected it, had I known it was you.” **That voice…** Aerin turned back to look at her audience.

Deep set amber eyes, a high, prominent nose and brow, full lips curled up in a smirk, a faded scar tugging one corner of his mouth up. Gone was the templar plate, the sword of mercy. Instead, he wore a silverite breastplate and pauldrons, a deep red tabard and cloak fastened over the metal, and a mantle made of a red lion’s mane. His golden curls were slicked back in a fashionable style. It made him look more… well, commanding, really. More mature.

She said the first thing that came to her mind. **“Varric will have to come up with a new nickname for you.”**

He chuckled, the low tone threatening to send shivers up her spine. **“He stands by it, he says. More enigmatic that way. I did not realize you were the elven warrior that had the entire town abuzz.”**

“The entire town? Creators, I hope not. Leliana didn’t tell you it was me?”
“No,” he held open the gate for her to walk out of the ring, “she just said it was an old friend of hers, and that she was talented. I admit, I was skeptical at first, hearing of your battle with the pride demon. Battle? Should we even call it that?”


“All of those work.”

“So, Knight-Captain. How are you here?”

“ Took a ship,” he replied mildly. “Rode some. Walked a decent amount. Also, I’m no longer a templar. Commander is my only title now. Did Cassandra tell you I could use your help with the recruits?” She paused. They had been walking towards a small dock on the lake.

“You left the Order?”

He nodded solemnly, moonlight glinting off his hair. She wanted to touch it, see if it was as soft as before. “I recall someone telling me that what matters is what I did from here on out. So when Cassandra offered me this chance, I took it. The Order has changed. It no longer supports the ideals it did when I wanted to join. It wasn’t… I want…”

“To protect people,” she murmured. “I remember.” She glanced up at him. How is he even more handsome now? “Commander Cullen. It has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

“It’s growing on me. What have you been up to since Kirkwall?”

“Living the life of a nomadic mercenary mostly. Running from the templars,” she shot him a cheeky grin. “Nothing as exciting as becoming a Commander.”

He clenched his hands at his sides to hide their trembling. Maker's breath, the way she says my title… Licking his lips, he desperately wished for a drink of water for his suddenly dry mouth.

She was staring. She knew she should look away, but the way he tensed, she was sure she said something wrong. Then he licked his lips and she forgot about that. All she could remember was the smell of him, cloves and elderberry and oakmoss, of which she could even now detect a hint, and the feel of his hands against her… everything. This isn’t the time for that. Venhedis, your sister is lying unconscious still. Get your shit together. You are a 30 year old woman, not a teenager.

“Ah. Well. Would you like for me to come by tomorrow? I’m not sure what you need my help with, I’m rather useless with a shield.”

“Y-yes,” he stuttered, “you are, um, you have a good eye. I was… hoping you could help me keep watch over their stance and footwork, redirect them if need be. And eventually they will have to learn to defend themselves against mages and rogues, of which you are both.”

Nodding, she turned back to look at the Breach. “I can do that. It almost looks beautiful, doesn’t it?”

He glanced up at it. “If you ignore the fact that it killed hundreds and spews out demons, yes.”

Snorting, she tossed him a smirk. “Romantic, aren’t you?”

“Couldn’t you tell?” She laughed at that.

“I suppose I could. After all, nothing but Lowtown’s finest abandoned warehouse would do.” He was glad it was dark out and the redness of his face was hidden.
“Aerin.”

“Hm?”

“I owe you an apology.”

She waved her hands off at him. “Not for that night, I hope.”

“No. Although if you’d like one for that night, I would. It was… you deserved better.”

She chuckled at that. “Believe me, it was far better than what the likes of me truly deserved.”

Frowning, he shook his head, brow furrowed. “No, I don’t- well. That’s not what I wanted to apologize for. Back in Kinloch, I said… I said horrible things. Things borne of anger and trauma and fear. It was not worthy of me. I wish I could take back what I asked you and Aedan to do, but I can’t. I can only spend the rest of my life, atoning for the things I did, the things I let happen.”

Her face was shadowed as she studied him with an inscrutable expression. “Cullen. I saw what happened. It was… regrettable but understandable. And now, I see the way you treat me and I’ve heard from others how you treat the few mages here. Suspicion, yes, and you’re defensive, but the revulsion and vindictive hostility you once held to us, especially apostates, is fading fast. Which is remarkable.” Her eyes darkened. “Better than me at least. I have yet to even begin forgiving my captors and their people.”

“Your captors?” With a terse bow, she stood up and smiled, a tight, haunted thing.

“Until tomorrow, then, Commander.”

“Cullen. Please.”

"Cullen.” With a final smile, this one hair’s breadth wider, she headed back to the small cabin she shared with Ellana

Maker’s breath, he thought. What am I getting myself into?

Chapter End Notes

He’s baaaaack :D
Aerin leaned on a bookshelf at the back of the war room, gleefully watching as Cassandra and Leliana explained Ellana’s new title to her.

“They’re calling me WHAT?!” Another fit of giggles threatened to consume her.

“The people saw what you did against the Breach. They believe that the woman who appeared behind you in the rift was Andraste.” Ellana groaned and hit her head against the massive table.

“Please tell me this is a dream.”

“Afraid not, Herald.” The newly minted holy figure glared at her sister.

“I will cut you.”

Cullen smothered a laugh. The sisters reminded him of his own siblings, constantly bickering. “If you’re going to the Hinterlands, look for other options to expand the Inquisition’s influence while you are there.”

“Right.” The Dalish girl sighed. “Am I going alone with a few soldiers? Or…?”

“I will accompany you, if you wish it,” Cassandra volunteered. “The elven apostate- ah, the other one,” she amended, glancing at Aerin who snorted, “has expressed his desire to accompany you in order to study your mark. His magic seems useful against the demons. Your sister is more than welcome to join as well, of course.” She paused. “And the dwarf. I suppose he can be helpful as well.”

“Will you come with me?”

Aerin nodded. “If the Commander hasn’t grown too dependent on me yet.” Cullen flushed and stammered out something that resembled a denial of his dependence, Leliana raising her eyebrow at him, a small smirk on her lips.

“I suppose we all can just go, can’t we? Us, Solas, and Varric?” The Seeker frowned at that last name.

“I suppose we could. Very well. We will leave at first light tomorrow.”

As the rest of the advisors and Herald filed out of the room, Leliana caught Aerin’s arm, pulling her back to walk slowly beside her. “So… the Commander, hmm?”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Aerin replied primly. The other woman just giggled.

“Oh, don’t play coy with me. I’m glad to see it. You need some happiness in your life.”

“I have happiness,” the elf insisted. “I have Ellana, and now you’re here, and Varric. And… stuff.”

“Aerin. You’ve been a leaf blowing in the wind for the past ten years. Never settling down, or a steady job.”
“Is this the part of the conversation where you tell me my biological clock is ticking? Or that a steady man like the Commander would be good for me?”

“Heavens, no. I just want you to be happy. Also, I bet he’s fantastic in bed.”

She snorted, unwilling to reveal exactly what she knew of the Commander’s bedroom talents, lack of bed notwithstanding. “Happiness doesn’t always mean I have to be with someone, Leli. Plus, him and I- I’m not so sure it’s a good idea. I mean, look at us. He’s all authoritative and imperious and… bossy as hell. And I’m, well, me.” *And I’m nothing but darkness enshrouding a tiny, flickering light.*

“He doesn’t know of your past, does he?”

“No.” Aerin’s voice was short and tense. “He doesn’t need to. I’m tired of the pitying looks people give when they find out. Plus, that’s far behind me now.”

“Is it?” Leliana asked softly. “Never mind. I’m sorry I brought it up. Please try not to set the entire Hinterlands on fire this time. Or any druffalos.”

“That was one time!”

***

The early spring weather meant the snow in the lowlands had finally let up and was melting, but the roads were in terrible shape from the runoff. Add in the constant fighting, remnants of spells, and ruts the wagons from refugees made, and traveling was a logistical nightmare. Aerin scowled at her tent, mud leaking through the seams as they made camp that night.

“I hate spring in Ferelden.” Varric nodded his agreement. Ellana was perched cautiously on top of a dry rock, trying to decipher a map, turning it this way and that. “You know where we’re going next?”

“I don’t see why I have to be the one to do this,” she grumbled. “You’re better at tracking people and maps and human things anyhow.” She shoved the map down at her sister. Rolling her eyes, she took the map from the younger woman and threw up a small magelight to read it by.

“We’re here,” she pointed to a mark in the center of the map. “The scout, Harding right? She said that the horsemaster lives west, there. We can head this way tomorrow, close these few rifts along the way, go see the man about a horse, and head south, circle around. That recruit wanted us to see if we can find some of the apostates’ supply caches too, so be on the lookout for those. All those poor people,” she sighed. “What?” Aerin noticed that the other elf, Solas, had an odd expression on his face.

“It was a kind thing you did, hunting those rams for the villagers. You seem much more… callous. It appears I was mistaken.”

Ellana chirped, “She acts mean and scary but she has a heart of gold.” Varric nodded his agreement.

“Stop telling my secrets, you two. I’ve a reputation to uphold.”

“You two are very fond of each other.” The Seeker had a small, rare smile as she watched the sisters.

“We save each other,” the Herald replied softly. Aerin ruffled her hair. “Do you have any siblings?”
Cassandra’s smile turned melancholy as she answered, “I had a brother. Anthony. He was killed, by blood mages.”

“I’m sorry,” Aerin murmured. “Blood magic has brought nothing but evil to this world.” Solas’ face grew pensive at that. *Oh? Have I touched a nerve?* “Alright, you, out with it.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I can see the questions you want to ask me about to burst through your skin, so go ahead, ask what you want. Better than having you study me like I’m some sort of bug.”

Solas considered her. “Would you prefer to go somewhere private?”

“I don’t intend to answer anything I don’t want you, or anyone else here to know, so no, here’s fine.” He nodded.

“You’re a Dreamer, a somniari.” Cassandra’s eyes widened at that.

“That’s not a question, elf.”

“Pardon. It’s more of a wondering statement. It’s a rare gift, to be able to visit other people’s dreams.”

Aerin frowned. “I don’t visit their dreams. I find people, and pull them to mine.” His face opened in surprise at that.

“That is… most unusual.” She shrugged. “Alright. Next, then? You are Dalish, but you never took vallaslin?”

“I never felt like I fit in with my clan. So I left to travel. I go back to them once in awhile, but no, I never took vallaslin. Never felt right. What else?”

“You don’t use your magic very often. It’s extremely rare to see a mage rely on mundane weapons instead of their mana.”

“Another not question. I’m an apostate. You don’t think it’s rather suspicious to go frolicking through a chantry town with a staff strapped to your back? I’ve kept myself out of the templars reach because I don’t cast unless I have to. Besides, it’s much more satisfying to watch a man bleed out from under your blade than just… freeze to death.” Ellana made a noise of disapproval.

“You are a healer, correct Herald?” Cassandra watched the elves carefully. “Seems odd that sisters should be so far apart in their professions.”

“Not really,” Ellana replied. “Aerin was injured enough in training that it made sense for me to learn to heal.”

“You do not look like you are related at all.” Solas had his head tilted to one side, studying the two women. They both just shrugged.

“Anyone interested in a story?” Varric cut in. *Bless you Varric.*

“Oh, oh yes please!” Ellana squealed. “I love your stories.”

***

The group walked along a narrow path, on their way back to tell Elaina and Dennet that the demon
controlling the wolves was dead, along with most of the wolves. All of them except one, in fact.

“You can’t seriously be considering keeping that thing.”

“And why not, Varric?”

“Ellana. It’s a wolf.”

“It’s just a baby. Its eyes are barely open!”

“It’s. A. Wolf.”

“And it deserves to live, just like everything else,” she snapped.

“Let her have it, Varric,” Aerin smiled, petting the tiny pup on its nose. “It might be possible to tame, given that it’s so young. Yes, you. Here, let me hold him.”

Solas watched the warrior elf snuggled the little wolf cub. “I would not have expected you to let it live.”

“Why? I don’t like needless death. Those wolves did nothing wrong. If we could have just killed the demon, and let the wolves be, I would have been content. Besides, baby wolves are adorable,” she lowered her head down to nuzzle its face. “What are you going to name it, Elle?”

“Herald, you cannot keep a wolf cub in the village.”

“I’ll move out of the village then.”

Cassandra sputtered. “No, you- Maker give me strength.” In the end, Ellana’s stubbornness won out and she would be allowed to keep the pup as long as it didn’t do any harm. Aerin laughed to herself. That was an argument they were bound to lose.

***

A week later, as they headed back to Haven, tracking through the mud that was slowly starting to dry, sore and disheveled and desperate for a bath, the Seeker dropped back to walk alongside Aerin.

“You were in Kirkwall, towards the end. With Hawke.”

“I was.”

“Was… it all as Varric describes? Is the book true?”

“The Tale of the Champion? Honestly, I haven’t read it. But Varric’s stories… He’s a natural storyteller. An artist. He takes artistic liberties, embellishes things. He’ll say that Hawke and her companions fiercely faced down 200 demons, shouting heroic war cries, their weapons always finding their mark, and destroying their enemies with nary a scratch. When in reality, there was probably only 25 demons, a lot more swearing, once Varric shot me in my own ass, and lots of bruises, cuts, and broken bones. But the outcome is the same. Dead demons, living us.” Cassandra laughed at that. “The stories people tell…” Aerin sighed. “I saw how they treated Aedan after the Blight. And Hawke. They were heroes. And the people elevated them on this pedestal to the point where they could do no wrong. But they were people. They had feelings. They fucked up, a lot. They lost so much. They gave everything to the world and the world left them with nothing and still demanded more. And now I see my sister. It’s starting happen to her too. The way people are starting to look at her. Like she is the Herald, sent by Andraste. Like those cultists in the Winterwatch Tower? They were practically laying prostrate on the ground as she walked by. She’s
not a holy figure. She’s a girl who loves everything fiercely and always gives her all. She stuffs her face with chocolates whenever she gets the chance and smears it all over her face. She likes sparkly things, and sleeps like a dead starfish. She’s Ellana, and I’ll be damned if I let anyone take that away from her.” Pausing, she grinned sheepishly. “I’m sorry. I got a bit carried away there. But yes. Varric exaggerates, but I haven’t known him to lie. Not about anything important at least.”

Except one thing. Oh well.

“Thank you, Mistress Lavellan.”

“Um. Aerin is totally fine. Please. For the love of the Creators, call me Aerin.”

***

“They want to send me to Val Royeaux, to address the clerics,” Ellana pouted glumly.

“That sounds like a terrible idea,” Aerin agreed.

“It is. I mean, look at me! Me! I’m going to mess this all up, I know it.” She flopped back on her bed, groaning.

“It’ll be fine. Cassandra is going, right? Between us two, you’ll be fine.” Her sister just moaned in disagreement. “Alright, enough of this. You need to unwind. Let’s go to the tavern. There’s a bard there singing. Come on, up we go.” Forcing a reluctant Herald to her feet, Aerin dragged her sister down the path to where the tavern lights glowed, warm and welcoming. Spying an empty table, she pushed Ellana into a chair and went to grab two mugs of mead from Flissa.

“Lightning! Herald! Didn’t expect to find you here.”

“Hey, I want a nickname too, Varric,” Ellana pouted. He chuckled.


She wrinkled her nose. “That’s dumb. And I think so.” Varric dealt the cards, as another person slid into their table. “Hello, Sister Nightingale.”

Leliana smiled. “Good evening. Deal me in, Varric. Don’t look so surprised, I take breaks sometimes too.” Aerin grinned. It had been so long since the two had last seen each other. She was happy that time had been good to her friend, even if her path had grown slightly darker. But then again, so had hers. After a few sips of alcohol, Ellana's mood had brightened up and she was chattering away with Varric, forcing him to teach her the words to the song that the bard, Maryden, was singing.

“Aerin, why don’t you sing that song?”

Ellana and Varric gave identical excited gasps. “You sing?!” they both shouted. Aerin winced, glaring at her friend, who just smiled serenely. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cullen step into the tavern, nodding to his second-in-command Rylen, as he headed to the bar for an ale. The elf vehemently shook her head.

“Nope. No. Non. Nein. Ie. Not.” The begging from the two sitting across from her was rather adorable, if slightly annoying.

“Why not? You have a lovely voice. Here, I can play for you. Flissa! Will you bring us a bottle of that West Hill brandy? And four glasses.”
“Getting me drunk will accomplish nothing.”

“Hush. Yes, it will.” She poured the smooth, amber liquid into the small glass. It looks like Cullen’s eyes. Looking up, she noticed said Commander watching her. Flushing, she looked back down, sighed, and threw the shot back, feeling the burn trickle down her throat. Leliana had stood up from the table and was not asking the bard to borrow her lute. Secretly hoping that the bard would hit her with it instead, Aerin was disappointed when Maryden just handed it over to the spymaster with a bow. Totally adding Maryden to my list. Leliana smiled at her friend as she strummed a few chords, searching for the right key, and began to play and sing in a stirring soprano.

**I feel sun through the ashes in the sky.**
Where's the one who'll guide us into the night?
What's begun is the war that will force this divide.
What's to come is fire and the end of time.
I am the one who can recount what we've lost.
I am the one who will live on.

Ellana’s face grew haunted as she listened in, taking the lyrics to heart. With a deep breath, she opened her mouth, the Elvhen translation spilling from her lips. Closing her eyes, Aerin let the words drift over her, as if the notes could reach into her soul and smooth out all the rough edges left by her past. *I have run through the fields of pain and sighs. I have fought to see the other side. I am the one who will live on.* The last notes faded into the silence of the tavern, lingering a moment before the crowd broke out into raucous applause, cheering the Left Hand and Herald. “Aerin,” Leliana called in a sing song voice.

Groaning, Aerin poured herself another shot of brandy—was this glass number six or seven?—downed it in one gulp, coughed, picked up the bottle, and took another long swig. “Maker’s breath,” she heard a familiar voice say. Shooting a grin in Cullen’s direction, she sat down next to the former bard.

“You start,” Leliana said, “and I’ll pick up.”

*Wise men say only fools rush in,*
But I can't help falling in love with you.
Shall I stay? Would it be a sin?
If I can't help falling in love with you?”

The tune floated through her chest, bringing back the memory of Alistair, his lopsided smile and the way his eyes crinkled, the profile of his face as he stared out to sea, his warm, genuine laugh. A small, sad smile crept onto her face and stayed for the rest of the song.

Cullen knew he was staring, but then again, so was everyone else. She just looked so… peaceful. More serene than he had ever seen her before. It was a good look on her, he decided. Normally, she walked around with a faint scowl creasing her brow, suspicious of everyone and everything. He wondered what it was in her past that had made her that way. Who were the captors she spoke of? Maybe he could ask Varric. Would that be improper? Why did he even want to know? Shaking his head, he decided it wasn’t important. There were other, more important things to do besides worry over past romantic liaisons. He would just put her out of his mind. *Even if her blood does sing to me like the blue. Why is that, anyways? Just infatuation.*

The crowd cheered even louder after Aerin finished her song. Smiling, and stumbling slightly, she
fell back into her chair, picking up her cup and frowning at it. “I think you’ve had enough,” Ellana teased. “Oh! Commander. Just in time. Will you help my lush of a sister back to our cabin? Otherwise she might get lost and fall in a snowdrift.”

“Hush you,” Aerin chided, “I can walk fine by myself.” She tripped over a chair leg and fell into Cullen’s arms. “Dammit. You planned that.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I put that chair there and willed you to trip.”

“I knew it. Sneaky. Trying to take advantage of me, hmm?” She tilted her face up and grinned. Half of his blood rushed to his face and other half rushed down farther.

“Ah- no. Come on, let’s get you home.” Tucking an arm under hers, he let her lean on him as they began walking to the door.

“Shame. Whoops!” Stumbling over a rock in the path, she lurched forward, somehow tangling her leg around his, bringing them both crashing to the ground. Bracing for the impact, he found himself laying over her, arms to the side of her head. “Oh, I like this view,” she purred.

“Maker’s breath,” he muttered. He could feel his arousal pressing against his pants. Hastily shoving himself upright, he extended a hand to the elf, roughly yanking her up and throwing her up into his arms.

“Hey, I can walk, you big buffoon!” She slurred as she whacked him in the arm, wincing as her arm bounced off his metal pauldrons.

“Apparently not.” Cullen ignored her continued insults and curses and strange looks the townspeople were giving him as he carried the drunk elf into her cabin and unceremoniously dumped her on the bed. “Good night, Aerin. I’ll see you tomorrow on the field.”

She picked up a shoe and threw it at his retreating figure, hitting the wall instead. “Jerk.”

***

Cullen ducked into the large tent, eyes scanning the room until they alighted on the Nightingale at her desk, shuffling through a pile of correspondence.

“Something I can help you with, Commander?”

“Yes, I was curious. I’ve read through dozens of background reports for all the upper ranking Inquisition members, but not a thing about the Herald, or her sister.”

“Ah, yes. I wondered if you would ask. There is surprisingly little information on them, as you can imagine. Dalish clans are notorious for guarding their secrets. All my scouts could determine was that they do, indeed, come from Clan Lavellan.”

“But you know more than that.”

“I know what Aerin told me years ago in confidence, yes. It’s not pertinent to the Inquisition. If she or the Herald wish to tell you or anyone else of their past, that is their call. Not mine.”

“Discretion, Sister Nightingale?”

She gave him a thin lipped smile. “For my friend? Always.”

***
Val Royeaux was just as horrible as Ellana feared. Angry clerics, angrier templars, and the worst of all, the Lord Seeker of all things angry. She was afraid that Aerin would set him on fire in the town square, but miraculously, her sister resisted, mumbling about learning a spell for frogs instead.

“It’s probably a trap, Herald,” Cassandra examined the notes they had found during their scavenger hunt for red things earlier.


Varric passed Ellana a perfumed and embossed envelope labeled in immaculate script. “A salon? What is that? At noble’s house? Should I change? Should I even go? Aerin, you go for me.”

“Cassandra would be better for taking with you I’d imagine.” As both the Seeker and Ellana groaned while they walked toward the gates, a voice called out to them.

“If I might have a moment of your time? I heard of this gathering, and I wanted to see this fabled Herald of Andraste with my own eyes.” An older, petite, dark haired elf in mage robes approached them. Aerin narrower her eyes at the woman. She seems familiar. Something about her…

“Grand Enchanter Fiona?” Cassandra sounded surprised.

“If it’s help with the Breach you seek, perhaps my people could help. Consider this an invitation to Redcliffe. An alliance could help us both. Au revoir, my Lady Herald.” With a small bow, the Grand Enchanter disappeared back in the city.

“Come,” the Seeker stared at the retreating mage, “let us check these other two leads and return to Haven.”

Chapter End Notes

Aerin is suspicious of the eggy elfy elf.

These next few chapters make me giddy.

Still getting the hang of tumblr, but if you’d like, stop in, say hi, ask me questions, give me one-shot ideas, or yell at me, whatever floats your duck. I just reblogged the funniest damn Cullen meme/screenshot thing and I still can't stop laughinggggg.

Thanks @windysuspirations for it. https://www.tumblr.com/blog/kawakaeguri
Aerin liked Sera immediately. The girl was ridiculous and violent, a rather perfect combination to lighten up the somber Inquisition. And she annoyed the First Enchanted that had deigned to join them, Vivienne. Anyone who got on that woman’s nerves was her new best friend as far as she was concerned. *Power hungry, scheming mage with her staff so far up her own perfectly sculpted ass.*

The two elves sat on top of a roof, munching on toast and strawberry marmalade, watching the Commander as he argued with the weasel-like Chancellor Roderick. *He’s actually defending the mages to a chantry official in front of an audience. He’s come so far, it’s almost unrecognizable. How did he do it?* Aerin chewed, pondering this complete flip of perspective as Ellana and Cassandra walked in the chantry, presumably to discuss the events at Val Royeaux.

“So, glowy hand seems like a nice git. Your sister, yeah?” Aerin snorted.

“Git? Yeah, she is. On both accounts, usually.”

“Difference of life choices, I suppose. The Dalish weren’t for me. Too much out there to confine myself to wandering the fields, hunting and singing stories around the campfire for the rest of my life.”

“I get that. Commander Tight Britches looks more uptight than usual. All arrggh and gaaah. Lookit him stomp.” Glancing over at the chantry, Aerin noticed that the Commander did seem more stern than usual. His jaw was clenched and she could see a vein ticking in his all the way from her perch. Ellana followed him out, her usual mulish expression set across her face, arms crossed as she stormed after former templar. She couldn’t make out exact words, but Aerin would hazard a guess it wasn’t friendly. Throwing her arms up, the Herald spun around in the snow and mud, angrily stalking through the village gates, headed for the treeline. A small wolf pup raced after her, yipping at her heels.

Aerin leapt off the roof, startling a pair of women who were passing by. With a quick apology, she darted down the path and past Haven’s entrance, following the footprints in the snow. “Elle?”

The breeze from an arrow brushed a loose lock of hair back, embedding itself into the tree next to her head with a dull thunk. She raised her eyebrow at the archer. “Meeting went well, I assume?”

“That- that- templar,” Ellana spat, “all bound and determined for me to ignore the Grand Enchanter’s invitation, telling me to spend more time gathering influence so I can approach the templars. When the mages asked me to go! Just because he doesn’t trust them. He can go out in the cold and run around in a war zone through the mud if he wants them so much.”

Pulling the arrow out of the bark, Aerin examined the fletching. “He’s not wrong, you know.” Her sister’s glare leveled on her. “Mages are dangerous. You shouldn’t trust them. But the templars aren’t any better. Especially after that snub from the Lord Seeker.” Ellana’s shoulders sagged. “They’re not deciding yet, are they?”

“No,” the Dalish elf sighed, reaching down to stroke the little wolf that was pawing at her leg.
“And they’re letting me decide for some twisted reason. Need to get those watchtower’s built so we can get the horses first. And an Avvar tribe has taken a group of our soldiers hostage, demanding to meet me. And the Grey Wardens have all disappeared. Leliana tracked one to the Hinterlands and wants me to go see if he knows anything. And a mercenary band on the Storm Coast that’s offering its services wants me to go watch them, plus find a missing patrol out there. Everyone wants me to go everywhere and all I want to do is not be around all these… humans.”

Grumbling to herself, she grabbed a low branch and swung herself up into the tree, resting against the rough trunk. Aerin leaned against the wood underneath her. “What do you think I should do?”

“Hm. Well the goal is to seal the breach as soon as possible, right? And if you can get the mages now, and they invited you, then they’re the logical choice. Hang what Cullen thinks. He’s a grown lad, he’ll get over himself or not.”

“I thought you fancied him?”

“I fancy his muscles and that jawline,” Aerin smirked. “Could care less about the rest. What can I do to help?”

“Will you go to the Hinterlands and find that Warden? And the Storm Coast? You’re better suited to judge whether or not the mercenaries are good or not. And poke around, see if you can find anything about the missing patrol. I’ve got to get to the Fallow Mire as fast as I can to save those men.”

“Can do. Who are you taking?”

“Um. I suppose I should take my new companions, right? So… Vivienne and Sera. And Cassandra. That leaves you with-”

“I’m not taking Solas. Varric and I will be fine.”

“You should. Why don’t you like him? He’s kind, and has the most fascinating stories about the Fade. Plus, he’s cute,” she giggled. Aerin stared up at her sister in disbelief.

“I mean, yeah, if you’re sexually attracted to eggs.” A slushy snowball dropped on her head. “Hey! It’s true. I don’t trust any man with a heady that shiny.”

Ellana rolled her eyes. “Just take the damn man. He's a good healer. Herald’s orders.” She squawked as retaliating snowball smacked her in the cheek. Giggle, she dropped down to the ground to gather up another snowball, her little pup jumping up and down with glee, trying to catch the snow as the sisters battled.

Laughing to the point of exhaustion, Aerin fell to the ground with a wet squelched, Ellana piled on top of her, while the wolf eagerly licked their faces. Spluttering, the older sister shoved the younger off and picked up the squirming pup instead. “Did you decide on a name yet?”

“Kyla, I think.”

“The northern wind? I like it.”

***

They found the Grey Warden fighting off bandits with a couple of farmers near Lake Luthias in the Hinterlands. Aerin would forever have a soft spot for the noble Order, she assumed. But after asking her questions, she realized that unfortunately, this taciturn man was giving her nothing. Sighing, she turned to leave.
“It’s been a pleasure, Warden Blackwall, but this didn’t help at all. Come on guys, let’s go.”

“My lady, you said you’re an Inquisition… agent? Events like these, with the Divine dead and the sky torn, people thinking we’re absent is almost as bad as thinking we’re involved. If you’re trying to put things right, maybe I can help.” The middle aged bearded man eyed her earnestly.

Aerin nodded, and held out her arm. “Welcome to the Inquisition, Warden.”

***

The Iron Bull was huge. Like a fucking mountain. He was at least twice as big as any Qunari she had ever seen before. Maybe even bigger than the Arishok.

“The Inquisition would be glad to have the Chargers, Iron Bull.”

“Don’t forget the ‘the’. The article is important. Makes me feel like a thing, a tool of destruction. It really works for me.” Raising her eyebrow, she chuckled. “This is Cremisius Aclassi, my lieutenant. Call him Krem.”

Aerin glared at the man. “Tevinter.”

The human held up his hands defensively. “Not by choice, that’s for sure. Just a soporati.” Not a mage.

“There gonna be a problem?” the giant Qunari rumbled. “I mean, I know he’s not the prettiest ‘Vint, but he’s a good man. Loyal.”

Cocking her head at the strange pair, she sighed, and shook her head. “You’re wrong. He’s quite handsome actually.” The man’s face burned red as he stumbled away to collect the rest of the mercenaries. The Iron Bull threw his head back and roared with laughter.

“Y’know, I got this thing for redheads.”

“Why am I not surprised.”

He grinned and flexed. He is a fine specimen, Aerin mused. Maybe I should? It’s been awhile. A very, very, long while. But he’s so freaking huge. He's rip me in half. Eh, I'll pass. “I’ll go with my boys to Haven tomorrow. Mind if I hang around you tonight, get to know what it is the Inquisition’s been doing?”

“For your reports, I assume? Make sure you tell the Arishok I said hi. I’ll even send him some cookies.”

The Iron Bull slapped his knee, huge grin breaking across his face as he asked gleefully, “Are you the cause of the all the new confectionaries that have been popping up all over Seheron and Par Vollen? Literally have sugar coming in the harbors by the boatload.”

“No, that was Leliana. She’s the one who first gave him one to try, back when he was Sten. He doesn’t like me much.”

“I can’t imagine anyone not liking you,” he leered. Rolling her eyes, she let a small spark dance around her fingertips. “Oh. Gotcha.” His face sobered up.

Harding, bless the woman, had set up camp under a dense canopy of trees and spread a large tarp over all the tents so it was relatively dry, and warm. The rain had them all chilled to the bone.
Stripping off her wet armor and clothes, she threw on a dry set of leathers and stepped out, gratefully taking a pack of rations and a bread roll from an attendant.

“The Blight would have been so much better if we traveled like this.”

The Qunari raised his eyebrow. “You were in Ferelden during the Blight?” She saw Solas scoot closer in the corner of her eye.

Varric nodded for her. “She traveled with the Hero of Ferelden.”

“You know Aedan hates that title.”

“And the Champion of Kirkwall!”

“Hawke likes hers even less.” The dwarf grinned unrepentantly.

“You must have had quite the adventures,” Solas remarked, somehow managing to be graceful as he tore off a small bit of jerky.

“I get around,” she shrugged. The Qunari eyed her.

“You remind me of a story. An Antivan legend I’ve heard. A woman draped in shadow who lures her enemies to their death by her song and beauty. Ever hear it?”

“Antivans have lots of legends,” she replied flippantly. “Have you heard the one about the Beast of the Tellari Swamp? I wonder how many of them are based in truth?” He smiled and returned to his food. *Nosy bastard. Ben-Hassrath, hmm. This could be tricky.* Finishing her bread, she dusted the crumbs off on her pants and stood up, stretching as she walked to the edge of camp and surveyed the verdant valley spread out before them.

“It’s curious.” *Not the bloody elf, ughhhh.* “I spend my nights walking the Fade, checking to make sure the area around Haven and our camp is free from demons, ensuring that the Herald’s mark remains stable.”

“How noble of you.”

A small smile flickered at the edge of his lips. *He is kinda pretty. I guess.* “Just doing my part. And there is this one dream, encased within a will so formidable that nothing can penetrate. No demons, no spirits. Although they gather around the edges in droves, drawn to the power.”

“Seems like a good thing,” Aerin dryly said. “What of it?”

“Your will is unlike any I’ve ever seen. The power you wield is unheard of, except perhaps in the days of Arlathan. And yet you shy from it.” She remained motionless, arms crossed, eyes fixated into the night. “I could teach you, if you wish it.”

“Why?” she finally spun to face him suspiciously.

“Because I hate to see all that wasted potential. And the more of your magic you control, the better you would be able to protect your sister.” Aerin considered him. *He’s lying. He wants something from me. But what?* His face gave away nothing.

“Shall I try to find you or you find me?” A smug smile crossed his face. *Definitely wants something. Best to play along for now.*

“I will come to you.” Nodding to the mysterious elf, she slipped back into camp.
“Everything ok, Lightning?”

She scratched her head and pulled her braid over her shoulder, fingering the ends while she observed her dwarven friend. “Well enough, I suppose. We’ll go tomorrow and check out the last place that patrol was supposed to be at. Warden Blackwall, did you wish to return to Haven tomorrow as well or would you like to come with us?”

“I’d like to tag around, if you’ll have me.” She smiled.

“Of course. I believe that’s my cue to sleep then. Goodnight, gentlemen. The Iron Bull.” His low chuckle follower her into her tent. Slipping off her armor, but leaving her boots on as she always did on the road, she relaxed onto her bedroll and closed her eyes.

The Fade crackled around her skin, the Breach swirling the atmosphere in the distance in a replica of the real world thing. It all felt wrong, like the air was bleeding out around her. Concentrating, she pulled a replica of the prairies the Clan Lavellan roamed around her, the warm breeze almost feeling real. A slight pull tugged at the edge of her consciousness. Focusing on that twinge, she relaxed her mind and Solas winked into existence before. His clothes here were grander than the rags he wore when awake. A rich, blue outer robe lined with silver scrollwork skimmed over his slim figure, a crisp white tunic over soft gray leggings underneath.

“You should dress like this in real life.” He smiled, holding out his staff in front of him. “Straight to business then?” Holding out her hand, she willed her staff into existence; smooth ash gray wood, with a small pale blue stone carved like a duck sat at the top as her focus. He raised an elegant eyebrow at it. “What? I like ducks. It still works.”

“I… suppose so. Very well. How do you normally pull people into your dream?”

Examining her staff, she replied, “I can only do it with people I know well. I get familiar with their mind, or aura, and so I can find it in the Fade, and I just… pull.”

He considered this. “Interesting. I have heard of tales of somniari who could do such things from long ago, but they are rare. This should be simple for you then. Come, let’s take a walk.”

Following the mage, she watched as her dream fell away. “Open your eyes.”

“They are open.”

“No, not your physical eye. Your mind’s eyes. You cannot see anyone else’s dreams because you are closed off. Empty yourself, clear your thoughts. And open.”

“Won’t that attract demons to me? My Keeper told me I should never empty my mind while I was in the Fade.”

He sneered a bit. “The Dalish only know bits and pieces. She did well, to protect you. But I am here now. Nothing ill will befall you while I am present.” Sighing to herself, Aerin closed her eyes. Breathe, focus, feed all my thoughts to the flame. It was trickier in the Fade to clear herself, probably because it was the opposite of everything she was taught to do. But the serenity came, and so, she opened her eyes. And gasped.

The Fade was alive. Not the barren place she usually wandered, but more like the night sky. Thousands of little pinpricks of light burned like the stars, while shimmering figures glided in and out and shadows lurked around the edges. All their attention was on her. She could practically feel the demons salivating, probably debating their chances with approaching me. In the air around her, graceful bridges rose, lattice work so thin it could be spider's silk, towering spires, crystalline
palaces- all ancient ruins now, reduced to a memory behind the Veil.

“Beautiful, is it not?”

“All the lights… are dreams?” He nodded, pleased. “And these buildings, all ruins now?”

“Most of them aren’t even ruins now. Mere dust. Come. Focus on the lights. Can you find your sister? You know her mind well.” Stretching out a hand, Aerin felt. The Fade swirled around her, almost as if it were eager to help. In a way, I suppose it is.

“There. Do I just walk, or… float? Hover?” Her face was scrunched up, trying to figure out what to do next.

“Just will yourself there, da’len.” She cocked a brow up at that.

“You know, we’re probably around the same age. So. Teleporting it is then.” Concentrating on Ellana’s light, she imagined herself standing before it. A blink later, she was. Clapping her hands in glee, she faced the other elf. “That was amazing. Thank you, Solas.”

“It was my pleasure. It has been far too long since I met another with talents that rival my own. I’m glad you are not a circle mage. In fact… your casting style is… odd, to say the least. I sense the Dalish in some spells, but in others, I’d almost say… Tevinter.”

“How fascinating. I’ll be sure to mention that to my Keeper.” Solas recognized her flat tone for what it was, a notice that his prodding was unwelcome.

“My apologies, I did not mean to offend. Would you care to spar with me? So I can get a handle on what we should work on first?” Aerin nodded, and Solas whisked them away to an elegant circular gazebo, the stone arches overlooking a massive waterfall and glittering city long since gone.

“Arlathan,” he murmured.

This place… It was beautiful. Serene. A harmonious riot of color, ewers of flowers seemingly draped haphazardly over every balcony, looking like it was growing out of the stone. Maybe it was. The columns that held up this place were made out of what looked like quartz, interweaving together like lace. “It’s beyond imagination.” She looked down at herself and gasped. Her hair was loose, hanging down almost to her knees, a gossamer golden robe thin as a butterfly’s wing, and just as soft, flowing over an icy blue gown that hugged her body, flaring slightly out past her knees. It was gorgeous. And disturbing. She glanced warily up at the mage.

“The fashions of the day. I thought you might be interested? No? Again, it seems I must beg your forgiveness,” he replied, a rueful look on his features. With a wave, her normal armor replaced the gown and her hair was back into its braid. “Now, then. Let’s start with a simple fireball.”

***

“If anyone else gets taken captive in that Void-forsaken place, they’re on their own.” Ellana stood naked in their room, while Aerin heated the small wooden tub for her. Her clothes had been discarded in a moldy, muddy pile outside the door. Probably to be burned. “So much rain, a plague, undead, and Avvar. I’m never going back. I refuse.” She scowled at the water, then clambered in.

“How did your trip go?”

“Did you miss the giant Qunari by the gate somehow?”

“Oh, that’s him? Creators, he so… big. His arm is almost the same size as me.”
“He seems nice. He’s a spy for the Qun, but he’ll still be useful. The Grey Warden, Blackwall, is helping Harrit out in the forge for now. That patrol was dead, but we found the group responsible. Their leader is dead and apparently they work for me now. I’m still confused about that.” Aerin stretched out sideways on the bed, head resting on her arms.

“How are you getting along with Solas?”

Aerin made a face at that. “Oh, your elven lover has been teaching me some useful tricks in the Fade. He’s ok. I guess. Hey, Elle? Just don’t… tell him anything about me, okay? I have this weird vibe from him. I can’t explain it, but I don’t trust him. Not yet, at least.”

Ellana sighed, soaping up her hair. “Fine, fine, my lips are sealed. Better tell Varric, too. So. I told the Commander I’m going for the mages in three days. He was very resigned, doing that twitchy scowl thing with his face, but he accepted it. I think. Will you come with me? Cassandra and Varric are coming too. Vivienne and Sera are a bit… too much for me. To deal with. Ever again.”

_Maybe that’s why Cullen was acting weird around me? Too stressed out about everything?_ Aerin had gone to help with training today, but the normally kind man was very curt and almost hostile with her. So much so that she took to calling him Knight-Captain the rest of day, not doing much to improve his mood. _Whatever. We’ve all got problems to get through._

“How sure thing, Bubbles.”

**Chapter End Notes**

Ducks are Aerin's secret weakness.

I'm sure she'll be totally thrilled at the magister in Redcliff, welcome them, weave them flower crowns and shit.
“Did you see that?!”

“It’s like time… slowed down.”

“Something’s not right here. Let’s go in.”

Aerin frowned at the empty space where a rift used to be in front of the gates that led into Redcliffe. She saw the magic in the air, not part of the tear, woven in an arcane pattern so convoluted she had no idea where it began or ended. Trying to pick it apart might have had disastrous effects, so she left it alone. A scout stood ready to meet them as they walked through the entrance.

“We’ve spread the word the Inquisition was coming, but no one expected us.”

“Not even Grand Enchanter Fiona?” Ellana was startled.

“If she was, she hasn’t told anyone. We’ve arranged for use of the tavern for negotiations.”

A slender elven mage ran down the road, panting for breath. “Agents of the Inquisition! My apologies. Magister Alexius is in charge now, and is expected shortly. In the meantime, you can speak with the former Grand Enchanter.”

“Magister?” Aerin stepped up. “Here, in Redcliffe?” Her eyes spit blue fire as she stared down the cowering man. A gloved hand reached forward to hold her back.

“Ah, yes. He’ll be along shortly.”

“Aerin, let’s go meet Fiona first,” Ellana murmured softly. With a mute glare, her sister shoved past the messenger and stalked down the hill, electricity crackling around her.

As the Herald and her companions continued down the grassy path that would lead them to Redcliffe, Aerin paused to take in a broken windmill, destroyed when the darkspawn invaded ten years ago. The entire village and chantry had been leveled and rebuilt. Carefully touching a section of broken wall, she leaned her head against the stone and breathed. Redcliffe. Where she had first met him. Where they first shared their love together. They had a picnic, just over there. The sparring ring was in this spot. Every tree, every rock, every patch of dirt held a memory for her. And now Tevinter was here. And was probably going to screw it all up. Not if I can help it. Ellana looked back at her, gently taking her hand in hers, keeping her comforting grip around it, anchoring her to the present. “That’s the griffon statue they built to honor Aedan.”

“Lot of memories for you here, huh, Lightning?” Varric patted her arm soothingly.

“Yes,” Aerin’s voice almost broke. Cassandra gave her a sympathetic glance.

“The tavern is just ahead. Come,” the Seeker pushed open the door to reveal a cozy stone walled tavern, warm polished wood reflecting the light from the sconces lining the room. “There is the Grand Enchanter.” Fiona eyed them curiously.
“Greetings. What has brought the Inquisition to Redcliffe?”


“You must be mistaken. I haven’t been there since before the Conclave.” She’s telling the truth. Or thinks she is. What the hell is going on? “Whatever or whoever brought you here, the situation has changed. The free mages have… already pledged themselves to the service of the Tevinter Imperium.” The group fell silent, stunned. Aerin reacted first.

“What?!” She stomped across the tavern, grabbing Fiona by the throat. Panicked, the mage summoned a force push but Aerin instantly unraveled her spell and ripped it away. Fear consumed the former Grand Enchanter’s face. “You fucking sold yourself to Tevinter? You’d be better off dead,” she snarled. “I’ll even help.”

“Aerin Lavellan, stand down!” Cassandra’s voice rang out, demanding to be obeyed.

“I will not,” the rogue snapped. “These mages have obviously taken leave of their senses.”

“Andraste’s ass. I’m trying to think of a single worse thing these mages could have done, and I got nothing,” Varric sighed. “Come on, Lightning. Put the lady down for now.” Hissing one last time, Aerin released her hold on the woman’s neck, watching her fall to the wooden floors.

As her colleague helped her back up, Fiona rubbed her neck wincing, and croaked, “As one indentured to a magister, I no longer have the authority to negotiate with you.” The tavern door swung open, bathing the dim room in the bright afternoon sunlight. A middle aged man in the Tevinter style of jagged robes strode confidently in.

“Let me deal with this for now. Not yet,” Ellana hissed to her sister, who just growled in response. Every inch of her was tense, ready to spring into action and kill.

“Allow me to introduce Magister Gereon Alexius.”

Aerin prodded the magister’s aura as the Herald sat down to speak with him. Powerful, tinged with desperation. And darkness. Why is he here? She fingered the top of her hilt, ignoring the looks Fiona was giving her. Shouldn’t have done that in front of all these mages. Maybe I can pass it off as a modified templar spell? Maybe? Probably not. Venhedis. A young man stumbled into Aerin, interrupting her concentration. Scowling she went to shove him off, then felt a tiny scrap of paper being pushed into her palm. Carefully pocketing the note, she helped the man back up. Another Vint. He looks… sick.

“My lady, please forgive me. I’m so sorry.”

“Are you alright, my son?” the magister rushed over. Curious and curiouser. As soon as the magister and his son left the tavern, Aerin moved into an empty corner to read the note.

“What’s that?” Varric popped up behind her.

She gave him the note. “Come to the chantry. You are in danger.”

“Trap?”

“Trap,” Aerin agreed.

“Are we going?”
“Of course.”

***

The well coiffed Tevinter looked down at Ellana in awe. “You don’t even know how that works, do you? You just wiggle your fingers, and boom! Rift closes. Allow me to introduce myself. Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of Minrathous.” Varric felt Aerin stiffen beside him, and reached out to restrain her, but it was too late. The elf moved so fast, she may as well have teleported. At least this time, she’s not strangling anyone, he thought wryly.

“Give me one good reason why I should not run you through right here, Tevinter.” Her cobalt blue eyes stared unblinking into his. Dorian Pavus, to his credit, did not flinch away- too much.

“Ah, hmm. Well, for starters, I’m trying to help. The Inquisition, that is.”

“Help from a magister?” she scoffed. “unlikely.”

“Altus,” Dorian muttered.

“Makes no difference to me,” she growled, reaching for her sword.

“Aerin, maybe we should hear him out? There are good magisters, after all.”

“Altus,” Dorian sighed.

“Good magisters?” Aerin glared at Varric.

“Mae,” he said softly. She hesitated, then nodded and stepped back.

“Thank you,” the altus bowed. “As I said, I want to help. Alexius was my mentor. But he’s… The rift you closed here? You saw how it twisted time around itself, speeding some things up and slowing others down? Time magic. Alexius used it to reach Redcliffe before you, distorting time itself, and it’s wildly unstable, unraveling the world. There will be more rifts like that one, spreading further out. ” He sighed. “I would know, I helped develop it. It was only a theory when I was apprenticed to him, but he must have found a way for it to work. I just don’t understand why he’s ripping time to shreds, just to gain a few hundred lackeys.”

“He didn’t do it for them.” The magister’s son from earlier jogged into the chantry hall. “My father’s joined a cult of Tevinter supremacists. Call themselves Venatori. Whatever he’s done for them, he’s done it to get to you.”

“I’m so tired of Tevinter cults,” Varric muttered.

“So we know we should be expecting a trap,” Ellana sighed.

“You should always be expecting a trap,” Aerin retorted.

“We need to talk this over. Let’s go back to Haven.”

***

Cullen’s scowl dug into his handsome face. “We should give up this nonsense, and go and get the templars!”

“You cannot be suggesting we leave Redcliffe in the hands of a magister?”
“That castle is one of the most defensible fortresses in Ferelden. It has repelled thousands of assaults,” Cullen spoke through gritted teeth. “If you go in there, you’ll die. And we will lose the only means we have of closing those rifts. I won’t allow it.”

Ellana’s head shot up as her glare turned icy. “You won’t allow it? I don’t know who you think you are, shem, but there’s not a damn person in this world who allows me to do anything.”

Aerin snorted from where she leaned against the far wall. Cullen’s head snapped towards her. “Tell your sister to cease her insanity.”

“I’m sure you’d prefer to just leave the mages to their fate then?” she replied sweetly. “And when the mage army led by Tevinter descends upon Thedas, what then?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Josephine snapped. Aerin wasn’t aware the Antivan could snap. “An ‘Orlesian’ Inquisition assaulting a Ferelden keep would be construed as an act of war.”

“The magister-” Cassandra started.

“Has outplayed us,” Cullen sighed.

Aerin frowned. “Leliana. Remember when we were in Redcliffe? How we got into the castle?” The spymaster’s face brightened. “The windmill is in ruins. But twenty sovereigns says the tunnel is still there.”

“That could work. We could send agents through, while the Herald distracts the magister.”

“Or you could just send me in to take of him.” The Nightingale considered it. Ellana forcefully shook her head.

“No. It’s too dangerous, even for you. There are too many mages.”

“If we are discussing what I think we are discussing, may I remind you that we don’t know if these Venatori have the Archon’s favor or not. Assassinating Magister Alexius may spark a war with Tevinter.”

The Commander eyes widened at the word “assassinate”, pinning Aerin with a questioning stare just as the door to the war room swung open. The altus from earlier grandly waltzed in. “Here to help, as promised.” The entire room turned to glare at the mage, Aerin’s fingers twitching. “If you’re going in, I’m coming along. I can help you get past Alexius’ magic.”

With a long exhalation, Cullen turned to look at Ellana, hands resting on his sword hilt. “This plan puts you in the most danger. We can’t, in good conscience, order you to do this.”

The Herald groaned. “Let’s just get it over with.”

Cassandra eyed Aerin. “Maybe your sister should stay here.”

The rogue leapt to her feet. “Absolutely not.”

“You are unstable. You attacked the Grand Enchanter!”

“I have good reason.”

“Then tell us.”

Aerin froze, chest tight, the edges of her fury blurring together.
“Cassandra, she—” Leliana started.

“It’s fine, Leliana. You want to know why?” her voice was low and harsh. “I spent seven years as a slave in Tevinter. Forced to fight for their entertainment. Kill other warriors, prisoners, and slaves. Innocents. They tainted me with their magic. It haunts me to this day. And still I fight them, their cults, fueled by their twisted sense of glory. The last group of supremacists found a way to reach into people’s dreams, control their minds. And almost succeeded. I have the most experience in the entire Inquisition with regards to fighting the Imperium. I. Am. Going.” With a final snarl, she spun on her heel, stalking out of the door, Dorian literally jumping to get out of her way.

“Ah. I thought I recognized her.”

Ellana whirled around on the altus, anger blazing. “You…”

His face paled. “No, no, no, not like that, Maker. I saw her fight. In Minrathous. She was brilliant.” The Herald’s jaw clenched, her tiny hands balled into shaking fists at her side.

“Inform me when we are ready to return. Aerin comes with me. There is no one else alive I would trust to keep me safe.” And with that, she fled out of the chamber in pursuit of her sister, Dorian quickly bowing himself out on her heels.

“Maker, I… I could not imagine.” Cassandra slumped against the war table, staring at the map. Cullen still stood in shock at the revelation. It all made sense now.

“No, you could not have,” Sister Nightingale snapped. “She has suffered much more than anyone could possibly imagine. And still she helps. She is powerful, both with her weapons and magic. I daresay she is as strong than you, Cassandra, if not stronger. It would be prudent if you all respected that. She is not an enemy I would wish to have against me.” The rest of the advisors quickly nodded.

Josephine hesitantly spoke up. “Is she… La Sirena?”

“Sirena?” Cassandra was confused.

“Maker’s breath, she’s…” Cullen dropped his head into his hands. “La Sirena came to Kirkwall right before the chantry exploded and things went to hell. She was giving Guard-Captain Aveline and I the biggest headache. Nobles, corrupt though they were, were dropping like flies. She’s an assassin. Who was made notorious for killing Antivan Crows. Never leaves a trace, always gets her mark.” Leliana nodded amicably.

“She’s the best as what she does, no matter what it is. That is why we need her. And why none of this leaves this room. She is not a trusting person by nature. Earn it. All of you.” Her piercing green glare held all of them for the space of a minute until each one agreed. “Redcliffe will be fine. Aerin will not let anything happen to the Herald. She would destroy them first.”

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Aerin barely said two words the entire trip to Redcliffe. The energy rippling off of her was palpable, setting everyone on edge. Dorian wisely stayed far away from the former gladiator, even though knowing who she was made him giddy.

“Sparkler, if you ask her for her autograph, it will be the last thing you ever do. Give her time. Don’t do anything to Tevinter-ish or magister-y. She’s a good person, just has issues like everyone else.”
“I don’t care if she likes me,” he sniffed, “I just would prefer to know my chances of waking up alive while we’re in such close quarters.”

“They’re pretty good as long as you don’t piss her off.”

“What pisses her off though? What if I breathe wrong near her?”

Varric considered that. “She did punch Hawke once for chewing with her mouth open.”

“Good heavens, I’m not a barbarian.”

Cassandra ignored the gossiping men, opting to sit down next to Ellana. Aerin was currently off scouting, as she had been doing every spare second she was not needed. “Your sister… in Tevinter. Were you there with her?” The elf gave a tiny nod. “I’m so sorry. I did not know. This must be exceedingly difficult for you.” A humorless smile crossed Ellana’s face.

“I had it easy. My only job was to heal Aerin, make potions and poultices for the other gladiators, run simple errands. And Aerin’s job was to do everything they said, obediently and graciously without question, in exchange for my safety. All the things she did…” She turned to face the Seeker, face pleading. “She’s not a bad person. All the things she did, she did to protect me. That’s all.” The Nevarran nodded.

“I can believe that.”

“Thank you.”

Pushing to her feet, Cassandra offered a small smile. “Get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

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Alexius’ cowl makes him look like a Pokémon, Aerin mused. She stood at attention behind Ellana, observing the negotiations. And what is it about Fiona? She’s so… I can’t put my finger on it. Maybe she just has one of those faces?

“Felix, what have you done?” The magister turned a gaze full of disbelief to his son. Oh good, the action is about to start. Someone, just let me kill him, please. “You walk into my stronghold with your stolen mark, something you don’t even understand, and think you’re in control? You’re nothing but a mistake.” He glared at Ellana, who just stood there, a faint smile on her nonchalant face.

“What do you know about the Divine’s death?”

“It was the Elder One’s moment, and you were unworthy to even stand in his presence. The Elder one has power you would not believe. He will raise the Imperium from his own ashes,” he snapped. Isn’t that what Aurelian Titus said, too? And he’s… oh yeah. Dead. Felix ran up behind him, begging him to see reason.

“Do you even know what you sound like, father?”

“He sounds exactly like the villainous cliché everyone expects us to be,” Dorian answered, stepping out from a side alcove.

“Who is this Elder One?” Ellana asked.
“Soon he will be a god. And we will rule from the Boeric Ocean to the Frozen Seas.” Fiona cried out, aghast at what Alexius had planned. What did you think would happen? They would give each mage a free kitten? Sing and dance around a campfire?Fuck’s sake, lady. It's goddamn Tevinter.

“This is exactly what we talked about never wanting to happen!” Dorian shouted. “Why? Why have you done this?”

The magister turned away. “Felix. He can save you. If I undo the mistake at the temple, the Elder One promised…” Aerin glanced at Ellana. How far would I go to save her? Would I serve a Tevinter mage god? Kill innocents? She mulled over the questions in her head. I would. If she let me. There is nothing I would not do. But she wouldn’t. She’d kill me just for entertaining the notion. Gods. What am I without her? Choking, wet gurgled cries caught her attention. Leliana’s forces were here, encircling the room as the Venatori guards dropped dead around the chamber. Let’s end this.

Aerin felt the pull of mana first. Bracing herself for an attack, she threw up a barrier to shield the party from whatever was coming.

“No!” Dorian shouted, flinging his own bit of magic at whatever Alexius held. It was nothing she had ever seen before. A portal crackled on the dais to the magister’s side, the weave of magic beyond Aerin’s comprehension. Panicking, she sought a way to disrupt it, frantically scanning the spell. Too late. It grew larger, enveloping the two people closest to it. Dorian. And Ellana.

Aerin sprinted for it. Only to collide with the stone wall behind.

The portal was gone.

“No,” she whispered, her mind blank. “No! ELLANA!” Agony and fury like nothing she had ever known erupted from her. Eyes literally spewing fire and sparks, she burned through Alexius’ barrier he had conjured to protect himself from the violent elf. “YOU-”

The portal reopened with a loud crack. Ellana and Dorian fell through, gracelessly landing in a heap on the floor, much dirtier than when they had left two seconds ago, both of them sporting multiple bruises, burns, and lacerations. Ellana stood up and turned on the cowering magister. “YOU-”

Aerin reached him first. Holding his throat in her hand, she glanced aside to her sister. “Shall I?”

“Kill him.”

Turning to ferociously grin at the man, she tightened her grip. “Say hi to Aurelian Titius for me.” His eyes widened. And started to scream, as blinding blue flames hot enough to scorch the stones in a 10 foot radius swirled around them in a tornado of fire and light, instantaneously turning his body and the rug they stood on to ash. The spell faded. Dusting her hands off, she turned to Ellana, critically examining her. “You are okay?”

She nodded, trembling slightly. “There’s a lot to tell. Later.”

“Y-you killed…” Dorian gaped. Felix stared numbly at the pile of ashes.

“He deserved it,” Ellana replied quietly, voice quavering. “You saw what he did. To the world.”

Aerin studied Felix with something almost akin to sympathy in her eyes. “It was a quick death. I
cannot truly find fault with what he did. I would have done the same for my sister. But he tried to kill her. It could not stand.” Felix mutely nodded.

The sound of armored men marching into the hall stole their attention. Two dozen soldiers in even formation spread out along the edges, sealing all exits. A tall man, with strawberry blonde hair and icy blue eyes strode in, wearing a slight smirk.

“Grand Enchanter Fiona, imagine how surprised I was to learn you’d given Redcliffe Castle away to a Tevinter magister?”

“King Alistair!” Fiona began wringing her hands. “I… never intended…”

“I know what you intended,” he glared, then sighed. “I wanted to help you. But you’ve made it impossible. You and your followers are no longer welcome in Ferelden.” His voice was commanding and regal, his spine straight, wearing his authority like an old friend. Well, he did say he was going to return to Ferelden and be king. Aerin gleefully watched the monarch take back control of his old home, resisting the urge to jump up and down and clap.

Switching her awareness back to the present, she realized Dorian was speaking now. “Surely better than what Alexius offered. The Inquisition is better than that, yes?”

“I suggest conscripting the mages. They have proven they cannot be trusted.” Cassandra stood firm.

Ellana groaned. “Aerin?” Alistair whipped his head around, a grin completely inappropriate for this serious situation widening his cheeks.


“The Inquisition would be honored to have you as our allies, Grand Enchanter.”

“You will not regret giving us this chance, Herald.” With a bow, Fiona left to rally her people.

Turning back to the king, Ellana bowed. “It’s an honor, Your Majesty. I’ve heard many tales about you.”

“Good things, I hope?” Alistair couldn’t stop grinning. Cassandra stepped forward, looking concerned for his mental health. Aerin tilted her head at the king.

“That fur thing looks ridiculous.” The Seeker gasped.

“Aerin! You cannot talk like that to the king!”

“Why? He’s still just a man under it. I think. Hard to tell under that dead squirrel hide.” Alistair burst out laughing.

“Oh, Maker, it’s good to see you, Aerin. Do you have to leave straightaway? Will you and your group join me for a drink?”

Ellana nodded, face still dirtied and pale. “Alcohol, yes please. Lots. Now.” Bowing grandly to the sisters, he offered each an arm and escorted them out of the chantry.

“What… just happened?” The Seeker and the altus blinked in stunned confusion. Varric just
chuckled.

“They both fought with the Hero of Ferelden, remember? Come on. Drinks sound good.”

Chapter End Notes

The idea of Aerin burning Alexius the pokemon to death fills me with such joy, that it's rather disturbing.
Aerin listened, leaning against the bar as Ellana and Alistair exchanged stories about her, every single embarrassing thing she had ever done or said, with Varric chiming in here and there.

"And then she tried to correct her leap as soon as she pushed off, ended up slipping in the gurn entrails and splat! Face first in intestines. She reeked for days!"

"I remember we were walking through these caves, and a low hanging leaf fell on the back of her neck. Maker, you should’ve seen how high she jumped and how loud she squealed. Squealed. I didn't even know her voice went that high!"

“I’m starting to regret this,” she muttered to Cassandra, who just laughed.

“You and the king… you were very close.”

Shifting uneasily, she nodded. “Once.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Life goes on.” Alistair leaned to one side and smiled. Kaffas. That’s who Fiona reminded me of. They have the exact. Same. Smile. What does it mean? “Cassandra,” she asked in what she hoped was a casual tone, “What do you know of Fiona? Before she became Grand Enchanter?”

The Seeker shrugged. “It was an odd thing. She was a Grey Warden, years ago. When she came out of the Deep Roads from an expedition with King Maric, she suddenly wasn’t anymore and was sent to the circle in Montsimmard.”

“Oh? Was that long ago?”

“Maybe 30, 31 years ago? Why?”

“Just curious as to her reasoning why she gave control to Tevinter. Wondered if it was something in her past.”

“Who knows the reasons she harbored in her heart.” Humming under her breath, Aerin stared at the king. Fiona. Fiona is his mother. She has to be.

“Something on my face?” Alistair walked over to her.

“Just imagining how best to shut you two up.” Her former lover and sister both giggled.

“We should return to Haven today,” Cassandra informed the Herald, who solemnly nodded.

“If you need anything, if it’s within my power, I will help,” Alistair bowed. “Just send word.” Escorting them out, the party said their thank yous and farewells, walking off as he pulled Aerin
“You know what they say, never a bride, always a bridesmaid,” she quipped. “How have you been? You look and sounded very kingly in there, by the way.”

“I’ve been practicing. I have a team of people solely dedicated to making me appear regal and imposing and stuff. It’s been… good, actually. Surprisingly so. I think I’m finally starting to get the hang of it. How about you? How’d you end up with the Inquisition?” He nudged her arm, smiling.

“I finished those last few contracts I told you about. Did some mercenary work, guarding caravans and such through Orlais, then the civil war went to hell and I hightailed it back to the clan. Our Keeper asked us to go to the conclave and report back. Obviously, we haven’t reported back yet but she knows.”

“Fadey stuff.”

“Fadey stuff.” She smiled, turning to look at him. A few more wrinkles around his eyes and smile, but still devastatingly charming. It was like looking into the sun. Painful. And yet so bright. *How I miss him.* “They’re waiting on me. We have to go. Things to do, tears into time and space to mend, world to save. Same old, same old.”

Alistair chuckled, and took her hand in his. Bowing over her fingers, he pressed a gentle kiss to her wrist. “Be careful. Take care of yourself.”

“You too, Ali.” With a quick squeeze, he let her hand go and watched her walk off. Again. He knew he shouldn’t have asked her to stay a while. Every time he parted from her again was like a tiny death. But what else could he do? He lived for these little moments. One second with her was worth the months of loneliness he faced. Sighing, he turned back to his guard. “Let’s go.”

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Ellana refused to divulge what had happened on the other side of the portal on the way back to Haven, saying she could only relive it once. So her companions waited patiently, some a little less so than the others, until they were back in the small village. Less than an hour after they arrived, the advisors and Aerin gathered around the war table to listen to her impossible tale. She had been thrown into a future, one year ahead, where the Elder One controlled all of Thedas. Mining people for red lyrium. Turning them into mindless abominations. The Empress of Orlais had been murdered. A demon army ravaged the world. Ellana’s voice was barely a whisper now.

“And you all… Cassandra, you and Varric were in the cells in the dungeon. Being so close to the red lyrium had turned your skin and eyes red. Cullen… you came to save me. Led an assault on the castle. They killed you. Leliana was there. In a… torture chamber. Aerin…” Tears fell down her face. “They used you. Blood magic. Controlling your mind. You were his champion. The Elder One. I killed the mage who had enthralled you. You told me to tell you to not let them ever take you, to-,” her voice cracked, “to assume rescue would never come. You all sacrificed yourselves. I watched everyone die so we could… could come back. And fix it.” She was sobbing, deep aching gasps shaking her slender body. Aerin pulled her into a tight hug, her own tears falling on her sister’s head.

“Shhh. That future will never come to pass. I swear it.”

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“Keep your elbow up! You there, feet further apart. No, that’s too far, someone’ll kick you down. Here, like this—right. Keep your eyes on your opponent, not your feet.” Aerin watched the recruits run drills, keeping a sharp eye on their form while Cullen led another set of recruits through conditioning exercises.

The Commander was in a particularly bad humor today. Dennet’s horses had finally arrived two days ago, and the mages the evening before, causing the former templar to be on edge. The hum of magic floated perpetually through the air, fraying his senses, not even mentioning the complaints—about the food, living conditions, the cold. It was never ending. She felt for him, she really did. Watching as he pinched the bridge of his nose, vein ticking under his eye, Aerin dismissed her men and walked over to him.

“Sun’s setting, Commander. Would you like for me to go fetch you some food?”

“There is too much to do,” he snapped. “I do not have the time.”

“Right, because the Commander fainting from hunger is always the best solution,” she agreed amicably. “Fine, then. Anything else I can do?”

“You can tell these damn petulant mages that they are lucky to even have bedrolls and I don’t throw them in the dungeons.” His face darkened as another robed man imperiously marched to them.

“Commander! There are templars in this village! They are watching us, our every move. This is unacceptable.” Cullen growled at the mage, taking a heavy step forward.

Aerin swiftly cut him off. “What would you have us do? They have come to aid us against the Breach, as have the mages. We cannot control where their eyes wander.” The man’s eyes narrowed. “If we sent them away, what would happen the next time one of you decide to try a new spell and sets the tents on fire? Or if a mage became possessed?”

“That’s all anyone ever sees in us, abominations. Nothing has changed, not even in this Inquisition,” he sneered.

Aerin stepped in closer until her nose was almost touching his. “I was at Kinloch. I was in Kirkwall. I am a mage. I know what we’re capable of. These templars will not overreach their authority here. Not as long as you do your damn job. Speaking of which, shouldn’t you be at training?” Her frosty glare bore into him.

With a final huff, he stormed back off. Sighing, she turned around to the Commander. “Is—” she stopped short. Cullen was furious.

“You dare usurp my authority? Now the mages think I am incapable of controlling my own troops!”

“I was trying to help,” she hissed. “And I’m sure none of them think that. They’re scared, Cullen, and scared people do stupid shit. A fact of which I’m sure you’re well aware.” He stiffened, jaw clenched so tight she was worried his teeth might crack.

“You are dismissed for the day, soldier.”

“I’m not one of your men, Knight-Captain.” Aerin flounced away, seething. _He needs to get his fucking shit together._ She didn’t understand him and his capricious temper. One minute, he was Commander Cullen, polite and charming, melting her knees with that smirk and low laugh of his. And then next, he was Knight-Captain of the Gallows, spitting venom and barking orders,
belligerence rolling off of his armored shoulders in tangible waves. Maybe I’m being too harsh on him. It’s only been a few years since Kirkwall, after all. At least he’s not strangling mages, she thought wryly. Or burning them to a crisp. Groaning, she stepped into the tavern. I am being too hard on him. Why do I even care?

Varric waved her over, calling out to a barmaid for another whiskey. “Bee in your bonnet, Lightning?”

“The Commander is being an ass again.” She sat down on the worn bench, muttering a “bless you” to the woman who brought her the drink. Taking a long pull, she sighed, feeling the alcohol numb her turbulent emotions.

“Cut him some slack. It’s gotta be rough, former templar in a camp surrounded by mages and so few of his own. Even puts me on edge.”

“I know, I know. Ugh. I should just let him be. What do I care anyways? Stupid, domineering, aggravating, handsome templar.”

“I am not a templar any longer.” Her head hit the table in front of her, Varric laughing to her side. “May I have a word with you?”

Voice muffled by the wood, she muttered, “Are you going to yell at me again?”

“I shall try to refrain.” Grumbling, she shoved herself to her feet, finishing her drink in a big gulp, then swiping Varric’s glass too. Ignoring the dwarf’s protests, she marched past the Commander and back out into the cold. Night had set and the mountain wind was picking up, blowing from the western peaks, making the air frostier than usual, the promise of snow lingering in the scent of the air. Leaning against the wall across from the tavern, the cool glass touched her lips as she sipped the liquor and pointedly stared at the space in front of her.

“What did you need, Commander?”

“I…” He shifted uneasily from foot to foot, rubbing his neck in that way he did when he was embarrassed. “I wanted to apologize.”

“Hm.”

“For how I treated you earlier. I know you were trying to help. I should not have lashed out as I did.”

Sighing, she offered him her glass. Surprised, he took a hesitant sip. Feeling the liquid warm his throat, releasing some of the tension in his chest, he raised the cup and took another larger drink. “I can’t blame you. All you do is yell at the mages. I actually burned a magister to death. And almost strangled the Grand Enchanter.” She shrugged her shoulders once. “You’re actually doing much better than me. It’s been… thirteen years for me? And only four for you.” Her laugh was low and mirthless. “What a fucked up pair we are.”

He couldn’t disagree with that. “You do admirably well. Your ordeal lasted much longer than mine. I can’t imagine what I would have done if I was in that hell as long as you were.”

“Are we comparing our tragedies then? Or shall we just get drunk? Because I much prefer the latter option.” She frowned at the now empty glass in his hand. “Kaffas. We need more.”

Cullen smiled gently at her. “I’m afraid I’ll have to pass. We only have one more day before we march on the Breach. Shouldn’t you be training with the mages? Your power would be most
useful.” She shook her head.

“I’m not circle trained. More than likely, my magic would overwhelm the focus and rebound into all the mages connected to the tether. Boom.” She mimicked an explosion with her hands.

“Oh. Maker. I hadn’t considered that.” He paused, studying the elf in front of him, bright eyes watching in return. “What would you have done? In the Herald’s place?”

“Conscripted the mages. Killed Fiona. I don’t trust them. They’re all fucking idiots for making that deal with Tevinter, of all places. The problem is, I can’t fault them. It’s the same shit as with Anders. They’re a product of the circles. Which are a horrible idea to begin with. It works in theory, and maybe there are places where the templars are kind and actually protect the mages. But it’s the exception, not the rule.”

He let out a breath he didn’t even know he was holding. “I believe it can be better. There has to be a way to fix all of this. I have to help, find a way to repair… the damage I caused.”

“What if it can’t be fixed?” Her curious gaze held his eyes. “What will you do then?”

“Spend the rest of my life atoning, fighting, I suppose.” It was all he really could do anymore.

“Fighting,” she mused. “Fighting is good. Oh well. If you won’t drink with me, I’ll have to find someone who will. Sleep well, Commander.” The elf snatched the empty cup out of his hands and briskly walked back into the warmth of the tavern, her scent lingering in the air in front of him.

Taking a deep breath of honeysuckle and lavender, he almost smiled. Stop that, Rutherford. She’s beyond you.

Shaking his head to dispel his traitorous thoughts, he headed back to his dark, cold tent to finish some paperwork, the heat of the whiskey still warming his belly.

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Cullen couldn’t believe it. They had actually done it. The Breach was sealed. The Herald lived. In fact, everyone lived. The battle they had feared had not come to pass. The village of Haven came to life that night, the people and soldiers lining the streets, music and alcohol flowing freely as everyone celebrated their victory. Yet still he roamed restlessly, checking in on his men, congratulating them and being thanked in turn. He had been expecting a battle. But there was nothing to fight. And so his blood rolled around in his veins, begging for some sort of action to sate it. With a sudden smile, he thought of the washerwoman from earlier who had given him a flirty wink, tantalizing curves and plump figure promising him a satisfying romp. Yes. That would do.

His new mission in mind, he set off at a brisk pace to find the woman. Only to be stopped by a jubilant giggle. Turning his head to find the sound, he spotted the Herald singing, perched on a low wall in front of a fire, drink in her hand, surrounded by a few companions. The Warden, Blackwall, was playing an upbeat tune on a battered fiddle and a couple was dancing in the small clearing. More specifically, Aerin was dancing. In a dress. With Rylen, his second-in-command. His warrior's hands were wrapped securely around her waist, and she was looking up into his tattooed face, laughing breathlessly at something he was saying in his stupid Starkhaven brogue.

A sudden pang shot through his chest, tightening his muscles. He had been trying to stay away from her, the strange song in her blood when she was close making him acutely aware of how long it had been since he last had lyrium, but it was impossible. Without knowing why, the washerwoman forgotten, he stalked over to the fire. Aerin's eyes caught his, pupils dilating at the sight of him advancing on her, like a lion who was one pounce away from capturing his prey.

Rylen paused, craning his neck to see what had gotten his partner’s attention. “Commander! Join u-”
Cullen’s hand shot out, wrapping around her slender wrist as he all but dragged her away from her startled friends and into the chantry. “Cullen! Ow- what the hell? What did I do? Hey! Oy! Let me go, you daft Ferelden!” Her attempts to pry his fingers off were futile, his grip akin to steel, metal pinching her skin. When they were inside the stone walls, he made a sharp left, continuing until the dungeon’s cold draft rose to meet them, pushing her into a small storage room, swinging her arm around and trapping her against his breastplate. Taking in her flushed, confused, furious face, he grinned triumphantly.

“Howdy,” he purred. Her mouth dropped open for a moment, before she regained her senses and slapped him. Hard.

“What the fuck was that for?”

Rubbing his face, he let her go and shrugged, his blood rising even more. “I uh…” Now that he had her out here, he was at a loss for words. “I wanted to… talk?” Her eyes widened.

“Talk.”

“It was just… crowded in there. I needed air, and decided to take you with me.” Rolling her eyes, she threw up her hands.

“You needed air. So you brought me to the cramped, underground dungeons.”

“I was rescuing you from Rylen’s wandering paws.”

“Rylen’s wanderi- Wait. You’re jealous.”

His face, already tinted red from the torchlight, noticeably darkened. “No.”

She burst out laughing. “You were! Oh, this is rich. Jealous of Rylen, your lieutenant? Of his hands, around me? Maybe you were imagining his hands somewhere else on me, hmm? Or my hands around his-”

Growling, he dragged her back to his chest, this time capturing her mouth with his, forcing her mouth open and his tongue deep inside, his hands possessively clutching her ass, pressing his arousal against her belly. He could feel her struggling to get away but he had no intention of letting her go. She bit his lip, hard. A sharp jolt shot through him and straight his groin. Moaning, he pushed her back, stumbling, until her thighs hit a pile of crates. Lifting her up, never breaking the kiss, he set her on top of the boxes so that her face was at the same height as his. Elegant fingers snaked into his hair, and yanked.

“Cullen! What the hell has gotten into you?”

He pulled back slightly to look at her, drinking the sight of her in- swollen, red lips, eyes bright and wide, chest heaving. He nuzzled her neck, raised his lips to her ear and murmured, “I need you. Please.”

“Why me?” Against her better judgement, she tilted her head to the side to allow him better access to the smooth column of her neck.

“I don’t know,” his voice was confused and slightly muffled against her skin. “I can’t get you out of my head. Or out from under my skin. I want you. And I think you want me too.” His tongue found the hollow of her throat, gently laving the flickering pulse, drawing out a low hiss from her.

“No, I don’t.”
He raised an eyebrow, bringing his fingers down to the fabric of her woolen dress, and pinching the 
nipple he felt hardening there. Her eyes flew open as she gasped. “Oh? Well, you’re free to leave 
anytime.” He grinned, and stepped back from her, conspicuously adjusting the large bulge 
straining against his leather pants. She narrowed her eyes at his smirking face, debating the 
options. *I should just go, serves him right, dragging me in here like some fucking barbarian. But…

every nerve in her body was on a slow burn. She wasn’t one to seek out the company of others for 
her baser needs. Her past guaranteed that. But suddenly, she found herself wanting. Needing. Just 
as she had before, drunk in a back alley in Lowtown.

Making a split decision, she grabbed the hem of her dress and pulled it over her head, tossing it to 
the side. Cullen’s eyes darkened to almost a complete black, as he looked her over with a critical 
eye. Scars littered her skin, adorning her firm muscled arms and abdomen. Every inch of her was 
toned, almost no softness left, lacking the curves he so enjoyed. It didn’t make sense why he 
wanted her so much. “You’re so small. I feel like I might break you.”

Hooking a finger on the edge of her breastband, she pulled it down slightly, tracing a finger across 
the soft flesh. With a flick of her wrists, the laces untied and she wiggled out of her smallclothes 
and bared herself to his hungry gaze. “It’s been tried before, believe me. But I’m stronger than I 
look.”

He pounced, tossing his gauntlets somewhere to the side. Calloused hands roamed over every inch 
of skin, teasing the underside of her breast, the dip of her hipbone, the crease where her thigh met 
her pelvic bone. Licking his lips, he lowered his head to her breast, teasing her hardened tip with 
his tongue, nipping at the sensitive flesh, switching back and forth between her two peaks, rolling 
and tweaking the other between his fingers.. Groaning, Aerin’s hips jerked involuntarily, begging 
for any kind of friction. He chuckled.

“Eager now, aren’t you?” She blushed. Blushed. It was fascinating. He wanted more. “Tell me 
what you want.” Staring at him, Aerin bit her lip, flushing some more. *Maker’s breath, she’s shy. 
“Shall I tell you what I want then?” A nod. His scar twitched as one side of his mouth curved up a 
smile. “I want to taste you, feel your sweet nectar dripping down my chin. I want to hear you 
scream my name as you come undone around my fingers. I want to see you impaled on my cock, 
back arched as I take you hard, pounding into you just the way I know you like it. I want to come 
inside you, want you to walk around the rest of today and tomorrow feeling my seed dripping out 
your sweet lips. I want you to go to bed tonight, and every night after, dreaming of me, and only 
me, deep inside you.” She was mesmerized by his low voice, chest rapidly falling and rising. 
Cullen glanced down, licking his parched lips. “Maker’s breath, look at you. Sopping wet. Tell me, 
do you want those things too?” It was all Aerin could do to nod once. His grin was dark and 
animalistic. “Good.”

Kneeling in front of her, he hooked her knees over his shoulders, and licked straight up her seam, 
flicking the tip of his tongue against her clit. Throwing her head back, she moaned, her fingers 
grabbing at the rough wood underneath her skin. “Aerin. Look at me. Watch me.” She couldn’t 
look away if she tried after that. Over and over, he drew his tongue across her folds, sliding it 
inside of her, nipping and sucking at her swollen pearl, until she was a babbling mess, begging him 
for more.

“Please, oh please Cullen, I need- ah!”

“Need what, sweetling?”

“More. Please, more.” A long, rough finger slowly slid inside of her.

“This more?”
“More!” she cried. Obliging, he added another finger and curled them up inside of her. The scream she let out sent shockwaves rippling through his already rock hard member. Groaning, he withdrew his fingers and pulled her closer.

“Suck,” he demanded, shoving his fingers coated in her arousal into her open mouth. Deftly, she drew the digits in, swirling her tongue around the skin, licking every drop of herself off of him, pulling off with an obscene pop. “Maker.” His breath was hoarse, his eyes narrowed at her. Her blood thundered through his ears. It was her turn to smirk.

A growl rumbled through his chest as he fumbled with his laces and shoved his pants down to his knees, pulling out his heavy member, tip weeping with slick precome. Reaching her hand out, Aerin wrapped her hands, roughened by the years of swordplay, around his shaft, marveling in the silk wrapped feel of him. His eyes closed in bliss and agony as she gently stroked him with one hand, taking his tensing balls into her other, teasing the sensitive underside as she twisted her grip around his tip. With a gasp, he knocked her hands away. “Too close. I need you. Now.” Grabbing himself, he aligned his tip with her glistening folds and thrust hard, skin slapping against skin, all the way in. A sweet, burning pain exploded inside Aerin. It had been years since he had him, had anyone last, and he was much larger than most men.

Barely giving her any time to adjust, Cullen’s fingers wrapped around her lower back, feeling an odd shaped scar. The strange, muffled lyrium song was almost overwhelming now, pushing him over the limits of his control as he set a brutal pace. It was all Aerin could do to cling to him, holding on for dear life so as to not get swept away by this intense passion of his. The world outside ceased to be. She stopped caring if there were people who could hear her outside. Everything centered on the building pleasure deep within her core, her desire for harder, faster, more, just more of everything. Opening her eyes, she focused on his straining face, sweat dripping off his forehead down his skin. His fingers found her nub and expertly circled it, forcing her to climb higher with him. “Beg me for it. Beg me to come,” he roughly demanded.

Raising her lips to his ears, she moaned, “Cullen, please, let me come. Please, please Commander.” Angling his hips, he intensified his thrusts, grinding into her in the most delicious way, until she thought she would lose her mind. With a scream, her orgasm slammed into her, every nerve in her body lighting up like fireworks, her vision blinded by searing light. Her walls spasmed almost painfully around him as his rhythm stuttered, muscles quivering. A few thrusts more and a growl tore from his throat as he came, hot, creamy seed shooting violently inside, her legs keeping him hilted deep within her.

Neither of them moved. His legs and arms trembled, and he worried whether or not he would fall should he attempt stand up on his own. Aerin was certain she would collapse. Catching his breath, he slipped his softening cock out, dripping onto the dusty floor, and looked up at her, suddenly uncertain. With a lascivious grin, she dipped her finger down, against her sensitive flesh, into their shared fluids, and popped it into her mouth, making a show of licking the sticky spend off.

“Maker’s breath, woman, are you trying to kill me?” She laughed.

“Oh I think you’re made of sterner stuff than that, Commander,” she purred, reaching for her discarded smalls.

“Maybe next time I can get out of this armor.”

“Oh? So confident there will be a next time?”

He leaned in close enough so that she could smell herself on his breath. “Yes.”
Aerin breathlessly laughed. A brief thought cross her mind, wondering if this would be a problem later. He craved control with her, and while she gave it willingly enough, a part of her screamed to rebel. *Cullen is a good man,* she chided her inner voice, *he won’t take it too far.* She was confident of that.

Pulling her dress back on, she headed for the door. Opening it with a grand bow, Cullen grinned, “My lady.” Smiling, she took his proffered arm. And then paused.

Bells were ringing.

Haven was under attack.

Chapter End Notes

I'm starting to see a trend with Alistair sightings and Cullen smut. DAMMIT AERIN.
Aerin stood frozen in the chantry, watching the people panic as an army of the Elder One’s templars drew ever closer. Maybe… maybe she could take the army out herself. If she pulled all of her mana, she could trigger… something? Damn it! Think, think! But that didn’t solve the matter of the dragon. Their own meager army would never stand. It was over.

“We could turn the last of our trebuchets to the mountain above us.”

“Bury Haven?” Ellana stared at the snarling visage of her Commander.

“This is not survivable. Our only option left to us is how spitefully we end this.”

“Chancellor Roderick has something to say.” All the heads swiveled to stare at the odd, pale boy who had come to alert them to the army’s approach. Ellana dropped down to her knees by the cleric.

“Someone get me my bag!”

“There is no time,” Roderick wheezed. “There is a path. Andraste must have shown it to me before so I could tell you. You wouldn’t know it was there unless you made the summer pilgrimage. The people can escape.”

Ellana worked quickly, trying to clean out his wound. “Madame Vivienne, will you heal Roderick as best you can? We’ll need him to guide. Commander, can you get everyone out? I’ll distract the dragon, give you time.”

“And when the mountain falls? What about you?” Cullen watched the Herald as she ducked away.

Aerin walked over. “We’ll do our part Commander, you do yours.”

Whirling around to face her sister, Ellana shook her head. “No, Aerin, you have to go with them. They’ll need you. We can’t risk him taking you.”

“With all due respect, Herald, shut up. I’m going. He won’t take me. I’ll die first. I will not leave you to face this alone. I promised,” her voice cracked, “we promised each other.” Nodding slowly, Ellana sighed.

“I will come as well,” Cassandra stepped up.

“Count me in,” the Iron Bull rumbled. The small Dalish elf felt tears threatening to spill over as she watched her companions step up for this suicide mission.

“Right. Let’s go.”

“Herald. If you are meant for this… Make that thing hear you.” Ellana nodded, pulling Cassandra and Iron Bull close to her for a minute. Turning Aerin, Cullen faltered. He wanted to say… what? She threw him a sassy salute. “Commander. It’s been a pleasure.” And she was gone.
“Two more turns and it’ll be set!”

“Dragon incoming!”

“Move!” Ellana screamed.

Aerin watched in horror as a stream of magic burst from the beast’s maw, the ground exploding around her sister. Sliding in the snow and dirt, she spun around to race back to the Herald. Instead, a Silence hit her. Gasping at the sudden loss of her mana, fighting the imbalance of her flailing limbs, a large, gray arm wrapped under her arms, flinging her up in the air.

“BULL! PUT ME DOWN! ELLANA!”

“Sorry, Boss’ orders,” the Qunari shouted. Grasping at the edges of her awareness for her mana, she felt another Silence hit her. Cassandra.

“I’m sorry, Aerin.” Screaming, wailing, scratching anything she could reach, she fought the giant horned man, but she was too weak from the purges and unable to twist free. A thundering roar distracted her just for a moment.

The mountain. It’s on top of us. Slamming his free shoulder into the chantry doors, he shoved the Seeker inside the building, throwing himself through less than a second later, just as the torrential avalanche buried Haven, trapping them inside. The Iron Bull let Aerin go.

“No.” She fell, knees hitting the ground. “NO!” Rolling to her feet, she snapped her sword out and threw herself at the mercenary. “WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DO!”

The man didn’t flinch as he faced down the legendary warrior and assassin, calmly holding up an arm to block her flailing assault with his bracer. “The Herald made us promise to run if the dragon came for her. And to get you out, at all costs.”

“That wasn’t her call to make!” Angry sobs violently shook her body. “You just left her there! Abandoned her! You made me…” She broke. “I promised… I promised…”

Cassandra carefully approached the elf. “She told us. If the Elder One captures you, has control of the power you wield, that future she saw in Redcliffe becomes our reality. She would not let that happen. No one can let that happen.”

“Why me… Why am I so special?” Aerin screamed, agony lancing through every fiber of her being.

“We do not know. Come,” the Seeker sighed wearily. “We must find the others.” Tears streaming silently down her face, Aerin obediently followed the two warriors into the back of the empty chantry. *The first time she survived an explosion that killed everyone else. The second time she survived a time displacement spell and saw the future. The third time… this can’t be the end. She has to come back. She has to.* They exited the chantry into the frigid night air, following the trampled path up into the mountain range. Turning, the trio stared out over the now buried town, peaceful, blanketed in white.

“Elle…” Aerin broke out into a run, intent on getting back into the village to search for her sister, find her, and bring her back. *She’s there, maybe hurt, I have to get to her, I have to.* Another Silence slammed into her with the force of a war hammer. Barreling to the ground, she screamed her frustration, pounding her fists into the snow.
“Sorry, little assassin,” a deep voice murmured. A sharp point of pain blossomed in the back of her skull, and her world disappeared into a haze of darkness.

***

Cullen and Leliana gasped in relief as they saw the tall figure of the Qunari mercenary cross the top of the ridge behind them. “They made it!” Sister Nightingale breathed. “Praise the Maker! Wait.” He looked closer, his heart sinking. Only two people. It’s… Cassandra. Where are the Herald and Aerin? Don’t tell me… no wait, the Qunari is carrying someone. I can’t tell who it is. “Cullen, which one is over the Iron Bull’s shoulder? I can’t see that far in this blizzard.” Her voice was strained.

“I… can’t see.” They ran back up the path to where the two warriors were wearily stumbling through the powdery snow. “That’s—”

“Aerin,” Leliana breathed. Relief and pain and guilt washed over both of them. Their Herald had gone down, a martyr’s death. Her sister had survived. The bard sagged against Cullen. “Maker…”

“Give her to me,” the Commander held out his arms. The mercenary swung her down gently, passing the elf to the other man, who tenderly cradled her head against his chest. The Qunari had noticed earlier, of course. They reeked of each other. And the way he was looking down at her, well… there were feelings there. Complicated ones, sure. But strong nonetheless. “We need a healer. How long has she been unconscious?”

“Oh, she’ll be fine. I, uh, did that.”

“What?!” The Nightingale spun around in sharp fury.

“It was the only way to get her to come, Leliana. Otherwise she would have gone back. We had no choice. She very well may try to kill us upon awakening.” Cassandra’s voice was pained and heavy. The bard paused to consider her words, then nodded once.

“I’ll post guards at her tent. What happened to your shoulder, Iron Bull?”

“Your little friend is feisty.” Cullen tightened his grip on her, a sour taste filling his mouth at the thought of the giant manhandling his… No, not his. Ducking into a tent, Leliana close behind, he gently laid her down on an empty bedroll, arranging her so she would as comfortable as possible.

She ran her fingers over her friend’s sleeping face. “She will not be the same. Not for a long time.”

“Maybe the Herald will yet surprise us.”

“Faith, Commander?”

“What else is left?”

***

For two days, they walked aimlessly through the mountains. The blizzard finally stopped as the sun set the second day, so at least they were able to see that they were walking into nowhere. The advisors spent their days arguing, setting the entire camp on edge. Aerin had awoken, but still remained silent. Her eyes were empty, as if the person within was gone and a husk was all that was left. She walked and slept only, never eating, barely drinking.

Leaning against a wagon, Varric watched her morosely. He considered himself Andrastian,
although he never really went to the services or anything. So he did the one thing he could do. Begged the Maker and his Bride. *Just for Aerin, please, give her a miracle. She’s lived through too much already. Not this, too.* A pale blonde teenager appeared next to the pale elf, kneeling by her side. *Where did he come from? Why does he look familiar?*

“I’m Cole. I can help.” Aerin didn’t respond. “You’re hurting, I can make you forget.” *No. “But you’re in pain.” It’s all I have left of her. “She’s still with you. Cold, toes like ice, warm trails, scent lingering in the shadows. She promised. She won’t break it.”* Aerin’s head slowly lifted. What? “She found the way. It’s growing stronger. Just there.” She turned to where he pointed. A green flicker. Stumbling to her feet, she broke out into a sprint out of camp, people shouting after her. Running faster than should be possible, she clambered up the snowy slope toward the small, sparkling light at the crest.

“All right, Aerin. ELLANA!” The figure lifted its head, and smiled.

“You found me.” And collapsed.

“Ellana!” Aerin slid to her knees, gently lifting the frozen woman out of the snow. Cradling her in her arms, she took small steps as she carefully picked her way back down to camp. Cullen and Cassandra met her halfway, relief suffusing their faces.

“Thank the Maker! You, get Solas and fetch the healers. Blankets! Every spare one you can find. Go!” The former templar delicately transferred the Herald over to his arms, as if she were a fragile ornament, wrapping his fur mantle over her and tucking in the ends. “She’ll be fine, Aerin. You need to rest, too.” Mutely, she shook her head. She wouldn’t be able to rest until her sister was awake and could tell herself that she was well. Everything else would just have to wait.

***

Ellana skipped cheerfully through the snow, as if the Elder One, or Corypheus as he named himself, didn’t exist, singing an old Dalish song as Solas smiled indulgently at her. Aerin watched as the elven mage swirled snow around her sister, making her clap and jump around like a small child. It was endearing how lighthearted she was now. They finally had a destination in mind, an ancient keep lost to time, high in the Frostbacks. And only a five day walk. It all felt like a dream. Ellana had survived, again. The people of the Inquisition were now positive that her little sister, a simple Dalish elf, was the Herald of their prophet. It was a tad bit unsettling, for both girls.

“Wish we could’ve fought that dragon.” Aerin glanced over at the Qunari mercenary and his Tevinter second.

“You wanted to fight that thing?”

Krem sighed exasperated. “Please don’t get him started on dragons. He has an obsession that borders on sexual.”

“Look at them though! All full of raw power and chaos. It’s meant to be tamed. And it was a demon. Demons are meant to be killed.”

She had to agree with that. “Well, yes. I think I’ve reached my quota of dragons for one lifetime though.” His eye lit up as he begged for details. “Um. The first one was a regular high dragon, in Haven, actually. Back during the Blight. There are tunnels, or were, under the Temple of Sacred Ashes that led to a weyr. We almost died. The second was the archdemon. That time, I almost died. Ahh, good times.”
The Iron Bull chuckled. “That was ten years ago, right? You’re probably stronger now. It’ll be easier. And so much more fun. There’s one in the Hinterlands wreaking havoc. Boss said we’d probably have to go back at some point and kill it. It’s gonna be awesome.”

Aerin nudged Krem. “He always like this?”

“Like a damn kid on Satinalia when it comes to fighting? Yup. Bigger the better for him.”

The Iron Bull ignored Krem, glancing at the elven rogue out of his good eye. “So, you’re pretty good in a fight. I’d like to spar with you some day if you’re up for it. Or you should spar with Cassandra. Oh! Or Sister Nightingale. Yeeyah,” he drawled, “redheads.” Aerin snorted.

“Oh, me and Leli do that all the time.” Leliana walked up at that exact moment.

“Do what?”

“Spar,” she winked at the bard, voice full of insinuation.

“Oh yes. That’s all we did during the Blight, after all. Spar, have pillow fights, drink tea, shop for shoes, drunken orgies.”

“Yes!” the mercenary shouted. “I knew signing up with the Inquisition was the best idea ever.”

Snickering, Aerin held up her hands miming a rectangle. “We should make a recruitment banner: Join the Inquisition! We’ve got redheads. And orgies. Hopefully wine.”

“This is gonna be great. Say, Aerin, mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“You can ask all you want, the Iron Bull, but whether you get answers or not remains to be seen.”

“Heh. Fair enough. Where did you learn to fight? It’s a pretty unusual style, dual wielding with swords. Most use daggers.”

“I use daggers. Or arrows. Or a piece of twine. Whatever’s handy, really. I learned from a guy. He taught me stuff.”

“Sensitive topic, gotcha. How come you don’t fight with a staff? You’re the first mage I’ve seen that uses her magic as backup.”

“Why does everyone ask me that? I just like the sound it makes when my blade goes shhhk squish. A sizzle from a fireball just isn’t the same. Freezing people is even worse. No sound at all. Although I do like lightning. It’s pretty.”

“I think we’re gonna get along just fine, you and me.”

“Glad to hear it,” she grinned. “I never knew Qunari had personalities, honestly. Sten- ah, the Arishok, was like talking to a giant log. Maybe a rock. Matter of fact, he still is.”

“Yeah, I’m special. They told me I wasn’t, but can’t out-lie a liar. One last question. Do you just not like Tevinter? Or Dorian in particular?”

She raised her eyebrow. “That obvious, huh?”

“Ben-Hassrath. Reading people is my job. You’re good at it too, I can tell. But you suck at hiding your own emotions.”
She smiled at that. “Because I choose not to. I used to have to hide everything. But now I don’t have to, so I don’t. Usually easier that way. Plus I figure it’s kinder. At least my enemies know I don’t like them before I stab them in the face. They may never see it coming, but at least they’re not surprised.”

“Nice avoidance of the question there.”


“Eh, you got a fair point there. I’ll concede. So… you and the Commander, huh?”

“And this conversation is officially over. Oh. By the way. I’m sorry for clawing a chunk of your skin out. I suppose you and Cassandra saved my life. So thank you for that.”

The Iron Bull smile was genuine. “Anytime. Hell, I’m just impressed you managed to do that much damage. Qunari have really thick skin. I bet you’re a hellcat in bed.”

Her laugh was bright in the crisp air. “Fishing, Bull.”

***

“Come on!” Ellana dragged Aerin up the boulders, securely lifting herself to the top as the older sister grumbled that she was a city elf, not a mountain goat. “Look! There it is.”

Skyhold.

Creators. It was massive, an ancient stone fortress lost to the world, just waiting for them to take it. Parts of it were crumbling in, tattered flags long since faded to the elements whipping in the wind, as was expected, but this was… so much more than she had imagined. Than anyone had imagined. Scouts and Bull’s Chargers were quickly dispatched for first inspection while the Inquisition made camp just outside the bridge that led to the main gate. Aerin slipped into their ranks, eager to get a good look.

She had seen ancient ruins before, of course. Solas had even showed her a few they way they used to appear back when they were in their prime in the Fade. But there was something about this place in particular, powerful magic embedded in the stones. Laying her hand on the smooth wall of the keep, she closed her eyes and reached. She could see the magic, pulsing deep in the bones of this fortress, like a beating heart, comforting and sure.

“You feel it too?” Turning to glance behind, Aerin smiled at the mercenary, an elf they called Dalish who insisted her staff was a bow and her focus was for aiming. Dalish splayed her fingers across the wall, tracing the cracks that looked like spiderwebs. “It’s almost like a lullaby. Soothing, and warm.”

“Elven magic, Solas said. This place was sacred to the People, long ago. The keep was built over the ruins of the elves.” Dalish grunted.

“Just like everything else the shems built. Using the graves of our ancestors for their foundation.” She sighed. “Oh well. Come on, let’s go check out the inside.”

Krem and another man, called Grim, met them as they opened a side door. Warily, they stepped inside, careful to test their footing before proceeding any further. “Think this was a kitchen,” the Tevinter said, pointing over at the two large hearths in the wall, soot blackening the stones. On the far side of the room, a large dark room loomed.
“Shh! I hear something.” Dalish pulled her not-a-staff out, slinking forward. Aerin tossed out a light. Dozens of eyes stared back at them, clicking hairy mandibles and chittering.

“FUCK!” She sprinted back into the kitchen, throwing up a wall of fire behind her and shoving it at the giant spiders. Squeals and screeches of the dying arachnids echoed through the great chamber. As the sounds faded, a new sound emerged. The sound of her companions, howling with hysterical laughter. Even Grim, who was mute either by choice or circumstance, grinned widely at her.

“Y-you,” Dalish wheezed, doubled over on the dusty floor. Krem leaned against the cool wall for support, cackling like a maniac while Aerin scowled from the doorway.

“Is everyone okay? Heard a scream.” The Iron Bull poked his head in, followed by the figures of the Commander and Herald. Aerin groaned, Ellana's face lighting up when her eyes spied the charred remnants of the spiders.

“I know who it was,” she called out in a sing song voice. Cullen’s puzzled face moved from person to person, trying to assess the situation.

“I’m going back outside,” the Herald’s sister muttered, stalking back through the first room.

“Was it as amazing as it usually is?” Ellana giggled.

“It was the best,” Krem chuckled. “Dalish and I will keep exploring. Keep you updated, Chief.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally on to Skyhold and the fun now begins hehe.
Chapter Notes

I've updated the tags. Please note this fic is about to get darker, delving into some emotional and verbal abuse. I didn't mean for it to happen, but the story has a mind of its own. Most of what I write about this, I write from my own experience, so it's not just me pulling shit out of my ass for kicks. My sincere apologies if this turns anyone off to the story, but please take care of yourselves first and be aware of the trigger warnings in the tags.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Good afternoon, Inquisitor.”

“Inquisitor, a moment of your time?”

“Pardon the interruption, Inquisitor, but the Ambassador needs you look over these forms.”

“Inquisitor!”

Ellana broke out into a sprint, leaping over a pile of crates before sharply turning up the stairs that would take her to the battlements. Diving into a guard tower, she slammed the door.

“Running already?”

“I swear by the Creators, if one more person calls me Inquisitor, I will throw myself off the wall.” Aerin grinned, opening her mouth to tease her sister, but refrained as she took in Ellana’s appearance. Their new leader was haggard, cheeks paler than usual and her bright green eyes were dull. “Everywhere I go, someone wants something from me, even if it’s just to say they talked to the Inquisitor. They’re relentless. I wish Kyla was still with me. Do you think she survived the avalanche?”

“She’s a wolf. Smart creature, I’m sure she got out fine. Well if you're staying in here, you can help me then.” She peeked over Aerin’s shoulder.

“Trying to get yourself sick off mold and dust?”

“Seems like it. Trying to find if there’s anything salvageable in here. Burning the rest.” The tower room was covered in dust several inches thick, rotting bookshelves piled along one wall, moth eaten tapestries flung over a solid four posted bed. “The wood from the bed frame looks decent. Look around, see if you can find anything else useful.” The girls worked in silence for several minutes, only pausing to sneeze liberally.

“Solas showed me what this place looked like before, last night in the Fade. It was magnificent. I wish I could have seen it in real life.”

Frowning, Aerin took in the dreamy smile on her sister’s face. “You’re spending an awful lot of time with him in the Fade.” She waggled her eyebrows at her, a fierce blush spreading over Ellana’s cheeks.
“Mythal’s mercy, we haven’t done anything like that! We, um, kissed once. But that’s it. We haven’t, well, you know.”

“Have you before?”

Ellana blushed even redder as she turned away to poke some crumbling books. “Once. With… you remember Tamryn? From the clan? It was… Messy.” Patting her sister on her head, Aerin giggled at that.

“Aw, my little girl is all grown up now.” Laughing, Ellana shoved her. “But seriously, Elle, be careful with Solas.” She held her hand up to stave off the inevitable protestations. “I know he’s helped us. Saved you. Led us here. I just can’t shake this feeling. He holds too many secrets.”

The Herald of Andraste snorted, then coughed as dust assaulted her lungs. “You’re one to talk about secrets,” she wheezed. “So if we’re sharing, what about you and Cullen?”

“Ah. It’s no-” Aerin stopped when she saw the other’s glare. “Fine. It’s just a physical relationship. I mean, I highly doubt the Commander of the Inquisition and former templar wants to be with an apostate elf tainted by blood magic.”

“But what if he does? I’ve seen the way he looks at you. Varric's noticed, too. It’s more than just lust, I think,” she persisted.

Sighing, Aerin shoved the last of the non-salvageable debris in a corner of the room. “I don’t know. I think he wants something I can’t give. He’s a man who needs to control every aspect of his life. I can’t be held like that.” She shrugged. “I guess what happens remains to be seen.”

“You deserve to be happy, Aerin,” Ellana murmured. “You deserve someone that’s good to you.”

“I have you, Bubbles.”

“Please don’t call me that.”

“Varric called it, take it up with him.” Grinning, Aerin pushed her out the door, and turned back to set the pile on fire, funneling the smoke out of the windows and doors. “There. One room done, 847 left.”

“Have you picked your room yet?”

“Josephine’s not assigning them to everyone?”

“I convinced her to let my close companions choose their own.” The ruby haired elf perked up at that.

“Ooh. Something with a view of the mountains I think. Let’s go check around!” Setting off in a jog, they crossed over the battlements, racing each other through each decrepit tower room.

Aerin cast a burst of wind to open the next door, sprinting through it laughing and-

“Oof!”

She bounced off metal, losing her balance and slamming back into the floor. Wincing, she glanced up, finding the bemused face of the Commander smirking down at her. “Kill me now,” she muttered.

“In a rush, ladies?”
Ellana casually walked in, grinning at her sister. “Oh, by the way Aerin, Cullen took this one as his office.”

The prostrate elf glared over her shoulder. “You did that on purpose.”

“I told you not to call me Bubbles. Apologies, Commander, for the rude intrusion. My sister was just eager to find her own rooms. Would you care to accompany us?” Ignoring the frantic waves and gestures threatening her demise, Ellana smiled sweetly at the former templar.

“Sure, why not? I could use a break.” Aerin flopped back down the floor. “My lady?” He grinned, offering her a hand. Grudging accepting it, she laid her hand in his, secretly relishing in the way he pulled her upright with ease. “Where did you plan on bedding down?” A tiny snort came from behind him.

“Somewhere with a view, I think. And warm. Nothing big or fancy. With a fireplace?” He nodded, pulling out blueprints that the stonemasons had drawn up to help with the repairs. “Inside the keep, then. There’s this wing, a few floors down from your sister’s room, they all should have an excellent view of the western mountains. Shall we?”

A messenger ran through the door panting. “Inquisitor. Message for… you.” It was obvious the poor man had been scouring the place searching for her for quite some time. Guiltily, Ellana took the paper and made a face.

“Sorry, Josephine needs me. Show me what you pick later, yeah?” And she was gone. Aerin swiveled back to face Cullen, who leaned down, a crooked smile on his full lips.

“Just us then?” Ignoring the butterflies that sprung to life in her belly, she simply smiled and took his proffered arm.

“Seems that way, Commander.” The courtyard was full of activity, laborers hauling supplies in and out of the gate, carpenters with their hammers milling about, and stonemasons lugging large slabs of granite across the keep. Most of the unessential personnel had been cleared out of Skyhold and relocated to the valley below, so that the bulk of the repairs could be completed with minimal distraction. Only the Inquisitor, her advisors, and a select few companions remained within the walls. Briskly crossing the yard and ascending the stairs into the main hall, ducking to avoid the new scaffolding, Cullen directed her to a staircase at the far left.

“Gods, how many flights of stairs is that? Ellana’s room is at the top? She’s going to be in amazing shape.” He chuckled, gently shoving her up.

“It’s the best suite in the castle. And she deserves the best.”

“She’s also going to deserve a personal leg and ass masseuse.” She pushed open a heavy wooden door about two stories up, revealing a long corridor lined with more doors. Peeking in the first room, she found a cozy chamber that would be fine, except it had no fireplace. “How did the people who used to live here stay warm?”

“It is warm up here. They were probably used to much harsher weather. We are in Ferelden, after all. We don’t have thin blood of the Marchers,” he added loftily.

“Must be your thick skulls that retain body heat so well.” Aerin stuck out her tongue, pushing past him to go inspect another room. At the end of the hall, she spied a door that was further apart from the rest. Without hesitation, she made her way to the rotting wood and listened as it slowly creaked open with a gentle push. The room was just large enough for a bed, a small desk and shelves
tucked in the far corner, and a couch that faced a blessed fireplace. It even had its own personal washroom, complete with a built in stone tub with a drain. She spun around happily in the center, watching the dust motes swirl around her. A tiny balcony with doors set with glass that was long since cracked opened out to the mountains beyond. “This is perfect.”

Cullen smiled, watching her prance around the room, inspecting every little nook and cranny. “I’ll make sure to let Josephine know, send some people up here to clean.”

“Oh I can do that, I don’t mind. Nothing else to do for now anyways. Do you know I’ve never had my own room? Not since I was a child. I shared with Ellana for years, then slept outside with my clan. In Kirkwall, I stayed as a guest in Hawke’s home.”

“And since Kirkwall? Did you not settle down anywhere?”

She shook her head, still smiling at the chamber. “Never stayed anywhere longer than six weeks since then. Haven was the first. This is nice.”

His heart gave a sudden lurch. Has she never had a home? A place that she could retreat to and call her own? He approached her from behind, leaning down to softly murmur in her ear, “I’m glad you like it.” She shivered. His lips curled up in a smirk at that. “We’ll have to get you a bigger bed.”

“Oh?” Her voice came out suspiciously high. “It looks large enough for me.”

“Mmm. It’s not long enough for me.”

“And you anticipate staying in my rooms often enough to warrant me taking your height into consideration when choosing my furnishings?”

He chuckled lowly, drawing her back to his chest, running his gloved hands down her waist to her hip. Settling on the indent there, he replied, “Hmm. I suppose we can just use my loft instead.” Raising an eyebrow at her retorting snort, he hummed, ”I can leave you alone if you’d prefer.”

“Who said I’d be alone?”

Growling, he spun her around, tangling his fingers into her hair and yanking her head back so she could see the dark intent in his eyes. “Wouldn’t you be? Who would you have then, hmm? Maybe that giant Qunari that you seem so fond of? The Warden? Or maybe…” He ducked his head lower to nuzzle her neck with his lips, “Maybe you’d prefer a woman in your bed? Josephine, perhaps? Leliana?”

Sighing, she allowed herself to enjoy the attention he was showering on her sensitive skin for a moment. Raising her arms to his shoulders, Aerin gently pushed him back. “Cullen, what are we doing?”

“Currently, I’m kissing your neck. After that…” He pulled her back in closer.

“Is that all you want from me then? Sex?” Cullen studied her face. She wasn’t angry, or upset, merely curious.

“What do you want?”

Poking him in the chest, she smiled. “I asked you first.” Looking down, he released her and blushed. There was such an interesting dichotomy with this man. One second, he’s a confident hyper sex lord and the next, a blushing chantry mouse.
“I, uh… I’m not sure?” She raised her eyebrows at that. “I mean, I’d like to, um, see. That is to say, you are- I want-” He tried to start and stopped several times, tongue suddenly feeling too large for his mouth. “Maker’s breath, I’m like a teenage boy around you.” Turning to the balcony, he lifted his hand to his neck to rub it, avoiding her gaze that was probably full of annoyed frustration at how hapless he was.

“Cullen. Look at me.” Hesitantly, he glanced back at her gentle smile. Oh, she’s not upset? Or disgusted? “Were you interested in… something more?” He let out a long breath, nodding. “Then you should know.” Walking out onto the balcony with him, she wrapped her arms around herself to stave off the cold. “I… You know I was a slave in Tevinter?” A nod. “I used to be passed around a lot, different magisters and lords. For their… personal entertainment. Since I left, I’ve only been with one other. I don’t do… relationships well. I have problems with feeling like I’m a… possession. Controlled. Would that be a problem?”

His eyes widened to the size of saucers. “Maker, I had no idea… And I, when we- in the dungeon… I’m an idiot. I should have realized. How are you so strong and… whole still?”

Her laugh was bitter. “Whole… Maybe I just hide it well. I’m barely keeping it together most days. Ellana is the only reason I haven’t completely lost it. The few friends I’ve made along the way helped too. And sex is… different. I surprisingly didn’t mind it much when you... acted like you did. All possessive and stuff. Pretty hot, in fact. You’re one to talk, by the way.” Her grin almost reached her eyes. “You’re the epitome of commanding togetherness.” Cullen snorted. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Sighing, he glanced down at his hands, leather gloves wrapped around the stone railing. “I won’t lie. I know I have problems with… needing to manage everything in my life. Everything that has happened to me… Well, you know. I never took charge before I stood up to Meredith. And when I did, I needed… I’ve never actually been in a relationship with someone. Being a templar, there’s not much opportunity for it. It won’t be easy. Andraste knows I shouldn’t even be asking you this. You deserve someone who isn’t falling apart at the seams. But I want to try.” Gazing to amber eyes, Aerin felt like she was drowning in his liquid warmth, in his soft velvety voice. “I want to see where this goes. Between us. Would it- that be something that you might want, as well?”

“You don’t care I’m a mage?” He shook his head.

“The thought does unnerve me slightly, but for some reason, I trust you. I mean, you’ve been an apostate all this time, surviving rather impossible situations and you’re still alive and you.” She broke away from his tentative, smiling face, staring out vacantly over the mountains.

Trust… “If I tell you this… You must promise me not to reveal it to anyone else. Even if you decide you don’t want me after, I won’t hold it against you, but you cannot tell anyone this secret.”

“Would it compromise my duty to the Inquisition?”

Duty. She almost laughed. “No. Ellana knows. And Leliana.”

Taking a deep breath, Cullen nodded. “Then I promise. I shall never reveal this secret to another living soul.” Turning to face him, she studied his face for any hint of deception. Satisfied with what she found, Aerin turned back to stare out the keep.

“The Tevinters used blood magic on me.” Cullen stiffened at her hoarse, whispered confession. “They tattooed a rune, in lyrium, using blood, on my skin.”

“That… explains everything, actually.” She looked up in confusion. “I can hear it. Or I think that’s
what it is. Right now, it’s just a faint buzz but the times we were together, it was louder. It… sings to me. What is it there for?”

Aerin didn’t move. Or breathe. Her eyes locked onto his fur mantle. An eternity passed. Then, “I’m not an elf.” Sucking a sharp breath in, his eyes froze on hers. “It’s a binding spell. To hide what I was. So they could keep me. I’m human. I… they bound my magic too. I barely had a trickle. I have more control over the depths of my magic now, but not all of it.”

The former templar stood silent for several minutes. His brow furrowed, creasing deeper and deeper. “How do I know you’re telling me the truth?”

“Besides the fact you just told me you trusted me?” she quipped. “You can ask Ellana. She knew me before I was an elf. Leliana believes me. Here.” Sliding her dagger out of her boot, she quickly sliced a small lock of hair off. The wavy blood red hair turned black and straight. “This is my natural color.” Gently taking the lock from her, he rubbed it between his fingers.

“I’ve never heard of magic such as this before.”

“No one has. It’s why I can’t break it. Not unless I’m willing to sacrifice four other people for the power,” her voice was brittle and flat. “So. This is me. Still interested?”

He carefully opened his hand, watching as the wind picked up the silky black strands of hair and carried them away. Turning slowly, without hesitation, filled with deliberate purpose, he grasped her shoulders, pulled her to his chest, lowered his head and uttered a single word. “Yes.” This time, it was her lips that rose to meet his. Angling her head to the side, she hooked her fingers along the top edge of his breastplate, pulling him closer to deepen the kiss, her lips pulling at his, soft, warm tongue probing his mouth, tasting him. Groaning, Cullen grabbed the bottom of her ass, hauling her up, encouraging her to wrap her legs around his waist. Blindly stumbling for the nearest wall, he pressed her against the dusty stone, grinding the beginning of his erection against her center, sending clouds of lint and soot swirling around them.

“Aaah-CHOOO!” Aerin violently sneezed, heads colliding forcefully. “Owww- Oh, Cullen I’m so sor- ah-choo! Ah-choo!” She couldn’t stop sneezing, much to her chagrin. Cullen threw his head back and laughed, rubbing the knot on his forehead as he guided her back to the ground.

“I think that’s our cue to leave. Shall we resume this later? Maybe in an actual bed this time?” She grinned, eyes watering from the dust and the pain in her head.

“I would like that.”

***

“Hey Lightning, got a present for you.”

“Should I be scared? I feel like I should be scared.”

If Varric’s smile was any larger, his entire face would just be a mouth. “Just go look. Up on the northwest battlements, that corner guard tower.”

“I swear to your Maker, if it’s giant spiders, I will stab you. Multiple times. Without a book to save you.” With a final suspicious glare over her shoulder, Aerin made her way across Skyhold to scope out Varric’s secret present. Most of the basic repairs had been completed, and everyone that was staying within the walls had moved into their rooms. The tavern, of course, had been constructed first. Top priority, in fact. Waving at a few of the scouts as she passed them, the elf jogged up the stairs, pressing an ear to the door first to ensure she didn’t hear any sounds of
clicking or claws or whatever else she feared. Silence. Taking a deep breath, she tentatively swung the door open.

“Hawke?! Fen Fen!”

“Aerin!” The black haired, travel worn mage threw herself at her old friend, Fenris casually tossing her a wave from across the room. Caught entirely off guard, Aerin tumbled to the ground in an awkward pile of armor and limbs.

“When did you get here? I’m going to strangle that dwarf!” She laughed brightly, ecstatic at seeing her friend here and healthy and safe.

“An hour ago. He wanted me to tell your Inquisitor about Corypheus.”

“What?” Aerin sat up, staring at the other mage. “How do you know about him?” Groaning, Hawke sprawled backwards on the floor, staring up at the rafters.

“We fought him, after the Qunari invasion but before you came. He was imprisoned by the Grey Wardens in the Vimmark Mountains, sealed in using blood magic. Specifically, my father’s blood. I was lured to the prison so his followers could use my blood to free him. Naturally, I had to politely refuse. We killed him. He was dead. Dead. We checked! I don’t know how he’s still alive. This… this is all my fault Aerin. My fault Ellana almost…” Her voice broke.

“No, Hawke,” she shook her head violently, shaking Hawke's arm. "This isn’t on you at all. You couldn’t have known. I mean, the fucking monster claims he’s one of the original magisters who walked the Fade. That was, what, like 1,200 years ago? If he is, who knows what kind of powers he has? This is not on you.”

“Told you so,” Fenris called out in a bored tone. The door swung open, a ponytailed dwarf poking his head through the crack.

“Like your present, Lightning?”

“Much better than anything Hawke’s ever given me, that’s for damn sure.”

“Hey! I said I was sorry!” Everyone madly grinned at each other.

“So Varric, on a scale of 1 to dead, how mad is Cassandra going to be when she finds out?”

He groaned. “I’m volunteering for whatever expedition is next. Crestwood, right? Let’s go. Right now.”

“What’s there?”

“My Grey Warden contact. Something weird is happening with the Order, and he's been looking into it. He has some information for Ellana. As soon as I can explain to her what’s going on, I’m heading out to meet him. You coming with?”

“Sure, if Ellana doesn’t need me, I’ll tag along with you two.”

“Three,” Varric muttered.

“Just like old times,” Fenris' lips twitched in a small smile. "With hopefully less blood magic this time around."

Something hit the outside wall with a strange... bleat? “What was that?!” Aerin shoved herself up
off the floor and scampered outside.

“Are we under attack?”

“Um…” She peered over the wall. “There’s a goat. Smashed into the wall. That's kinda gross. And an Avvar. Who is laughing rather creepily. Varric, go call a guard. Or something?”

Chapter End Notes

Commence squealing.
Cullen had not been pleased that Aerin was leaving for Crestwood with Hawke. The Inquisitor had chosen Solas, Sera, and Blackwall to accompany her, so he did not understand why she had to go as well.

“Because I miss my friend and want to spend as much time with her before she leaves again? Is that too hard to understand?”

Scowling, he shook his head. “I suppose not.” His face fell. “I’m sorry. That was unkind of me. I’m just going to miss you. And worry about you every second until you’re back safely.” Aerin had smiled at the sweet thought and pressed a kiss to his cheek. They had yet to find time for themselves, as Cullen had been overwhelmed with paperwork and training the new recruits that kept pouring in from every corner of Thedas.

“We’ll have plenty of time for each other when I come back, Commander. I won’t be gone long, just a few weeks.” He shivered at the way she said his title, a warm promise for things to come.

“You’re damn right we will.”

“Why is she smiling like that? Who is it?” Hawke’s voice brought her back to the present, incredulous as she stared at Aerin. The elf just smirked. “Oh come on, you have to tell! You haven’t been with anyone since-”

“Hawke!” She glanced sheepishly at Varric.


“How do you know I haven’t had dozens of lovers since leaving you?”

“Have you?” she asked eagerly.

“No. But you didn’t know that.”

Ellana pulled her horse beside them. “I know who it is,” she sang.

“Ellana....” Aerin warned.

“What? It’s not a secret, is it? It can’t be, with the way you two were making eyes at each other at supper last night.”

Fenris jerked his head up, startled. “Oh. Him? That’s surprising.”

Whirling on her lover, Hawke bristled. “You know who it is?” He nodded. “Tell me!”

“It’s not our fault you’re as dense as a rock,” Varric grinned.

The Champion of Kirkwall pouted. “I hate you all.” The sound of horse hooves galloped up behind them, a messenger waving his arms frantically.

“Inquisitor! Rift spotted!”
“Coming!” Ellana yelled. “Hawke, are you going to go on ahead?” The mage nodded. “We’ll catch up with later then.”

“Be careful!” Aerin called to her sister’s retreating back. “Alright, let’s go find this Warden.”

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Aerin was soggy, leather armor and underclothes smelling of mildew, and she was pretty sure a mushroom was starting to grow from her head. It had started raining about a day before they got to Crestwood and had yet to let up. *Probably has to do with that rift in the lake. How is Elle going to close that one? Why has no one invented umbrellas here?* No one had really said a word since they hit the town’s borders, a sour mood permeating the group due to the weather. So she was surprised when Hawke finally opened her mouth.

“There, that cave. That blessed, dry, cave where there is no fucking sky and no fucking rain.”

Pulling her cloak hood tighter around her head, she urged her horse into a quick canter, desperate to reach the shelter. “Bandits, just up ahead!” Fenris scowled, lyrium tattoos lighting up as he vaulted from his horse and pounced on the unsuspecting men as the rest of them picked the terrified stragglers off.

“Finally,” Varric groaned.

“Still happy you came along?”

“Drown while riding a horse or face Cassandra. I’m not really sure which is preferable at this point.”

The steady drip drip of water echoed through the dark cave, the faint bluish glow of deep mushrooms giving off just enough light. Tossing a ball of fire ahead to further illuminate their way, Aerin stepped in first. Hawke pointed to the flickering torch, far ahead in the distance. “Stroud should be in there.”

“Wait,” Fenris muttered. “Blood. Few days old. Over here.” Silently, the group slowly crept forward, just in case enemies lurked behind the warped driftwood door at the end of the tunnel.

“Ah!” A loud crash resounded off the damp walls. A sheepish Hawke laid sprawled out on the muddy ground. “Sorry. Tripped.” As her elven lover rolled his eyes, sighing in exasperation, the door flew open, longsword glinting in the dim light. A mustachioed man with black hair stood at guard. “Stroud! Hey buddy!”

The Grey Warden sighed, his rich Orlesian accent warm. “Hawke. Should’ve known it was you, stomping through here loud enough to wake the undead. Come in, I’ve got a fire going.” Grateful, the group piled into the little room, stripping off sopping armor and clothes, spreading them to dry around the campfire. Pulling out a wrinkled, but clean and only slightly damp shirt and leathers, Aerin dressed quickly. “Run into any trouble?”

Varric stretched out on the ground. “Saw a few Grey Wardens poking around the town. Probably looking for you.”

“So what did you find out, Ser Stroud? About the Wardens?” Aerin anxiously looked at the man.

He stroked his thick mustache. “It’s the Calling. Every Grey Warden in Orlais is hearing it right now. They all think they’re dying. I believe it has something to do with Corypheus. He could control the Wardens. I think he might have the same abilities as an archdemon.” Aerin gasped.
“You understand what that means, I take it? I am curious as to how. It is a closely guarded secret.”

Leaning against a pillar, she closed her eyes, remembering the night she found out, just before they marched on Denerim. “I fought with Aedan Cousland and King Alistair against the Blight. We had to know what we were up against, since there were only three Wardens. It was imperative to know why one of them had to strike the final blow.” He nodded.

“Mind filling the rest of us in?” Varric face’s was confused.

“Archdemons can only be slain by someone with the taint,” Aerin muttered. “Otherwise…”

“Otherwise,” Stroud continued for her, “their essence just passes on to the next Blighted creatures. Another darkspawn, usually. Or in the case of Corypheus, another Grey Warden.”

“And the Calling?”

“It is was signals that our time has come to an end. When we hear it, we descend to the Deep Roads to search for our death.”

Scrambling up to her knees, Aerin’s eyes widened. “You said Orlesian Wardens. What about the Ferelden ones?”

Stroud’s eyes were sad. “I would imagine they are hearing it as well.”

“Mythal’enaste. I have to warn Alistair and Aedan. I will see if I can find Alistair tonight. And get Leliana to hunt Aedan down.”

Hawke turned a sympathetic glance to her friend. “You can’t find Aedan in the Fade?”

“Not unless I know where to start looking. He’s… far.”

“Nothing else to do in the meantime except to wait on the Inquisitor then,” Varric groaned. “Maker, this is… well, shit. Anyone hungry?”

“I have some stew, if you’re interested.”

“Stroud, you’re a saint.” Laying back on the bedroll, Aerin ignored her companions banter, watching the smoke from the campfire curl out through a small soot stained opening in the rock, too agitated to eat.

“They’ll be fine.” She turned to stare at the white haired elf.

“How do you know?”

Fenris snorted. “They’ve survived everything that has happened to them so far, right? Plus, as king, won’t he have responsibilities to take care of first, before abdicating?”

“He promised me. Alistair. That when it was time, we’d go down to the Deep Roads together.”

“How very romantic.” A tiny smile crept across her face at his droll tone. “Eat something. Then find your friends and warn them.”

“You’re so bossy.”

“Hawke gives me plenty of experience.”
Denerim was burning. The screams of the dying echoed all around, blood running in sluggish rivulets down the cobbled streets. An ogre, sounded by a vanguard of shrieks and hurlock emissaries, bore down the alley, heading straight for him.

“For the Grey Wardens!” His shout rang out, rallying the soldiers around him to press on. “Aerin, wait!” A ruby haired elf vaulted past the front line, swords held poised in her hands as she rushed a cluster of darkspawn, throwing herself into the worst of it. Alistair sprinted as fast he could in his heavy plate armor, but it wasn’t enough. He watched in horror as the ogre snatched her up, saliva spewing in her face as it roared its victory. And with one clench of its massive claw, ripped her in half. Alistair broke. Screaming his rage and agony, vocal chords shredding under the strain, he charged straight for the monster.

And stumbled through fog, into a golden meadow filled with a riot of colors from the late summer wildflowers. “Huh?”

“There. That’s better.” Whirling around, he came face to face with the woman he just watch die, clad in a simple deep blue dress, the sort a farmer’s wife might wear.

“You’re alive! Maker! But I- you—” He staggered to her, collapsing on his knees, still panting from the adrenaline and exertion. With a start, Alistair realized his bloody armor was gone, replaced by a plain soft green tunic, leather pants, and soft kidskin boots.

“It was just a dream, Alistair. A nightmare. I’m alive, and well. Currently moldy from all the rain in Crestwood, but otherwise, fine.” Her eyes sparkled as she smiled down at him. Grasping his hand, she pulled him upright.

“Just a dream… It seemed so real. Wait. So this is you? How did you find my dream?”

“I’ve been practicing,” she grinned, pleased with herself. “There’s another Dreamer at Skyhold, and he’s been helping me. An elf, Solas. Weird guy, and entirely too pompous, but intelligent.”

Alistair breathed, reaching to wrap his arms around her, snapping them back to his side when she flinched slightly. “Oh. Um. Sorry, I… Right. So is this just practice for you, or is there a reason you’re here?”

Guilt welled up inside of her at his hurt tone. “Ali, I…” She shook her head. “The Calling. Have you been hearing it?” Startled, he nodded.

“How did you know?”

“Stroud, another Grey Warden, he’s been investigating red lyrium and Corypheus, the Elder One, with Hawke. He thinks the Calling is tied to him. Every single Warden in Orlais and Ferelden is hearing it right now. It’s not real, Alistair.”

He sagged in place. “I… thought it was the end. I was getting my affairs in order. Planning everything. I was going to send you a raven later this week, asking if you still wanted to… come with me.”

“If it was real, I would. I told you, I won’t let you face that alone.” Her smile didn’t reach her sad eyes. “You should know… um. I’m starting to… see someone. I think. Just seeing how things go.”

Alistair felt a barbed dagger pierce his heart, the pain burning through his consciousness. No. No, she deserves to be happy. Don’t mess this up for her, Theirin. Forcing a smile to his face, he
pretended to feel joy, for her sake. “That’s good to hear. Anyone I know?”

“...Cullen. Cullen Rutherford.”

His jaw dropped. “The templar from the circle? Knight-Captain from the Gallows? Commander of the Inquisition?” Aerin winced at the recitation of Cullen’s titles.

“He’s… changed. Still trying. But, he’s a good man. Just got lost along the way,” she muttered, not meeting his eyes.

Alistair placed heavy hands on her shoulders. “Is he good to you? Are you happy?”

Her laugh was bitter. “As happy as I can be, I suppose. But yes.” Frowning at her tone, he let her go.

“Well, then I’m happy for you.” They stood there awkwardly for several minutes, staring at the flowers swaying in the Fade breeze. “Right, well, thank you for letting me know. About the Calling. Can you get a message to Aedan too?”

“I think Leliana can track him down, but I can’t find him unless I know where to look. I’m going to find her next.”

Nodding, Alistair offered her a hesitant smile. She knew he was trying to put on a brave face for her, but it was harder to lie in the Fade.

“I wish it didn’t have to be like this.

“Aerin, I…” he paused… “Be careful.”

“aren’t I always?” With a small smirk, she was gone.

Well, shit.

***

“Hey Leliana, sorry for barging in on your dream but OH SWEET NUG SHIT. I’M SO SORRY.”

Leliana glanced up from where she was entangled with Aedan and another unfamiliar woman, lying on her back on a plush Orlesian style divan while her love’s face was nestled between her legs and the unknown third party was doing something extremely dirty to his ass. Aerin turned bright red and spun away, mortified beyond all reasoning. Chuckling, Leliana gently pushed Aedan back, standing up to approach her stricken friend.

“Can- can I change it?”

“If you’d like. Sure you aren’t curious?”

“No, Creators. I do not want to know what you and him do with your naughty bits.” The dream shifted to the dark rookery in Skyhold, vague raven-like shapes hopping in the background. Safe. “I so wish there was a way to knock on dreams.”

The spymaster’s laugh trilled through the stone chamber. “And to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“We met with Stroud, Hawke’s Warden contact. I need you to get a message to Aedan. The Calling. Aedan’s probably hearing it and he needs to know it’s not real.”

“Maker! I’ll send a raven as soon as I awake. Have you told Alistair?” Aerin mutely nodded, her eyes drooping down. “Did he not take it well?”
“No, he…” She groaned. “I told him about Cullen.”

“And what about Cullen?” The bard leaned against the railing, smirking.

“Don’t even act like you don’t know, Nightingale.”

“Oh, but I don’t know the details. Only that your relationship is quite, shall we say, physical,” Leliana giggled. “The dungeons in Haven’s chantry carry sound very well. As do the corridors in the Inquisitor’s lower wings.” Aerin groaned again.

“Well, besides that, we decided to give an actual relationship a try. See what happens.”

Her friend watched her closely, concern creating a line through her pale brow. “Aerin, he- I do not wish to see you hurt. He has a need to-”

“Control,” she finished. “I know. We talked about it, he’s aware of… everything. Maybe it won’t work. Maybe it’ll explode in our faces. Maybe we get married and live happily ever after, but I want to try. For the first time in a decade, I want to try with someone else. Even though it hurts like hell. It hurts so much, Leli,” a whimper escaped. Leliana stepped quickly to her, embracing her, laying her braided head on her chest. “It’s not fair. He’s alone, and I’m here, and we can’t-” A broken sob hitched her voice. “Ten years. It’s been ten years and it still hurts the same. They say that time heals all wounds, but that’s a god damned lie.”

“I’m so sorry, my friend. I wish there was something I could do.” Sister Nightingale was not used to feeling hopeless, and she hated it more than anything. “Actually… do you remember that dwarf who we helped get into Kinloch’s Circle?”

Aerin pulled back to stare at her friend in confusion. “Uhhh, yes? Why?”

“She’s an arcanist now, and we’ve offered her a place at Skyhold. Aerin. She’s an expert in runes and crafting. If anyone can help you, it’s her.”

The elf just stared dumbstruck, not wanting to get her hopes up but… “When does she arrive?”

“Three weeks? She’ll be down in the Undercroft with Harritt.”

Aerin closed her eyes. “Gods. I… It probably still won’t work. But I’ll talk to her when I get back.”

“I have faith,” Leliana teased. “Enough for both of us, in fact. Now, let me wake up so I can send a raven to Aedan. Safe travels, Aerin.”

***

The glowing embers from the dying fire provided an eerie glow to the shadowed cave. Blinking the sleep out of her eyes, Aerin picked her way through the maze of her sleeping companions, shuffling outside the cave to find a secluded spot to relieve herself. Still raining. Good thing this place is on high ground, otherwise we’d be swimming right now. Finishing her business, she ducked back into the mouth of the tunnel, staring out over the soggy countryside.

“Copper for your thoughts?” Varric yawned, lumbering up behind her.

“How many times does one throw themselves at wall in an attempt to plow through it before they should give up?"

“Uhh… two? And a half.”
Watching in confusion as she chuckled to herself, Varric shook his head, turning to gaze down the road. “Hey, someone’s coming. Inquisitor and gang. I can see Sera’s yellow plaidweave pants from here.”

Catching sight of her sister and friend, Ellana spurred her horse on, just shy of breaking into a full gallop. “Please, please tell me it’s dry in there.”

Aerin snickered at the sight of the party, bedraggled from the downpour, especially at the sight of Solas, bald head shining and face miserable. “There’s a fire inside. Did you see that rift?”

Groaning, the Inquisitor nodded. “We stopped in the town, helped fight off some undead that’s been popping up everywhere. I hate those things, by the way. Least favorite monster. The mayor said we can get to the rift if we drain the lake. Of course, the controls for the dam are only accessible through that fortress, Caer Bronach. Which is overrun with highwaymen. Take back the keep, kill the bad guys, drain the lake, go underground, close the rift. Hooray.” She kicked at a mushroom, scowling as Solas pushed the door open to the back room, holding it open for the women to enter.

“Inquisitor! It’s an honor. Jean-Marc Stroud, Grey Warden at your service. Come in, sit, please.” Ushering them to the fire, Ellana gladly handed over her soaking cloak and wrung out her hair.

“Pleasure, Warden Stroud. You have news for me?”

Relaxing against her pack, Aerin listened halfheartedly as the two discussed their next move, mind wandering to the dwarven arcanist that would soon be Skyhold. *I shouldn’t get my hopes up. But it’s so hard not to... Wait, blood magic say what?*

“When I protested this rituals, the Wardens turned on me and I fled. They are gathering here,” Stroud pointed at the map, “in the Western Approach, at an ancient Tevinter ritual tower. Hawke and I are planning to head there, scout it out.”

The elven rogue frowned at Hawke. “You’re going, too?”

“I have to. This is my fault. Corypheus is my responsibility. Plus, Stroud can’t go all by himself. He’d miss me too much.” Stroud snorted at that.

“I’ll go too,” Varric volunteered.

“You just don’t want to face Cassandra,” Ellana teased. “Cullen wrote that she took out three training dummies when she found out. Into splinters. Aerin, are you coming with us? Or are you going to the Western Approach?” Frowning, she considered. *Cullen will be furious if I go. But ancient Tevinter ruins, blood mages... I can’t let Hawke go without me.*

“I’ll go with Hawke. Give me a piece of parchment, I’ll need to write Cullen.”

“Ooooh, you and Commander Tightwad doing it now? All kissyfaced and shite?”

“Eloquent as ever, Sera.”

“Shut it egghead.”

“Hey, Solas. Do elves call elfroot just root?”

“We have a different name for it, Warden Blackwall.”
“Well, that’s no fun.”

Ignoring their banter, Aerin grabbed a quill and paper and settled her supplies on a roughly hewn table on the far side of the cave.

_Dear Cullen,_

_I hope this letter finds you well. I know you’ve been forgoing meals and other necessities, like sleep, in order to get more work done but please don’t neglect yourself. We’re in Crestwood now, with Ellana and Stroud and group. She’ll be staying here to help close the rifts and generally be her helpful self. I’ve decided to go to the Western Approach with Hawke and Stroud. There’s something foul going on, and I’m nervous about it and would feel much better if I tagged along. Varric is coming as well. I know I said I wouldn’t be gone long, and I apologize. I’ll be back as soon as I’m able, hopefully with more information about the situation._

_All my best, Aerin_  

Chewing on the quill, she reread the letter several times. _Ugh, it’s so stilted and formal. “Hey, Elle, send this to Skyhold with your next raven, will you?”_  

“Is it a love note to Cullen? Can I read it? I’m going to read it.”  

“Oooh, writing about your lady bits? And Cully-Wully’s bits? Doing things?”

“Sorry to disappoint, Sera, but no. Just updating him as to my whereabouts.”  

“Why?” The elven archer wrinkled her nose. “He ain’t your guardian.”

“I just don’t want him to worry, that’s all.”

_I hope he’s not too mad at me. I’ll just have to make it up to him when I get back._

Chapter End Notes

Poor Alistair :(
Struggling for Balance

Chapter Notes

NSFW. Some butt stuff. If that's not your thing, stop reading when it gets sexy. Excuse me while I go clutch my pearls and fan myself.

Cullen wasn’t mad. He was livid. Aerin made her way to his office tower first thing when she finally got back to Skyhold, almost seven weeks later, not even stopping to change. Shaking sand out of her hair as she walked, she pushed open his door. “Cul-

She froze as a carved wooden box slammed into the wall inches away from her ear. “Maker’s breath, I’m so sor- Oh. It’s you.” His gaze was stoic as he took her in. “Welcome back. I trust your journey was well,” he sneered that last word.

Confused, she cautiously stepped over the broken splinters, crossing the room to stand in front of his desk. “It was a disaster. I’m sure you’ve read Ellana’s report. We are, after all, preparing to march on Adamant now. The journey itself was tolerable. I have sand in places I didn’t even know existed. I missed you,” she offered him a tentative smile.

He blinked. “Right. I’m sure you did. Where’s Stroud, hmm?”

Furrowing her brow, Aerin studied him. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days, with his dark circles, bloodshot eyes, unkempt hair, and a decent layer of stubble covering his face. “Josephine’s finding him a room. Cullen, are you feeling ok?” She reached out a hand to him.

“Fine,” he snapped, jerking his body away from her touch. “I’m sure you’re eager to go see where Ser Stroud’s bedding down for his duration here. I have work to do, as you said, we have a siege to prepare for and it won’t plan itself, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? You think I’m… with Stroud?!” Aerin slammed her hands down on his desk. “I pushed our group double time just to hurry here back to you because I missed you. You, you fucking daft twatwaffle. You know what? This isn’t working. I won’t stand here and be accused of shit I didn’t do, nor had any intention of doing. See you around, Commander.” Whirling around, she stomped toward the far door, wrenching it open to slam against the wall.

“Wait! Aerin, please, I-” Cullen stumbled, groaning in pain as he fell against his desk. Grinding to a halt, she turned on her heel, running back to him to catch his heavy form against her body.

“Cullen, what’s wrong? Should I fetch a healer?”

“No,” he whispered, “Just… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to lash out like that at you. I’m so sorry, Aerin. I know you didn’t do anything.” Burying his head in her arms, his breath hitched in what suspiciously sounded like a sob.

“Hey, talk to me. You can tell me anything, Cullen.” Helping him back to his chair, he sat down with a muffled whimper, burying his face in his gloved palms.

“Lyrium. I quit taking it.”
“What?! When?” Aerin dropped to her knees, tucking his hands into her own. *I remember seeing the cast out templars on the streets in Lowtown, catching rats in Darktown. Driven insane by the withdrawals.*

“Right after I agreed to join the Inquisition. I didn’t want to be tied to that life any longer. You understand, don’t you? It’s the Chantry’s leash. I can’t be bound to it.” His amber eyes were haunted, pleading with her.

“Cullen… This could take your mind, kill you. Are you sure?”

He grimaced. “It would have taken my mind eventually anyways. At least this way, I have control over it.” Sighing, she pressed a kiss to his hands.

“Well, let me know if there’s anything I can do help ease your pain. How bad is it?”

“Just… forgive me, please? I did not mean to drive you off like that with my yelling. Today is a particularly bad day. It’s headaches and nausea mostly. Nightmares at night. The light hurts right now.” Stepping away, Aerin pulled the windows in the room closed, finding blankets and shirts to stuff in the openings to block out the late afternoon sun. “That is much better.” A tiny, hesitant smile ghosted across her lips as she crossed the room back to kneel before him.

“Cullen. I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you. When I said I wanted to be with you, I meant you alone. I’m not going to go sleep around and cheat on you. I hope you know that. I went because I wanted to keep them safe. The Inquisition needs their help. Duty. You understand that, right?”

Nodding, shame flitted across his eyes. “It seems I still have a long way to go with this relationship business.”

“You simply need to learn to talk to me before accusing me of things. You said you trusted me before. Do you still?”

“I- yes. I do. Trust you.” Gently lifting her hands, he touched his lips to her fingertips.

“I’m going to go take a bath and change. Do you have more work to do?”

“A bit. I wasn’t lying when I said there is much to do to prepare for Adamant. Would you- um, I’ll understand if you don’t, but… join me for supper?”

“Of course.” With another quick kiss, this time to his forehead, she stepped out of his office. Cullen leaned back in his chair and exhaled a long, heavy breath. *Dammit, Rutherford. Don’t mess this up.*

***

Carefully balancing the tray of food and bottle of whiskey she pilfered from the kitchens, Aerin wearily made her way up to Cullen’s office. *Am I doing the right thing? Everything so far seems so on edge with him. No, today wasn’t his fault. He’s dealing with the withdrawals. Gods, lyrium withdrawals…* Sparing a second, she sent up a quick prayer to every deity she could think of to beg that he would make it through this whole.

Reaching the door, she glared at her full hands, using her foot to kick out a knock. A gruff voice muttered entry. “Hands are full, can you open it?” The door swung open to reveal a candlelit room, a new chaise lounge and table placed into a far corner.
Rubbing his neck sheepishly, he gestured, “I realized I didn’t have anywhere for us to sit, so I had someone fetch this couch and table. Will it suffice?”

“It’s perfect.” Flashing him a grin, she set her burden down, skirts swirling around her.

“You should wear dresses more often,” he murmured huskily in her ear, pressing the curve of her rear into him.

“And you should not wear your armor more often,” Aerin retorted, thumping him against his breast plate for emphasis. Laughing, he turned away to climb up to his loft, the clang of armor being removed echoing down the trapdoor. Several minutes later, he slid back down the ladder, hair freshly combed, wearing a light tunic and cotton breeches. The tunic v-neck was open, revealing the soft, wiry golden hairs underneath. Her fingers twitched with a need to touch his skin. Instead, she sat down on the chaise, Cullen dragging a chair to sit opposite her.

Stacking their plates after they finished, Cullen poured them both a bit of the smooth liquor she brought. “You know, this is probably the most we’ve ever talked.”

“That’s because you’re usually too busy hauling me off and claiming me like a barbarian,” she observed.

He smirked. “You like it.”

“Never said I didn’t,” she agreed. Feeling his blood begin to rise, he sat down on the chaise next to her and pulled the slender woman against his chest. Instantly snuggling into his side, Aerin smiled, listening to his heart pick up its pace.

“This is so much nicer than having all that metal between us.”

“It would be even better without this,” he plucked at the neckline of her dress, spying the chain she always wore. “What is this necklace, anyways?”

Running her hands through the bit of hair exposed by his shirt, golden blue eyes met his. “Just a ring I thought was pretty. Has a mabari on it. I like dogs. I thought you were fond of my dress?”

A grin tugged at his lips. “I’d be more fond of it if it were on my floor.” Laughing, she sat up, twisting to face him.

“There is a bed upstairs,” her voice low and suggestive.

“But a perfectly good couch down here.” He reached up to pull her down, eager to feel her, but she flipped off him, darting across the room giggling. “Minx. Don’t make me chase you.”

“Why not? It’s fun,” she teased, circling behind his desk.

“Aerin…” His voice was low, full of dark intentions, warning her to cease. She fled up his ladder, Cullen close on her heels. “Got you.” Grabbing her around her waist from behind, he pinned her hips to him, gently wrapping one calloused hand around her smooth neck. Arching her back, Aerin ground her ass against his growing erection. “You shouldn’t tease me.”

“What if I enjoy it?”

Growling, he spun her around, grabbing fistfuls of her dress and yanking it roughly over her head. “Maker. You walked around Skyhold without any smalls on?” As all the blood drained out of his head and flowed south, he slowly circled her naked form, trailing a hand across her back and the
rune tattooed there. As soon as his fingers brushed the binding, the lyrium’s song sent a pang through him, a violent shock of yearning and want that burned his blood. Gasping, he doubled over, catching himself on the cool stone wall.

“Cullen?” Hastily crossing the room to him, she ducked down to look into his face. “Cullen, what is it?”

“Song… I need- ah! You, please.” His pulse was thundering in his head, a thousand tiny pinpricks threatening to tear him into a shreds if he didn’t sate himself now, getting as close to the haunting melody as possible.

Rubbing soothing circles against his back, she murmured, “I’m right here, Cullen. Whatever you need.” He forced himself upright, eyes darkened to a deep, rich golden chocolate, nostrils flaring as he fought for control of himself. With frantic yet deliberate movements, he ripped his shirt up and off himself, shoving his pants to his ankles and kicking them off, relishing in the way she now stood, staring in awe at his body.

Scars littered his skin, shiny and smooth burns here, a branching pattern that resembled the lightning spell that caused it across his shoulder there, as well as several puckered marks from arrows and countless lines of varying length and width from blades everywhere else. His muscles were well defined and solid, the form of a warrior at his peak. Golden hairs grew darker in a trail leading from his navel down below. Aerin licked her lips as she took the rest of him in. She had seen his manhood before, but combined with the rest of him, it was overwhelming. Dragging her gaze back up to his face, he smirked as she knew he would, approving of her perusal of him.

Purring with delight, she gently shoved him back until his knees hit the bed. “Lie back,” she whispered. Swallowing, he did as she bid. Crawling on the sheets after him, she settled herself between his legs, teasing his inner thighs and the sensitive skin around his member with her fingernails, watching as his hips jerked in anticipation.

“Aerin… What did I say about teasing me?” With an innocent coy look, she fluttered her eyelashes at him, dropping her head down to draw a short lick over the underside of his tip, wrenching a low moan from his lips. “More,“ he demanded. Happy to comply, she slid her full lips all the way down, until her nose hit his coarse hair, choking on the fullness of him. With a cry, he threw his head back against the pillow, one hand winding into her hair, the other, clenched in the sheets. Working her way up and down his velvety skin, torturously slow, using her hand to tease his base and sac, she watched him unravel before her eyes. Gently massaging his balls, she slid her fingers further down, finding that spot right before his puckered hole, and pressed. With a hoarse groan, Cullen’s hips jerked forward, slamming the tip of him deep into the back of her throat, forcing her to gag. Tugging her off of him, he roughly hauled her up, flipping them over so that she was pinned under him, squirming in anticipation. “You,” he breathed, “are evil.”

“You like it.” He did. The playful darkness inside of her called to him, intermingling with the lyrium in her blood, until he craved her more than he ever coveted the blue. She was his drug of choice now. And he couldn’t get enough. Everything she did drove him crazy with want, a hungering desire for more, more. Trapping her wrists above her head with one hand, he skimmed his other down her front, circling the hardened nipples, flicking and rolling the peaks with his fingers, delighting in the way she writhed against him. Taking her nipple into his mouth, he carefully bit down on the firm flesh, drawing a gasp from deep within her, her fingernails digging into his biceps. Thrusting her hips against his stomach, she keened in his ear, begging for friction, pressure, anything. A chuckle rumbled from deep within his chest, as he lazily drifted his hand down from her breast, teasing the sensitive undersides, skimming the slight curve of her waist, grazing where her thighs met her pelvis.
“Ah— Cullen, you’re killing me,” Aerin groaned. He smiled against her skin, releasing her hands as he pushed himself further down.

“Payback,” he whispered, blowing a cool burst of air over her hot core, watching her body twitch in response. Gently parting her tantalizing folds, he coated one finger in her arousal, swirling it just around the edge of her opening and up to her hidden pearl. Flicking his finger, he grinned as she bucked off the bed with a loud gasp, repeating the action several more times until she begged him to stop. Maker, he loved it when she begged. Everything about her always exuded confidence and strength, from the way she walked to the way she fought. So to have such a powerful creature as she, someone he knew almost all men lusted over, at his mercy— well, it was the ultimate power trip, to know he would be the one to cause to come undone, that it would be his name on her lips as she came, that it was his seed that would fill her womb. “That’s such a lovely sound you’re making,” he murmured into her slickness, “all that pleading and begging. I think I want to hear more of it.” With a wicked glint in his eyes, he set about devouring her, tongue swirling around her swollen nub as he fucked her with his fingers. Her cries got louder as he could feel her walls start to tense, ready to push over the edge, then he abruptly pulled away.

“Cullen!” she wailed, “Please, please, I need—”

“I know what you need, sweetling,” he kissed her stomach. “Patience. Flip over.” Without hesitation, she rolled onto her stomach, pushing herself up on her hands and knees, arching her back to present him with a perfect view of her dripping core and firm ass. “Perfect. You are…” He slid his fingers back inside of her, watching her grind against his hand in an attempt to get him deeper. Eliciting another disappointed moan as he pulled out his soaking fingers, she gasped as he moved to his next target. Gently, he circled the puckered skin at her other entrance, as if considering what to do. “Is this okay?” She nodded, chest heaving. Slowly, he worked the tip of his middle finger in, feeling the ring of muscle clench tightly around him. Rubbing her lower back over her tattoo, feeling that sharp jolt again, he choked, a broken whimper coming from his throat. “Aerin, relax. Let me in.” The tight muscle relaxed just a fraction, enough for him to slide his finger in all the way in one quick push. “Maker, you’re so tight here. I need—”

The desire to be inside her overwhelmed all coherent thought. Keeping his finger lodged firmly in her ass, he dragged his cock against her arousal, wetting the tip, before thrusting up inside her without hesitation. She screamed, walls violently clenching around all of him. Forcing his hips to stay still, he let her adjust, wiggling his finger around inside her more, stretching her so he could slip more inside. Eventually, her hips began pushing back against him, begging him to move. “What do you need, sweetling?”

Lost in a haze of sensation, teetering on the edge of her orgasm, Aerin didn’t understand the question, only able to buck wildly against him, demanding with her body that he fuck her. “Not going to answer me then? Tsk tsk. That calls for punishment, don’t you think?” A sharp burst of heat and pain spread across her ass, the sound of his palm resounding off her flesh. “What do you think I should, hmm?” Another smack. “Let’s see…” Smack. “Oh, I’ve got it.” Smack. He bent over her back until she could feel his hot breath in her ear. “You will not come until I say you can, is that understood?” She nodded frantically. Smack. “Say it.”

“I— ah! I won’t come until you let me,” her voice was low and husky, skin warm and bright red where he had spanked her, finger still secure in her rear. He had never been so turned on in his life. A devilish smile spread across his face. How far could she go? Rearing back, he plunged deep inside of her, the angle allowing him to penetrate her further than before, and slid a second finger into her asshole, using his spit to ease the way in, watching in awe as he fucked her senseless.

She was so, so close to the edge, it was like trying to hold back a tidal wave. Every inch of skin
burned, every nerve ending was filled with lightning. She was so full, and still she wanted more of him. Screaming as he changed the angle of his hips, feeling his cock slam into the overly sensitive spot inside of her, she begged, swore, prayed and pleaded with him. But he was relentless, wringing every last whimper and sob from her throat until she was sure she would die.

His hips began to stutter out of rhythm. Panting, he commanded, “Come. Now.” With a sound somewhere between a wail and a scream, she came instantly, ecstasy flooding her senses, feeling the electricity lance through her from head to toe, heat searing her skin, vision burning a blinding white. Cullen continued to fuck her through wave after never ending wave, he himself inundated by the smell of their pleasure, the sight of his cock pulsing in and out of her tight sheath, the feel of her muscles grabbing ahold of him so tightly he almost went faint, the scent of sex heavy in the air, and that damnable lyrium lullaby. With a shattered roar, he broke, thrusting himself one last time deep into her as he spilled over, hot, heavy ropes of creamy fluid splattering her inside, overflowing to drip down onto the bed. Utterly spent, he collapsed on top of her quivering body.

She winced as he gently removed his fingers and slid out from her, feeling the burn from the used muscles, whimpering at the loss of him. Grabbing his shirt off the floor, he gingerly wiped them both off, tossing the dirty clothes into a corner of his loft. Pulling the sheet over them both, he delicately tucked her against his chest, smiling as she snuggled in and wrapped her legs around his.

“Mmm,” she mumbled.

“Will you stay with me tonight?”

“Couldn’t get rid of me if you tried. Seriously. I can’t feel my legs.” Cullen laughed warmly at her, feeling free and light for the first time in years. Happy, he realized with a start. I’m happy.

“Was everything we did… okay?”

“Now you ask me?” Aerin raised an eyebrow at him. “Which part? When you denied me my orgasm? Or when you fucked me in the ass with your fingers?” He blushed a furious red at her crude words, causing her to giggle delightedly. “Oh, you’re adorable when you blush.”

“Hey!” he protested. “I can’t be adorable. I’m the Commander.”

“Yes, you are. My cute, adorable Commander.” With a playful growl, he rolled over on top of her, nibbling at her ticklish spot on the side of her neck, fingers grazing her ribs, forcing a shriek out of her.

Giggling and flailing her limbs, she gasped out, “Fine! You’re a paragon of manliness! The quintessence of bravery! The epitome of virility! The embodiment of power! Strength personified! Dashing! Handsome! Rugged! Mythal have mercy, please!” Grinning in triumph, he ceased his torture, dropping a kiss onto her nose. “Ass,” she smiled fondly.

“Mmm. You like it,” he countered.

“Yes. Yes, I do.” Cuddling back up to him, reveling in the feel of his skin on hers, she slipped into a deep sleep, both of them foregoing the Fade for once.

Chapter End Notes
Dom!Cullen is MY FAVORITE. Obviously.
Aerin stared at the door to the undercroft, having resorted to pacing back and forth on the stairwell like a caged tiger. *Just go inside, say hi. Ask her about runes. Just go in. Dammit, Aerin! Open the fucking door, and walk in. Gah! Why is this so hard?!* She glared at the door as if it alone were the source of all her troubles. Gathering her nerves once again, she took a deep breath, and swung the heavy wooden door open.

The undercroft was a pleasant place, an open cavern hidden behind a waterfall, the heat from the forges keeping it a comfortable temperature year round. Harritt stood to the far left, muttering over a massive axe he was crafting. Leaning against a desk in a center, was the arcanist.

"Dagna?" A cheerful girl with dark red hair popped up, ink smudged across her freckled cheeks. "Hi! That’s me! Coming to say hi to the new girl?” she giggled.

Aerin blinked. *She’s so... Lively.* “Ah, yes. I’m Aerin. The Inquisitor’s sister. Pleasure to meet you.”

Dagna cocked her head to the side, studying the elf. “Your name sounds familiar.”

“I took your request to study to Kinloch Hold. I traveled with Aedan Cousland during the Blight. I’m impressed you even remember it, honestly.”

Snapping her fingers with recognition, the dwarf grinned and threw her arms around a stunned and paralyzed Aerin’s waist. “Thank you thank you for helping me! If there’s anything you ever need, just let me know!”

“Actually,” she cleared her throat, lowering hands she didn’t even remember raising, nerves threatening to choke her again, “There is something. I was told you know about runecrafting? Well, what about breaking a rune? That’s tattooed. With lyrium. And… blood magic.”

Shrugging, the unflappable arcanist smiled. “I don’t know. I’d have to see it, study it first.”

Muttering to herself, Aerin glanced over at the blacksmith, who was preoccupied in his own work. Sighing, she turned back to the dwarf. “If I show you this, you have to promise to not tell anyone. Except the Inquisitor or the advisors. No one else.”

“Ooh, secrets. I promise!” *Please don’t let me regret this.* Untucking her shirt, she pulled the back of it up, spinning around so that Dagna could see it. “Hmm. I’ll have to write it down. Can you hold like that for a few minutes?” *Well, she didn’t instantly say no like everyone else. That’s a good sign, right? I wonder if there is anything she can’t do. They say she’s a genius. Gods, what is taking her so long? How much is written back there?*

“Okay, done!” Shirt tucked back in, Aerin glanced down at the parchment. The rune was more like a paragraph, the symbols written in a language she didn’t recognize. “Ancient Tevene. I can decipher a bit of it, but I’d need someone to translate it further. Hey, isn’t there a Tevinter mage here? He could probably help!”

The elf felt her insides twist and go sour at the mention of Dorian. She had had very little
interaction with him, which was just the way she preferred it. No matter that everyone else loved him. Even Ellana. And the Iron Bull, which surprised her. Maybe… maybe? He might be willing to help. He might actually be on our side. I mean, he helped defeat Alexius, right? So he can’t be completely evil. Sighing, she looked down at the giddy arcanist. “I’ll talk to him.”

Trudging out of the undercroft, Aerin crossed the main hall, ducking away from the nobles that were always milling around, and headed up the stairs to the library, where Dorian liked to spend most of his free time. Sure enough, he was sprawled out in a cushioned chair, glass of wine to his left, book to his right. His back was to her, talking to Ellana, whose normally cheerful expression was drawn in. As she got closer, she caught the tail end of their conversation.

“… be sold. As a slave, he could have a position of respect comfort, and could even support a family. Some slaves are treated poorly, but do you honestly think inescapable poverty is better?”

Ellana glanced up to see who was approaching, only to see her sister, jaw clenched, eyes narrowed in fury. Dorian glanced behind, curious to see why the Inquisitor was suddenly ashen faced and he froze, uncharacteristically petrified. “I- uh, this-” he stuttered, flapping his hands about helplessly.

“Aerin-”

“Don’t.” She hissed at her sister, ignoring the way Ellana winced. “Respect? Comfort? I would have rather starved in the gutter, free, than be enslaved, my body and mind and will taken from me. They stole everything I was. Destroyed me! Broke me! Ellana was snatched from her clan, she didn’t willingly offer herself. And you think it’s better?!” Whirling on her sister, Aerin hissed, “And you call this altus your friend? When he condones the very institution that has turned me into this? I don’t understand you. I don’t know you anymore, Inquisitor.” Without regard for her sister’s tears or the Tevinter’s wan, ghostly face, the rogue stormed out the library, passing laborers and nobility ducking to get out of the path of her rampage.

Her temper hadn’t cooled by the time she reached the training yard. Still bristling with anger and disgust, Aerin pointed at the Iron Bull, who was leaning against the railing watching two of his men train. “You. Spar. Now.” An eyebrow raised in question, the Qunari sauntered over to the rack to grab a heavy, blunted axe. She paused, a hand hovering over the swords, before changing her mind and grabbing a wooden pike with a dull tip.

“Something on your mind?”

“Shut up.” Stomping into the middle of the ring, she held out the pike, standing at guard until the mercenary was across from her. With a slight nod from him, she attacked. Viciously snarling, her weapon swung above her head in an arc, dodging his thrust, colliding with his lower abdomen with a grunt. Pressing her advantage, she rolled under his spinning axe, landing another blow across his back. His eyes narrowed in focus, as she cleared her mind, channeling her rage into her strikes. A crowd had begun to gather, a certain author taking bets on the predicted winner, odds evenly stacked. The soldiers stood in awe watching them fight, like a vortex of lashing winds meeting a stone wall. He was holding against her with his greater strength, but she was wearing him down with her speed and anger.

Cullen stood on top of the battlements, called out of his office by Rylen to come watch the spectacle of his lover fighting the Qunari giant. She was pissed, he could tell. But why? Gazing out over the sea of faces, he spied the Inquisitor on the main steps, eyes filled with worry and guilt, hands wringing desperately. An argument between the sisters, he mused. Only someone or something she cared about deeply could have made her this upset. “Rylen, how long has this been going on?”
“Almost an hour.” The Starkhaven templar was impressed. “No sign of stopping either.”

“One of them is going to get hurt,” the Commander muttered. “I’m going to go stop them.”

“Commander, if you get in the middle of that, you’re liable to lose a limb,” the spymaster’s lilting voice came up beside him, amused. “They’ll be fine. Bull is probably the only person here who could withstand her right now.” A loud crack rang across the courtyard, crowd murmuring when they saw Bull’s axe had cleaved her pike in two.

“It’s over, thank the Maker.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that. Watch,” Leliana’s eyes twinkled. Frowning, Cullen turned back to the ring, watching the fighters just stand there. Then, the Iron Bull tossed his axe to the side and crouched. In a flash, Aerin charged him, ducking to his left, blind side, just inside his reach, and jammed a sharp elbow into his kidneys. Spinning so she faced his back, her leg snapped out in a powerful kick to his upper back, then recoiling to strike him down low, on his knees. With a muttered curse, the giant went down, flopping onto the packed dirt. Leaping on top of his back, she straddled him, one arm wrapped around his neck, the other against the side of his head, ready to snap.

“Yield.” With a groan, Aerin rolled off the man as a raucous cheer went up around them, sprawling in the dust next to him. “Feel better?”

“No,” she wheezed. “Now I’m pissed off and sore.”

“I think you broke a rib. Or two.” The Iron Bull hadn’t budged an inch yet.

“Sorry.” Hissing from the pain blossoming all over her battered body, she glanced at her opponent. He looked the same as her, maybe worse, bruises marring his gray skin, with a particularly nasty splotch on his lower back. Gingerly pushing himself up, he smiled as Stitches, his company medic, and a circle mage came forward, offering to heal them. Aerin waved them off. “Nothing’s broken, just bruised. I’ll live.” Limping to the rail, she spotted Cullen heading her way, face full of concern, a hint of jealousy in his eyes when they landed on the Qunari.

“Are you alright?” he looked her over, checking for wounds.

“I’ll live,” she shrugged.

“What was that about? Couldn’t you have fought someone else, Cassandra, maybe?”

Narrowing her eyes at him, she frowned. “Cullen. He was the first person I saw when I came out here, hunting for blood, that I figured I wouldn’t kill. Cassandra wasn’t around. I would have literally murdered someone before I found her. Don’t tell me you’re jealous again.”

“No, no,” he held up his hands. “I was just… worried,” he lied. “He’s so much larger than you.” Satisfied with that response, she smiled and leaned up to kiss him softly on his lips.

“Thank you for worrying about me.”

Cullen’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, but she didn’t notice, too preoccupied with frowning at her approaching sister. “Aerin? Are you still in a stabbing mood or can we talk?”

“I hurt too much to stab anything else right now,” the bloody elf muttered, following the Inquisitor up the stairs, grimacing at the pain, into an empty guard tower.
Ellana sighed, sitting down on a barrel. “Aerin, look… I know you don’t like Dorian. But you
didn’t hear the whole conversation. He was telling me how he used to view slavery. And how his
worldview has changed so much since meeting me, and you. He was quoting what one of his tutors
had told him, the bit about a slave having respect and comfort. Dorian doesn’t believe that
anymore. He’s a good man, Aerin. And he’s trying. He’s not the sum of his countrymen. There are
evil people no matter where you go, just as there are good, kind people, struggling to do the right
thing. Like you. Me. Cullen. Everyone else in this damn place. Just… don’t write him off just yet,
ok? Let him prove himself to you.”

Aerin watched the dust floating through the air. “I suppose you’ll want me to apologize then?”

“It’d be nice;” she shrugged. “Why were you in the library anyways?”

Fidgeting with her bracer, Aerin groaned. “It’s all a mess. Dagna, the arcanist, wants to decipher
the rune. She says it’s written in ancient Tevene, and wants Dorian to take a look at it.”

“What?!?” the Herald shot to her feet. “That’s amazing! Let’s go ask him now!”

“Ellana,” she whined, “Yes, I’ll just apologize, then ask him for a favor right away. That just
screams sincerity.”

“Oh, hush, he won’t mind. I bet he’d be delighted to help. Come on, I’ll go with you.” Too sore to
resist, Aerin let herself be dragged back across Skyhold, up to the mage’s library haunt. Shoving
her into the alcove, the Inquisitor stood back, expectant grin on her face. Groaning again, Aerin
turned to face Dorian.

“I saw your fight with that giant Qunari. About time sometime beat that lummox. He was starting
to get insufferable.”

“Look, altus-”

“He has a name,” came a feminine hiss from behind her.

“Dorian,” she amended, ignoring his suspicious gaze, “I wanted to apologize. I attacked you
without knowing the full context of your conversation, and I know that one man does not represent
the actions of an entire country. Nor did you have anything to do with what happened to me. So…
I’m sorry.”

His face was a study of shock. Flabbergasted, he opened and closed his mouth several times.
“Well, I- er… Thank you, Mistress Aerin. Apology accepted.”

“Aerin is fine,” she muttered. “I… There’s something I wish to ask you. And my apology stands no
matter what your answer is. I just… need a favor. A translation. Do you know ancient Tevene?”

“A decent amount, I should say. I haven’t had opportunity to use it much recently, but I think my
tutors pounded it into my unwilling head quite well. What do you need translated?”

“Dorian,” Ellana moved in closer. “This is a very sensitive matter. Before you agree, you have to
know, this cannot be repeated or revealed to anyone, outside of us, Leliana, and Cullen.”

Curiosity piqued, he nodded. “I give my word. I will not reveal the secrets you entrust to me.”

“Don’t make me regret this, Pavus,” Aerin warned. “It’s in the undercroft. Come on.” Varric stared
at the trio as they moved across the main hall, surprised to see his friend in such close proximity
with the dashing Tevinter, and not trying to kill or dismember him. Waving gaily at the dwarf,
Ellana skipped across the floor behind the silent pair, calling out greetings to everyone they passed. “Ellana, what on earth is wrong with you?”

“I’m excited!” she clapped, pushing the undercroft door open, “aren’t you?”

“Trying not to get my hopes up again,” Aerin shook her head. “Dagna? I brought him.”

“Oh! Hi, Master Dorian! Here,” the bubbly dwarf shoved a parchment into his hands, “Can you translate this?”

Scanning the runes, he nodded absently, motioning for her to give him more paper and ink. Leaning against the workbench, he worked quickly, brow furrowed in concentration. Aerin wiped her sweaty palms on her leathers several times, shifting from side to side, before giving up and going to stand by the far railing, staring into the spray from the waterfall, while the other two women hovered over the mage’s shoulder.

“Finished,” he announced grandly. Peering at the translation, Dagna nodded to herself.

“This is complicated. It’ll take some time, but… I think I can make something to at least nullify the rune for now.”

“This spell,” Dorian traced an elegant finger over his writing, “is a highly complex glamour binding. What was it hiding?”

“Me,” Aerin turned, and pulled up her shirt for him to see. Gasping at the sight, the mage approached her back.

“May I?” At her nod, he studied the rune. She could feel the tingle of his magic, prodding at the silvery red ink. “Blood magic. No wonder you hate Tevinter so. I rather dislike them these days as well. So, the person I see in front of me really isn’t you? Fascinating. Dagna, if you need my assistance with anything, let me know.”

Perking up, she nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, yes, it’ll be much easier with your help.” Pulling out a thick book filled with notes, the dwarven arcanist smiled. “It probably won’t be ready until after Adamant, but I’ll figure out something, Aerin. Don’t you worry.”

Swallowing thickly, the elf nodded, feeling her sister squeeze her hand. For the first time, she felt… hope. Giggling, Ellana hugged Aerin, who had gone limp. “It’s going to work. I just know it.” Suddenly tired, Aerin sagged.

“I think I’m going to go take a nap. Thank you, Dagna. Dorian.” He shot her a handsome smile.

She stumbled out of the undercroft, mind numbingly empty, her feet carrying her up to her stuffy room. Releasing the clasp on her balcony doors, she pushed them open, sighing as a cool breeze fluttered through her room. As she stripped out of her dirty clothes, wincing as every muscle assaulted her senses, she heard a knock.

“It’s me, Cullen,” a smooth, muffled voice called.

“Come in.” Her door swung open, to reveal her lover standing there with a tray of food.

“I, uh, thought you might want to eat in here? Maker, look at you. I’ll send for a healer.”
“No,” she laid a hand on his arm, “just bruises. They’re my own punishment for leaping to conclusions and making assumptions,” she added wryly. Pulling a plain cotton dress over her, she sat down on the sofa, patting the cushion next to her. “Are you eating with me?”

“I really shouldn’t,” he sighed. “There is so much to do.” Seeing her look of disappointment, Cullen relented. “But it can all wait. You’re more important anyways.”

“More important than planning the siege of an ancient keep so we can defeat a noble order and stop them from summoning demons to destroy the world? You sure know how to make a girl feel special,” Aerin giggled.

He smiled, unfastening his tabard, mantle, and breastplate, and sat down beside her, heart warming at her contented sigh. “I try. So what happened to make you so mad today?” Aerin explained as they ate about the events with Dagna, misinterpreting Dorian, taking her anger out on the Iron Bull, and finally, the translation. “So she thinks she can negate the rune? And you’ll be you again? What do you look like anyways?”

“A human, I hope,” she responded dryly. “I haven’t seen my face in almost 20 years, Cullen. Since I was 11. I have no idea. What, are you going to leave me if I’m not pretty?” she teased.

“Hmm. Possibly.” Her face was stuck somewhere between hurt, anger, and shock at that. “I’m joking! Aerin, I’m joking. I’d love you no matter what you looked like.” Silence fell upon the room, tension suddenly thick enough to drown in. What did I say? I said- oh.

“You… love me?” Her voice was tinny, unsure, wavering, head cocked to one side, studying him.

“I… had not planned to say it yet. I know it seems like it’s way too soon, considering we haven’t been together for long but I…” he trailed off. “I’ve known you for years. Admired you for just as long. Your strength, both inner and outer, your spirit. It’s what drew me to you in the first place, I think. Maker’s breath, you must think I’m an idiot.” Cullen stared down at his knees, willing the ground to swallow him whole. The slight touch against his arm was unexpected, causing him to jerk back.

“Cullen.” Her eyes were warm and bright, the hint of a smile playing around the edges of her lips. “I don’t think you’re an idiot.” Hope welled up inside of him at her words. “I… I’m not going to say it back. Not yet,” she amended. “I’ll spring it on you when you’re least expected it.” Her grin was infectious, matching his own as he pulled her onto his lap.

“I think I can wring it out of you yet,” pressing soft, nibbling kisses along her neck, he pushed away their food, wrapping his arms around her and drawing her closer, relishing in the feel of her breasts pressed against his chest, only a few thin layers of cotton separating their skin.

A breathy sigh escaped her. “I thought you had more work to do?”

“It can wait. All of it. I have more… pressing matters to attend to,” he smirked, rolling his hips upward to grind against her.

“Well, by all means, I shan’t interfere,” Aerin giggled, running her hands down his firm muscles, up to his face, and into his hair, giving it a sharp tug.

Hissing, Cullen flipped her over so he was on top of her, her back flattened against the chaise. “I love you,” he murmured again. Her sweet kiss was all the answer he needed.
Oooh is it gonna happen soon? IS IT?!
The march to Adamant was long and grueling, taking about five weeks for the army and siege weapons to march over the Frostbacks and through Orlais to the Western Approach. The summer sun made it that much worse, everyone baking within their armor, muttering curses at the weather. “At least it’s not spring,” their Commander reminded them. “Otherwise the roads would be mud, and the wagons and catapults would be all but impossible to move.” Little blessings.

Cullen spent most of his time at the front of the army, Aerin bringing up the rear with Hawke, Dorian, with whom she was now on almost friendly terms with, Blackwall, Solas, Sera, and the Iron Bull and his Chargers. Bits of friendly banter occasionally drifted her way, but for the most part, she used the time to think about her and her Commander. He confused her. Despite his insistence that he did trust her, she could still detect the suspicion in his eyes every time he saw her joking with another man. It was infuriating, but he had not said another word on the subject. Maybe he’s aware of it, and is trying to work through it? I wish he wouldn’t be like that, but I can’t change him. At least he’s not actively accusing me anymore. Her companions’ conversation came back into focus.

“Hey, Dor. Y’know, you don’t like like a Tevinter.”

“Pray tell, Sera, how is a Tevinter supposed to laugh?”

“I dunno. Cruel and stupid, like,” she cackled like a witch from the fairy tales of Aerin’s youth.

“I thought it more, mwahahaha,” Hawke chimed in.

“Oh no, you’re not allowed to laugh like that until you get your magister license.”

Blackwall and the Iron Bull were to her left, debating about different materials for weapons.

“Dawnstone,” the mercenary decided, stroking his chin.

“That’s even more brittle than bloodstone,” the Warden remarked, eyes surprised behind his bushy beard.

“Really damn pretty though.”

“It’s pink.”

“It’s pretty.”

Ignoring Sera’s snickers of, “Y’know what else is pretty and pink?”, Aerin’s mind turned back to her ruminations about Cullen. The past several weeks had been amazing. When they weren’t arguing, that is. And they never were big arguments. They fought over silly things, like what sort of alcohol they wanted that night, what she was going to wear to bed, what book he should read next, why didn’t she want to play chess. Stupid things that didn’t even matter. They always made up afterwards though. The physical part of their relationship definitely wasn’t lacking. But a small voice in Aerin’s head flitted through, telling her that the sex was really all they had. They didn’t really share any of the same interests. They both liked to read, but he liked to read nonfiction, history and strategy, while she preferred mysteries and romances. Unsubstantial drivel, he called it.
He liked to relax by playing chess, and she hated the game. Her way of winding down involved playing cards with Varric, watching Dorian and Bull tease each other, playing pranks on the nobility with Sera. A smile twitched on her face as she remembered the last prank she and Sera played on Cullen. They had snuck into his office, rearranging all the books he had carefully sorted alphabetically and by topic. She had found him later that day, standing behind his desk and scowling at the room, instantly knowing that something was amiss.

“I know Sera was in here and when I find out what’s she’s done I will… do something back,” he had muttered. Aerin had to clamp a hand over her mouth to keep from giggling. She also would’ve liked to hang out in the stables more, watching Blackwall carve and whittle his creations, but she didn’t want to incite Cullen’s ire. But as much as they nitpicked each other, when they were good, everything was perfect. He was as devoted a partner as she could have hoped for, never shying away from affection or his duty, loving her. He loved her. And she couldn’t bring herself to say it back. Oh, what’s wrong with me? He’s gorgeous, he loves me, he doesn’t care about my past, I’d be insane not to love him. I do love him. I’m just nervous, that’s all. I don’t have a lot of experience in love or relationships. Just nerves. I’ll tell him tonight.

“Hey, Sera!” the Iron Bull’s face lit up with an idea, “The next time we run into a line of enemies, I’ll pick you up and throw you. I lob you over the front ranks, you flank them, mayhem ensues.”

“What? I can’t fly, you daft tit.”

“Pssh. Gotta wonder about anyone who fights as much as we do and doesn’t have some fun with it.”

Solas’ glare was firmly disapproving. “We have fought living men with loves and families and all that they might have been is gone. And you talk about fun?”

“Yeah, but they were assholes.” Aerin burst into hysterical laughter, clutching onto her saddlehorn to keep herself from pitching onto the ground.

“I’ll do it! Throw me.”

“Me, too!” Hawke bounced on her horse. Fenris groaned to her side.

“YES!” the Qunari pumped his fist into the air. “Double warrior mage attack!”

“Oh dear,” Dorian sniffed. “Shall I preemptively fetch a healer? I should fetch a healer.”

“People aren’t meant to fly, loony britches! Ain’t got no wings!”

“It’ll be fun, Sera!” Aerin grinned. “After so long, the monotony of jab, stabbity stab gets so boring.”

“That’s what I’m saying!” Bull nodded enthusiastically. “Maybe some red templars will attack us today.” He craned his neck around the column, as if he could will the monsters into existence.

“I doubt even they are that brain addled,” Solas sighed.

“There’ll be plenty of enemies at Adamant, I should think. Maybe wait until we get there?” Blackwall suggested.

“Camp! Stopping to camp up ahead!” Messengers ran up and down the column of soldiers, calling out orders.
“No fun,” the mercenary grumbled. “No fun at all.”

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The sun wasn’t due to rise for another two hours, but already the camp was bustling. They would storm Adamant that night, as soon as the unforgiving sun set. Soldiers sat in front of their tents, inspecting every inch of their armor, oiling it, repairing anything that looked remotely off, and generally trying to keep busy so they wouldn’t panic. Most of these men had never seen a true battle, only minor skirmishes out on patrol. Aerin hadn’t either. She stood on the crest of a hill, leaning against a rocky outcropping, staring at the ancient fortress in the distance.

“Surreal, isn’t it?” Ellana crept up behind her. “And they’re all looking to me. Knowing they could die. Knowing I’m the one sending them to their deaths. Mythal’s grace, I can’t—”

“No,” Aerin grabbed her hands. “They do this willingly because they believe in you, in our cause. They do it to protect their loved ones. They go of their own volition. Honor their sacrifices, but do not blame yourself for what will come. You won’t fail.”

“How do you know?” her voice quavered, barely a whisper.

“You’ve never failed me. All the times I’ve let you down, you’ve never left my side, never stopped believing in me. Because, honestly, I think you just don’t know how to quit. So I know you’re going to go in there, defeat all the demons, and beat sense into the Grey Wardens. Because failure is never an option for you.”

Staring at Adamant, Ellana nodded once. “Right. Failure is not an option. If we fall here, Thedas will fall and I will not allow that. How have you been, by the way? I’ve barely seen you on this march.”

“It’s hard work keeping Sera from causing too much mayhem,” Aerin teased. “Nervous, though. Never been in a battle on this scale before.”

“If there’s anyone that can come out of there unscathed, it’s you. Have you talked to Cullen recently?”

“Not much. He’s been busy.”

Ellana sighed, rubbing her tired eyes. “Will you please try to get him to rest a bit today? We need him at his best tonight and the man’s exhausted. He needs to sleep.” Nodding, Aerin ruffled her little sister’s hair, flicking the green ribbon up into her nose with a smirk, before setting off to find her stubborn Commander.

She found him staring at blueprints of the fortress that she was quite certain he had memorized weeks ago. “Cullen, the layout hasn’t changed since the last 800 times you looked at it. You need to rest.”

Scowling, he waved her off. “There’s still much to do. I’ll sleep after the battle’s won.”

“No.” Wedging herself between him and the map, she planted her feet firmly in front of his bulk. “Inquisitor’s orders. Your men need you in top form tonight. You have to sleep. Gods, Cullen, you look like you’re about to drop dead now.”

“I’m fine!”

“No, you’re not!” Their eyes were locked, as if they could glare the other into submission. “Talk to
me, Cullen. What’s wrong?”

It was the concern in her lyrium blue eyes that broke him. “The withdrawals,” he muttered. “The nightmares have been worse on the road. I can’t sleep.”

“Oh, love.” She wrapped her hands around his, feeling him stiffen under her touch.

“What did you say?”

“Oh?”

“Aerin…”

“I love you, Cullen Rutherford.” He didn’t dare breathe. She… Maker, she loved him. Him. A man who was broken and so flawed. Well then, I’ll just have to be a better man, someone that would be worthy of her, won’t I?

“Maker’s breath.” He leaned his forehead against hers, bliss settling over him like a warm embrace. “Say it again.”

“I love you. Will you please rest?”

“That’s cheating,” he teased.

“All’s fair in love and war,” grinning, she led him into his tent. “I know you’re not fond of my Fade abilities, but I can find your dream. Shield you from the nightmares.”

Sitting on his cot, he frowned, “How will I know it’s you?”

“Demons have a red tint to their eyes.” Taking a deep breath, he nodded, laying down to settle himself. Ducking outside, Aerin flagged down a messenger and told him to wake them up in five hours. Unfurling a spare bed roll, she made herself comfortable. Within seconds, Cullen was out, a testament to how exhausted he really was. Closing her eyes, she shifted into the Fade, easily finding the star that was his dream next to her. Slipping inside, she recognized the circular room outside of the Harrowing chamber in Kinloch. And there was her templar, praying on his knees.

“Cullen. It’s me. Look at me.”

“Begone, demon!”

“You’re dreaming. You’re the Commander of the Inquisition’s armies, set to attack Adamant tonight. I just told you I love you, not ten minutes ago. Remember? You’re not a templar anymore, love.”

"Lies!"

"I’m not. Look at my eyes, Cullen." Hollow, anguished eyes that she remembered so well met hers clearly.

“Not a templar,” he breathed, rising to his feet, “you love me.”

“I do,” she smiled, reaching to brush a curly lock of hair out of his face. “I miss your hair like this sometimes.”

“It’s silly,” he frowned.
“Your slicked back style is more authoritative,” she agreed, “but the curly makes you seem younger. Lighter. Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

“How?”

“Think of somewhere you like being. And imagine us there.” His eyes closed, the cold stone walls melting away into an idyllic meadow, the couple standing at the edge of a pond by a rickety old dock. “Oh, this is pretty.”

Opening his eyes, Cullen’s face relaxed into a content smile. “This is near where I grew up, in Honnleath. I used to come out here to escape my siblings. They’d always find me, of course. It was… peaceful here. I had hoped to bring you here one day.”

“We’ll go. After we get back from Adamant,” Aerin declared. “Just you and me, no Inquisition business. I think we deserve a holiday, don’t you?”

“Mmm,” he murmured happily, laying down in the grass and pulling her next to him. “A vacation, then. Just the two of us.”

***

No. The bridge was crumbling under the dragon’s weight, Ellana and Hawke scrambling but neither were going to make it in time. Aerin was going to lose her sister and one of her best friends, and there was nothing she could do. Again.

“NOOOO!” They fell, stones tumbling alongside their tiny figures. Down, down… falling into a sparkling green rift that had suddenly appeared in mid-air.

They were gone.

“Where did they go?” Dorian stared in shock at the empty space where the bridge had been.

“Rift. The Fade? They’re in the Fade.”

"Do you think they survived?"

A hoarse whisper answered him, "I don't know."

There was no time to mourn. Demons were still swarming the place, but most of the Grey Wardens not under the thrall of Erimond, the, of course, Tevinter mage, fought alongside the Inquisition.

“Green, so afraid, cold here, searching, failure is not an option.”

“Cole, get out of my head. This isn’t the time.”

“Not in your head. Hers.”

“Ellana?!” Aerin grabbed the spirit and pulled him close. “They’re alive?” He nodded. “Oh, thank the Creators. They’re in the Fade physically then?” Another nod. “Can they get out? Oh! The rift in the courtyard!” Another nod. Waving frantically to her team, the elf yelled, “We’ve got to get down to the rift! Ellana will be coming out that way!” Sprinting, she raced through the fortress, dodging the corpses that cluttered the halls, followed closely by Dorian, the Iron Bull, and Blackwall.

“Cullen!” she fought her way over to him.
“Thank the Maker you’re alright! I haven’t heard word of you for hours. The Inquisitor—”

“Will be coming out of that rift,” Aerin interrupted. “Cole senses her still. They’re in the Fade.”

“Bloody hell,” he swore. “Alright. Men! Clear the courtyard!” It was easier said than done. This rift was much more active than the others they had previously encountered. The spew of demons was endless.

Hours the soldiers fought. It felt like Denerim all over again, the smell of ashes and blood and the sound of screams. More sulphur and less decaying flesh though. The pale light of dawn was beginning to break, bathing the bloodstained courtyard a pretty shade of pink. It was wrong.

“It’s been too long,” someone muttered near her.

“They’re dead for sure,” another agreed. Snarling, Aerin turned to punch their lies from their mouth, only to be stopped by a shout.

“The Seeker!” Cassandra stumbled out of the rift, Varric and Solas close behind her. No one breathed, waiting to see if that was it. Then—

Ellana fell out, Hawke supporting Stroud. Wait, that’s not Stroud. Another man? What the hell did they bring back? Grimacing in pain, the Herald turned toward the glowing tear in the Veil, snapping it closed with her mark, instantly destroying the remaining demons, to boisterous cheers. Where’s Stroud? Hawke’s eyes met hers. Oh, no. Aerin barely heard the Inquisitor talk about the Warden’s sacrifice, offering the rest a place at the Inquisition’s side. She walked to her friend, suspiciously eyeing the stranger who was fading in and out of consciousness, and handed her an elfroot potion as she wrapped an arm around the mage. “I’m sorry.”

“The Fade sucks ass,” Hawke sobbed against her shoulder. “Never going back.”

The Commander jogged up to them. “Thank the Maker you’re back safe. Who, or what, is this?” The man they had brought out of the Fade was in his mid- to late twenties, black hair cropped close, a tattered white short sleeved shirt, and… gray cargo shorts with rugged hiking boots. Dirty, stained, ripped cargo shorts, and brown leather high top hiking boots like her dad used to have.

“We need a healer for him. We found him wandering the Fade, delirious. Solas says he’s human, not a spirit or demon or possessed by one.” Ellana grabbed a nearby waterskin and gently tilted the lukewarm liquid into the man’s mouth. Most of it dribbled down the sides of his mouth, but enough got in to make him splutter and cough. “Easy, now.”

Cullen frowned. “You there!” He motioned a few soldiers over. “Take him to camp, find a healer, and make sure he doesn’t leave his tent. No one goes in or out besides the healer, me, or the Inquisitor. Understood?” Saluting, one of his men carefully slung the stranger over his shoulder, setting a brisk pace back to camp.

Ellana watched him go. “Did you see his clothes? I’ve never seen anything like it.” Aerin could only think of one thing to say.

“Well, shit.”

***

That night, a small group of them sat around the campfire. Ellana’s head rested on Solas’ shoulder, a small smile resting on his lips. Hawke sat between Varric and Aerin, staring at the flames. “So it was Divine who saved you, not Andraste.”
Ellana shrugged. “I always knew it wasn’t the Maker’s will. Just a mistake.”

“A mistake that has saved numerous lives,” Varric chided. “Maker or no Maker, all the shit you’ve done is real.” The Herald smiled, hands playing with the hem of Solas’ robe.

“I can’t believe we actually walked the Fade physically,” the bald elf commented for the hundredth time, eliciting eye rolls from the rest.

“Solas has had a hardon for the past fourteen hours. Inquisitor, do something about it,” Hawke demanded, causing their illustrious leader to blush an interesting shade of red and the rest of them to snicker. The other elf merely regarded the other mage with his signature cool look of disdain.

“Do something about what?” Cullen strode into their circle, plopping down beside Aerin, who had spent the last hour staring into the dancing fire.

“Solas’ Fade boner. Andraste’s tits, but that’s weird.” Wrinkling her nose at the couple, Hawke took a swig from a flask. “Seeing you all cozy with the Knight-Captain.”

“Commander,” he replied idly.

“Who would have thought? So how is he? Eh? Eh?” The apostate nudged her friend in the ribs, leering at them. “I mean, he’s pretty, but in bed? All shy little chantry boy or repressed lion?”

Watching amusedly as Cullen spluttered and flushed red to match the Inquisitor, Aerin replied in a casual sing song voice, “I’ll never tell. You’ll have to live your life without the carnal knowledge of our personal lives.”


“Just throw in some stuff about heaving bosoms and wicked tongues and throbbing meat and you’ll be set.” Cullen coughed violently again.

“Maker’s breath… do people actually read that nonsense?” Aerin and Hawke nodded. “I will never understand you two.”

Giggling, the Champion of Kirkwall patted him on the head. “We’re women, Curly. You’re not supposed to understand us.” Fenris muttered his agreement. “Well, we’re off. Getting as much travel in tonight before the blasted sun rises again. Hopefully we’ll be in Weisshaupt in a month or less.”

“Are you sure you can't rest just one more day?” Aerin pleaded.

"I promised Stroud," she whispered softly, voice breaking.

"I know, I... I'm going to miss you. Can I check in on you from time to time?"

“Of course. Not responsible for what you walk into though. I'm going to miss you, too.” The women hugged fiercely, holding back tears. “You too, Varric.” After hugging everyone in the circle, Fenris awkwardly waving instead, patting Aerin on the head, the pair left, their horses kicking up sand and dust until they faded from sight.

“So has Fade guy woken up yet?” Varric threw another log on the fire.

Ellana shook her head. “No. It’s so strange. How did he get there? Where is he from? His clothing were odd. His shoes especially.”
“Are we sure he’s isn’t possessed?” the former templar asked warily.


“Wonder how long he was in there for,” Ellana remarked. “Must have been for awhile. He looked pretty banged up.”

“Whoever he is, I’ll keep him under close guard until we reach Skyhold. Then Sister Nightingale can deal with him. Unless you can get information from him, Aerin?” She blinked up not quite comprehending what he was asking her. “You were an assassin, right? You must have done interrogations.” He wants me to torture the man? But…

“Cullen, no. You can’t ask that of her,” the Inquisitor glowered at her Commander.

“She has the skills. It would be wasteful not to utilize them.”

“Let’s try talking to him first, alright? Wait until Skyhold at the very least.” He acquiesced, getting up and kissing Aerin before heading off to do final inspections for the night. A pit dug into Aerin’s stomach, one that would not leave her for the rest of the trip back.

What does he want me to be?

Chapter End Notes

Double post today! Going out of town tomorrow, so no post tomorrow or Saturday. Maybe Sunday.

I know Hawke and Fenris have a pretty small part here, but they'll be back.
“Another one?”

Aerin stared into the honeyed depths of her glass, watching the torchlight flicked through the liquid. Taking a sip, feeling the burn of the liquor sliding down her throat, she looked up at Leliana. “Have you talked to him yet?”

“No,” she leaned back in her chair. “He still hasn’t gained full coherence. You recognized his clothes, though? So he is…?”

“More than likely. Kaffas. This is a mess.”

“No one else knows this about you? Ellana?”

Shaking her head, the elf took another, longer pull of whiskey. “I tried to tell her once. She thought I was lying. I left it alone after that.”

Pursing her lips, the spymaster swirled her wine. “I think it’s best we continue to keep that among ourselves. So only we, and Alistair, know now.” Aerin nodded in agreement.

“Fine by me.”

“Have you seen Dagna yet? She has a present for you.”

“Why do you think I’m drinking?”

“Nerves?”

“God, yes. What if it doesn’t work? What if it does? What am I supposed to do?”

“You could see if works first,” Leliana smirked. "Then, we’ll worry about what comes after.”

Her hands were shaking, stomach twisted in knots. “Come with me?”

“Anywhere, my friend.” Slowly, the two women descended the stairs from the rookery, one subtly dragging the other down into the main hall, and into the undercroft, where an ever cheerful dwarf sat at a cluttered bench, tinkering. “Dagna? Aerin’s here.”

“Oh, good! I finished these just the other day.” She held out a box. With trembling fingers, Aerin carefully cradled the box against her chest, the suffocation of her curse more oppressive in this moment than it had been for decades.

“You have to open it,” Leliana smiled.

“Right. Um.” Removing the lid, she gaped. Two smoky gray cuffs of everite lay nestled against
linen, intricate runes engraved all along the sides, inlaid with dragon bone scrollwork. She felt the thrumming of heat as she ran a hesitant finger over them.

“...I added the dragon bone as a focus. Since you don’t use a staff to fight, I figured I could take the focus stone from a staff and inlay it on the bracelets. A little bit of dragon bone goes a long way. Try it on!”

“...Here? Ah... Do you mind if I go somewhere more... private first?” Not here, where anyone could just walk in on me. At Dagna’s wave, Aerin headed numbly for the door.

“Your room?” Leliana strolled along side the dazed elf.

“I don’t have a full length mirror. Do you?” At her friend’s nod, they climbed back up to the rookery, into the side room that the spymaster had claimed for herself.

“I’ll give you a moment.” The door closed with a soft thud. Aerin was alone. With the bracelets.

Well, even if they don’t work, I get a focus. And they're pretty. So there’s that. Taking a deep breath, she snapped them on.

Leliana heard a muffled gasp through the closed door, a few choking curses in Tevene, and then the sound of metal jangling onto the floor. Shoving the door open, unable to stand the anticipation, she confronted a breathless elf, hand over her chest, heaving deep lungfuls of air. “It didn’t work?”

The giggle was quiet at first, but quickly escalated into hysterical guffaws. Sister Nightingale blinked in confusion. “No, no, no, Leli, it worked. Mythal and Andraste’s holy fucking tits, it worked!”

“Then why...?”

“Ah. I’m... bigger than I am now. This armor is far too small. Far, far too small. I almost strangled myself.” Aerin’s grin was triumphant. “I need clothes first.”

A deep wave of relief flooded Leliana’s chest as she beamed. “What size? I’ll get them.”

“Umm. This big? Wait. I’ll show you.” Pulling her all the way in and firmly locking the door, the elf stripped out of her armor and clothes, standing naked in the center of the small room. “Ready?”

With a smile that could only be described as transcendent, Aerin snapped on the cuffs again. With a sucking breath, her figured shimmered in a hazy bluish light, the scarlet haired elf fading away.

In her place stood a muscled and toned woman, of about the same height, with creamy, golden skin that glowed, limbs that were slightly shorter but no less elegant, wider hips, ample bust, slender waist, and straight jet, black hair. Lifting her face, she smiled. The nose and chin were slightly blunter, the lips less pouty. A smattering of freckles spanned her cheeks and nose. And her eyes... the bright electric blue had deepened to a royal cobalt, and burnished gold to a deep bronze. She was still beautiful, but more grounded, more real than the elf had ever been. Leliana raised a trembling hand to her friend’s real face for the first time.

“I’m free, Leli. Free. I could fly right now.” Throwing her head back, the woman laughed with Aerin’s voice, practically vibrating with excitement.

“You- Maker. Look at you. Aerin, you’re beautiful! Let me find clothes. Then we can figure out what’s next.” Slipping out of the room, the spymaster all but sprinted down the stairs, falling into Josephine’s office. “Josie, I need clothes, dress probably. A similar size to Cassandra, but larger in
the bust. Don’t ask what for, I’ll tell you later, but I need it now.” Nodding, the ambassador rushed off, returning less than five minutes later with a dress. Shouting her thanks, she left the confused Antivan behind, taking the stairs two at a time back to her room. “Here!” Bursting through the door, she threw the fabric at the nude human who was still staring at her reflection and running her hands over her old new body.

“Thanks, Leli.” Slipping the dress over her head, Aerin tied the laces off and frowned at her arms. “I have body hair again. This is weird.” Lifting her skirts, she examined her legs and poked at her underarms. “I might need to shave. I don’t like the feeling.” Rubbing her ears, she sat down crossed legged in front of the mirror, still staring in awe at her figure. “So what do we tell people?”

Sitting on her bed, Leliana tapped her finger against her mouth. “It’s not permanent yet, so you could switch between your elf and human forms, yes? Not that I’m asking you to do it, but theoretically, if a dire need arose?”

“As long as I had the clothes to switch. I’m substantially… curvier. Gods. Look at my tits. They’re amazing,” she poked her breasts to Leliana’s amusement. “Dagna and Dorian are working on a spell to completely remove the rune but that will take months, maybe years, if they ever do figure it out.”

“I know you probably detest your old form, but… it could be useful. Come up with an alias for the real you. I think we should tell only the people who already knew the secret. Ellana and Cullen, obviously. Dorian and Dagna. Josephine and Cassandra should know as well. Who else?”

“Varric. Hawke and Fenris knew, but they’re gone now. That’s it.”

“Um. Perhaps not tell Varric just yet. He’d write it into a story.” Aerin snorted. ”As for you,” the Nightingale examined her closely. “You don’t look like anyone in Thedas I’ve ever seen. You’re look…”

“Mix,” Aerin stated. “Say I’m a mix. Nevarran, Antivan, Rivaini. Grew up on the border of Tevinter near Antiva, that should explain my odd accent. And I can speak Antivan.”

“That could work,” she mused. “So, a new name then. Let’s see... Something simple to remember. How about-”

“Adrienne.” It came out as a hoarse whisper.

“What?”

“My name. My real name. Adrienne Jia Iseri.” Tears slipped down her face, eyes staring vacantly at her unfamiliar hands.

“Oh, Aerin. Er. Adrienne,” Leliana wrapped her friend in her arms for a comforting hug. “It’s a lovely name. Are you going to surprise Cullen?”

“Yes,” she giggled, wiping off her eyes. “Ellana first, I think. How do I look?” Standing up, Aerin brushed off her dress, quickly pulling back her hair into her usual braid, tying her old emerald green ribbon around her wrist instead.

“Perfect.” Smiling, the woman gave another fierce hug to her old friend and turned, skipping down the stairs, ignoring the looks and whispers she got from curious people wondering who she was. Leliana would make up something to appease them later. Clattering to the bottom of the landing most ungracefully, she peeked into the solar, finding her sister deep in conversation with Solas, as usual. Folding her hands, she placidly walked up to the Herald, and bowed.
“Pardon my interruption, but may I have a private word with you, Inquisitor?” Ellana’s eyes widened so much, Aerin feared they would fall out of her head. *She recognizes me.*

Stuttering, the Inquisitor nodded and all but ran out onto the battlements, heading for an empty tower. Once the door was shut, she whirled around and stared. “Aerin?”

“Adrienne Jia Iseri, at your service, Herald.”

“Jia,” Ellana gasped, tears brimming in her large eyes. "Jia, oh Creators, look at you! You—you’re… adorable, actually. Oh! Freckles! How cute!” She squealed, jumping up and down. “So your eyes are the only thing unchanged? Wait, no, they are different. Darker. How did she do it?”

Aerin showed her the everite cuffs. “These. It’s a temporary thing. Also, Leliana and I decided to keep me, who I really am, a secret for now. So only your advisors and Cassandra will know. I’m now Adrienne Iseri, again, daughter of a Nevarran father and an Antivan/Rivaini mother, whom I presume to be deceased.” Ellana squealed again.

“You look so familiar, and yet not. It’s strange hearing your voice and seeing,” she motioned to Aerin's body, "This. Oh, oh, you have to show Cullen! Let’s go!”

“I think, um, that meeting should be private,” Aerin blushed. “He should be almost done with work for the day. Will you tell him to come to my rooms?”

“Wait, should you even be using your same rooms?”

“Oh.” She frowned, thinking. “Adrienne can be a friend of Aerin’s. Old companion? To explain why their skills and fighting styles are so similar. Or maybe a cousin? That makes more sense, yeah. Aerin is on a special mission for Sister Nightingale. I’m here, using her rooms, because family. Will you tell Leliana that for me as well?”

“Of course!” Ellana chirped. “I’m going to tell Cullen right now, then I’ll find my spymaster. I want all the details later! Well, leave out the steamy bits. Gross.” Giggling like a schoolgirl, the elf sprinted out of the tower and back onto the ramparts. Shaking her head, a huge smile still plastered on her face, Aerin quickly crossed the bridge back to the keep, carefully lifting her skirts so as to not trip on them as she passed through the main hall, up to her room. Breathing deep, she opened the balcony door, leaning out to stare at the mountains. Everything felt so... new. Colors were more vivid, smells were sharper. It was almost as if a veil had been lifted from her head. And the pain— it was gone. For the first time in her memory, the tightness of her skin and the pressure constricting her chest was *gone*, her limbs feeling ten times lighter. A knock echoed through the room, disturbing her reverie.

“Aerin? It’s me.”

“Come in!” Poking his head in, Cullen looked around the room, “The Inquist- oh. Pardon me. I was looking for my… friend. Are you lost, madam?”

Stifling a giggle, she coyly smiled at the handsome man. “Just a friend, sir? Do you often visit your friends in their bedchambers?”

Blushing, Cullen rubbed his neck. “Ah… No, it’s- we’re… These are her rooms. Does she know you’re here?”

“Oh, forgive my manners.” She curtsied, “Adrienne Iseri, at your disposal, Commander.” He blushed even redder at the purr in her voice. “Aerin is my cousin.”
His face drew back, stunned. “I wasn’t aware she had family.”

“She wasn’t either until about an hour ago.” Brow drawn tight in confusion, he opened his mouth and closed it several times, eerily reminiscent of a fish.

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand.” Crossing the room to him, she stood inches away from his chest, and leaned up on her tip toes. His eyes widened as he took a step back. “Miss…”

“Cullen.” Her voice was low. Recognition hit his brain. “It’s me. Aerin. Dagna made me these,” she held up her wrist. “This is the real me.”

“Maker’s breath,” he breathed, voice a ragged whisper. “You… let me look at you.” Stepping backwards, she allowed him to turn her in a slow circle, gently running his hands around her waist, across her cheek and ear, down her neck. Swallowing, his mouth suddenly went dry. “You’re even more beautiful than before. How is that possible?”

Giggling, she wrapped her arms around his neck, tangling her hands into his fur mantle. “Magic. Are you done for the day?” He nodded, unable to speak, delighting in the way her curves now filled his hands. “Good,” she lifted her mouth to his ear, hot breath making him shiver, “then we can get… reacquainted.” Cullen never removed his armor so fast in his life, nor had he ever just threw it to the side like he did then. Yanking his shirt off, clad only in his breeches, he tugged her to him, as she pulled the dress over her head.

“Maker.” She wasn’t wearing a breastband. Or smalls. He figured they didn’t fit anymore, same as the rest of her clothes. In fact, she would be needing a completely new wardrobe. A whimper escaped his throat as he took in her body, her real body. Her muscles were more defined now, breasts heavy against her chest, hips softly rounded with firm flesh, a dark thatch of hair between her legs. Embarrassed at the sudden appearance of hair, she attempted to cross her legs and hide. “No,” he pleaded, “I want to see all of you.” The lyrium in her blood was quieter now, more like a faint hum rather than a the crescendo of a haunting melody. It still called to him, just more subtly, finally giving him more control over himself around her.

Gently lifting her up, Cullen laid her down on the bed, setting about the lengthy task of tasting every inch of her body, determined to familiarize himself with her as soon as possible. Her nectar was muskier, but just as addicting, her body felt more solid underneath him, her skin more sensitive to the touch. Moaning his pleasure, he drove his tongue as far inside her as possible, feeling her hips jerk up to meet his face, his hand firmly on her stomach and pushing her back down. “Cullennnnnn, I need more!” Her breaths were coming in short pants now, desperate for more friction.

“Hmm?” he smirked. “I’m not done reacquainting myself. This might take hours.”

“You’re trying to kill me.”

“Me? I’m not the one who waltzed in here with a body taken right out of my dreams,” he growled, roughly shoving two fingers up into her wet heat, watching her buck under the pressure. “You’re a desire demon, aren’t you? That’s the only explanation I have as to how you tempt me so.” Wrapping his lips around her pearl, he sucked, delving deeper with his fingers, relentlessly pushing her to the edge, feeling her unravel beneath his skillful touch. Abruptly pulling back, she made to cry out, but he grabbed her hips, and in one smooth, slick motion, thrust his impossibly hard shaft all the way in, balls slapping as he fully hilted himself and she screamed with pleasure. Torturously slow, he slid in and out, rolling his hips each time they met, watching with rapt fascination at how her breasts jiggled at every plunge. Cullen pulled himself back to sitting, settling her on his lap as his arms wrapped around her back, latching on to a plump, dusky brown nipple, laving all his
attention on the hardened peak as he ground his cock deep inside her. Her fingernails dug into his biceps, the sharp pain only spurring his lust higher.

“You,” he gasped, “are mine. Forever.”

“Yes,” her voice wailed, “please Cullen, oh please.”

“Say it,” Cullen demanded.

“I’m yours, my love. Forever.” Growling, he rolled over onto his back and smacked her firm bottom.

“Take your pleasure.” Needing no further urging, Aerin immediately began grinding her hips, bouncing obscenely on his weeping member, her arousal leaking down his shaft, as she panted and moaned his name. Dipping his thumb into her fluids, he pressed it to her clit and began to rub firm circles, pushing her higher and higher until she felt as if she might float away. Cullen groaned, watching his lover fuck him, everything so new and yet not. Her voice was calling his name in the same sweet, sultry tones as before, but everything else, it was changed.

“Yes yes yesyes oooooooh gods yes!” her words became a string of incoherent praises and mumbling as her walls began clenching him tighter. Finally free of her binding, she felt each touch, each thrust, each caress more intensely. She could fly, soar, and he was her anchor, pinning her with the hot, velvet, maleness of him to reality, the reality of his firm bulk moving deep within her, his mouth sucking on her fingers, tasting her skin, his hands grounding her hips to his, lusty moans vibrating inside his lungs, her hands entangled in his wiry chest hair, grazing his puckered nipples, wringing every last drop of desire out of them both.

“Come for me, Aerin.” With a gasping high pitched moan, she rose to meet her high, tumbling through the waves, drifting away, oblivious to everything in the world beside her lover, firm and solid and so very hard inside her. Flipping her back over, he braced himself over her, pinning his arms by her head as he began to vigorously claim her with deep, pulsating thrusts. “Look at me,” he rasped. “I want to see your face.” Deep blue and bronze eyes locked onto his honeyed amber ones, hazy with desire and lust. Hips stuttering, he forced himself to speed up, feeling when his control finally snapped. Devouring her lips in a punishing kiss, he spilled himself within her, grunting into her mouth, murmuring, “Mine. All mine.”

“Mmmmm,” she agreed, exhausted and spent. “I love you.”

His heart swelled, this feeling like an impossible dream. He would wake up soon, he knew it. “I love you, too,” he whispered, smiling as she pulled him down, snuggling into his sweaty chest. “So. Adrienne? I honestly feel like I’m cheating on you right now.” She giggled. “Except your body still responds to me the same way,” he grinned. “For instance, if I do this…” he pinched her nipple hard, gratified at the twitch of her walls around his softening cock. “Or this,” he ground against her still sensitive nub, listening for her low moan.

“You’re insatiable,” she sighed.

“For you? Always.”

***

“So this is the official story then? Aerin is on a secret mission for Sister Nightingale. Adrienne is her cousin that Aerin had asked earlier to come to join the Inquisition and will be replacing her until Aerin returns. Which will be…?”
Aerin shrugged, watching as Josephine chewed on her quill. “Whenever you need her back. It’s going to take some time for me to get used to this,” she waved her arms around, covered in bruises. She was extremely clumsy, now. It was a new feeling. Her legs were shorter than she was used to, as were her arms, and her center of gravity had shifted. The woman had already taken several tumbles down the staircases, tripped into far too many walls and people between yesterday afternoon and this morning. “It took me several months to stop tripping the first time.” Ellana snickered a bit in remembrance, ignoring her sister’s glare. “So, if there’s any important battles I need to be in, I’ll need to be Aerin for now. Until I retrain myself.”

Leliana nodded thoughtfully. “There’s nothing pressing right now, not until the ball at the Winter Palace around Satinalia. Ellana, you’re headed out to the Exalted Plains this week, yes? Aer- or Adrienne, rather, Maker, that’s going to take getting used to, perhaps you should remain in Skyhold for now?”

“Oh, yes!” Josephine’s face brightened. “I wanted to ask you if you would consider learning Orlesian? With your grace and bearing,” Ellana sniggered again, “Um, the grace you previously possessed, it would be a simple matter to pass you off as nobility at the ball. With the fact you already speak Common and Antivan, you could be vital in helping collect intelligence.”

Aerin stared at the hopeful Antivan lady’s expression. “You want me to what? Pretend to be a lady? Won’t Ellana need backup if she’s going to be trying to stop an assassination?”

“She’ll have plenty of help from the others,” Leliana waved away her concerns. “We need information, and you’re the perfect person to help obtain it. And it would play in our favor to have our own assassin on the dance floor all night. Insurance, as it were.”

Sighing, Aerin glanced over across the war table at the Commander, who was studying the map with a frown, and the Seeker, leaning against the far wall. “Cullen? Cassandra?”

“Hm?” His head jerked up. “You know what I think. This entire ball is a waste of time and resources. But I supposed I must defer to the majority,” he vaguely gestured to the other women.

“It could be useful,” the Seeker demurred.

“Elle?”

The Inquisitor smiled. “You already have the noble mein, when you’re not cursing at least, and Varric told me a few stories about when you’ve played the lady before during your Crow hunting days. If anyone can do it, it’s you.”

Groaning, she closed her eyes. “Fine. Fine. I’ll learn Orlesian.”

“And how to dance,” Josephine added.

“Sure.”

“And the court politics, intrigue, genealogies, I think you will do fine with the Game, but additional lessons won’t harm anything…”

Lower and lower Aerin slumped, finally hitting her head on the large oak table. “What did I just agree to?”


“I need to go stab something. Ugh, I have no armor. Or clothes.”
“I have already taken the liberty of ordering you some tunics and leggings, from the measurements of the dress you are wearing now. I shall also procure some more appealing attire.”

“She means fancy dresses,” Ellana grinned.

“Yes,” the ambassador nodded serenely. “It will take awhile for you to be comfortable wearing corsets, hoops, and heels, not to mention dancing in such. It would behoove us to acquire as much practice as possible.”

With a whimper, Aerin slid to the cool, stone floor, Leliana giggling in the background. “Talk to Harritt today, get him started on some armor for you. New weapons too, it won’t do for people to see you with Aerin’s swords and daggers. I know we discussed yesterday about letting the knowledge of who you really are remain a secret for now. I fear you will be somewhat secluded in the months to come. After Halamshiral, it should be safe to let the others know.”

“I should have just stayed an elf,” she muttered.

Chucking, Cullen shook his head. “Nonsense. I much prefer the real you.” Gratified, she smiled, hauling herself back up to her feet as a sharp rap rang through the doors.

“Sister Nightingale? The Fade walker is awake.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the first scene I envisioned before I started writing this story and I'm so EXCITED.

There was gonna be more feels and thinking but Cullen's libido is impossible.
Jet black braid bouncing as she walked, Aerin wandered off to the undercroft to get measured for a new set of armor, while Cullen and Leliana headed off to the dungeons, the latter promising to bring Aerin by later. Dagna squealed softly so as to not alert Harritt, grinning from ear to ear with joy that her cuffs had worked. “You’re a miracle worker, Dagna.”

“Nonsense. You helped get me into the circle in the first place. It’s the least I could do.” Seems Ash’a’bellanar was right. The path to my freedom did start during the Blight. With a promise from the blacksmith that her new armor and weapons would be done within the week, Aerin climbed up to the library tower to find a certain mage.

“Pardon me, my lord, is this seat taken?” Dorian glanced up, taking in the attractive and wholly unfamiliar woman standing before him with an appraising eye.

“No, please, sit. Although you won’t be doing yourself any favors being seen with me, being the evil magister pariah and all. I’m Dorian, no my lord necessary. Wine?”

She stared at the glass of red wine he held out, bile rising in her throat. Swallowing, she grasped the slender stem. Ladies drink wine, not whiskey. Right? Ugh. Taking a dainty sip, she smiled in a shoddy attempt to hide her grimace. “Thank you, Dorian. I admit, I can’t imagine someone half as handsome and charming as you to be lacking in friendship. I am Adrienne Iseri. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” He chuckled at that.

“You’d be surprised. Mistress Iseri, are you new to Skyhold? I don’t believe I’ve ever seen your face before.”

“Oh, please call me Adrienne. Yes, I arrived last night, my cousin has been after me for some time to come join the Inquisition and aid its efforts. I must say, the keep is spectacular.”

“Oh, your cousin in here? Anyone I might know?”

She took another sip of wine, not entirely hating it. “Aerin Lavellan. Do you know of her?” Dorian’s eyebrows shot up his forehead.

“I- uh… yes. I wasn’t aware she had family?”

“We’re not close, of course, more like cousins thrice removed. But she lent her aid to me in the past, and so I wish to repay her favor.”

“Ah, I see. What will you be doing here then?”

“The ambassador, Josephine Montilyet, has requested my assistance in her endeavors. I look forward to being of use.” A coy smile on her face, Aerin leaned in closer to the mage. “So, how was I? Convincing?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Dorian. You daft tit.”
“Aerin!” He jerked upright, knocking over his wine, the dark red seeping into the pages of his book. “Oh, now look what you’ve done.” Giggling, she leaned back in the chair, enjoying watching the normally unflappable altus get all ruffled. “So that is your cover story? Simple enough. Look at you, my dear. You are stunning, a truly exotic beauty.” She made a face at the word ‘exotic’.

“I can’t reveal who I am to anyone else yet. Not until after Halamshiral. They’re making me learn Orlesian. And how to dance in heels. It’s going to be terrible.” Throwing his head back, Dorian laughed at her distress.

“Oh, it won’t be that bad. I’ll help you.”

“You know Orlesian?” she raised a dark eyebrow.

“Of course. I’m a scion of House Pavus. I know Orlesian, Nevarran, and even some Antivan. I also know how to dance, much better than any of these southerners,” he sniffed.

“That would be lovely. I’m going to be awfully short on company these next few months, especially since Ellana is going to the Exalted Plain for the next six weeks.”

“Then I shall have to be enough to fill the void in your life left by the absence of the barbarians you like to call friends.”

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“He’s crazy, delusional.” Aerin watched as Cullen paced the length of his office, glaring at the floor. “He thinks he’s from another world?”

“He certainly believes what he’s saying,” Leliana shrugged. “He also says he has proof in his bag. Aerin, you’ve an excellent talent for knowing when someone is lying. You could also find his dreams, see what he sees. Care to come talk to the prisoner?”

“Pictures, he says. Anyone can sketch a picture. I don’t want her near him, he’s unstable,” barked the Commander.

“It will be fine. He’s chained, inside of a cell, protected by several of my trusted guards. He won’t harm her. Come, let us go.” Without giving him a chance to retort, the spymaster grabbed her friend’s hand and hauled her away, Cullen’s frown following the women as they scurried out of his tower, heading for the stairs to lead them into the courtyard. “Ugh. I called you Aerin in there, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” she smirked. “You did. What was that about a bag? I don’t remember seeing a bag.”

“Cassandra apparently was carrying it for him when they exited the rift. It’s up in my rookery, I meant for you to take a look at it but got sidetracked with all the excitement. I’ll get someone to bring it down to the dungeons,” she responded, flagging one of her scouts down.

“Oh, good news, I fooled Dorian into believing my cover story. And he’s promised to help me learn Orlesian and politics and dancing.”

Leliana smiled. “I’m glad you will have at least one friend with you. You know you and Cullen… You’ll have to put your relationship on hold. Otherwise, it will seem that the Commander is cheating on Aerin, with her cousin, no less. We can’t afford any scandals before Halamshiral.”

“You’re telling him, then. I’m not going anywhere near that conversation with him.” The bard giggled.
“Is he that amorous?”

“Even more so,” Aerin giggled. A cool, wet breeze flowed up the corridor of stairs that led down to the dimly lit dungeon, the sound of the waterfall roaring in the distance. Waving the guards stationed in the prison away, the women came to stand in front of a remarkably clean cell.

He looked rough. Several weeks worth of stubble had grown out into a sparse beard, his eyes were tired and sunken, but otherwise, he was healthy and clean. And rather handsome in a lean, sharp sort of way. His original clothes were lying washed and folded in a corner of the cell, and a plain cotton tunic and pants had been provided in their stead. Pulling up a stool, Aerin sat in front of the iron bars, studying him. “What’s your name?”

“I already told them,” he mumbled. “It hasn’t changed since the last six times I was asked.”

“You do realize you’re a prisoner, right?” Resting her elbows on her knees, she propped up her head in her hands. “Being smart won’t help much.”

He wearily sighed, turning to look at her for the first time. “My name is Michael Turner. I’m a civil engineer from New Orleans, Louisiana, United States of America, planet Earth, in the year 2016, anno domini. No one has told me where I am yet. Where’s my stuff?”

“We did tell you,” Sister Nightingale replied serenely. “You’re in Skyhold, in the Frostback Mountains, on the Orlais-Ferelden border. Your bag is on the way down here.”


“What do you remember last before waking up here?” Aerin asked gently.

“I was…” he frowned. “Walking. On a camping trip in the mountains in Colorado with some friends. I split off from the group, and managed to slip down a ravine. The bottom of the ravine almost… no, that’s crazy.”

“Crazier than this?”

“Right,” he sighed. "The bottom almost… shimmered. Like a force field with a green tint. I woke up in a wasteland. There were rocks, jagged and floating like gravity didn’t fucking exist, the sky was green, and there were screams everywhere but no one was in sight. I started walking. I don’t know how long. Until your people found me. Now I’m here.” His expression was utterly hopeless.

“May I see your shoes?”

“My what?”

“Shoes.” Aerin tapped the iron bar, indicating his boots. Confused, he handed one over. Holding the surprisingly light leather and mesh boot in her hands, she turned it over, poking at various spots. The rubber was hardened but still soft enough to absorb shock and familiar to her touch, nylon mesh rough under her fingers, plastic tips adorning the laces. Turning it over, she read the logo—‘Vasque’. These were boots that would not be found anywhere in Thedas. “He’s telling the truth, Leli.” The spymaster nodded.

“I figured as much.”

“You believe me?” the Earthling sat up straight. “Will you let me go?”
“Where would you go?” Leliana considered him. “Both Orlais and Ferelden are at war. This is not your home. The year is 9:41 Dragon. An ancient magister has torn open the Veil and demons stalk the lands. Mages and templars vie for the upper hand. And none of these words mean a thing to you. We can offer you a place here, if you wish it. It is safe, or at least safer than anywhere else in Thedas at the moment.”

“Thedas? What would I have to do?”

“Thedas is what we call this part of the world,” Aerin answered. “You said you were a civil engineer? Can you build things?”

“I don’t suppose you have computers here, huh?” At their blank faces, he groaned. “I can try. It’s been years since I did calculations by hand, but what do you need?”

“Military structures. Roads, bridges, trebuchets mostly.”

“Not much choice anyways. I’ll try. To at least be useful, if anything.” Satisfied with that, Leliana unlocked the cell just as the elven scout from earlier stepped silently into the room, a navy blue nylon backpack in his hands, the kind hikers use, Aerin noticed. Taking it from the man, the spymaster handed it to the other woman, who immediately unzipped it, spreading the contents carefully on the floor.

Individually packaged granola bars, a big plastic sack of water? That’s weird. Oh, there’s a straw attached to it. Neat. Compass, flashlight. She flicked the light on and off a few times, to the amazement of the guard. Lighter, first aid kit, ooh Tylenol, gun? Shit. Guns can’t be here. “What’s this?” she asked, hoping her tone was more curious than panicked.

“Uhh, flare gun. It shoots out a light, to alert others to my location in case I get lost.” Nodding, she passed it to Leliana.

“Destroy it.”

“Hey! That was expensive!”

“It’s better this way,” Aerin replied simply. What’s this block? She turned over a smooth rectangle, one side covered in glass.

“That’s my cell phone. It’s probably dead, but I have a solar charger in there. A few hours in the sun, assuming this sun is similar to mine, and I can show you pictures of where I’m from.”

Everything has changed so much. Carefully laying it down with the other items, she poked through the rest of the bag. Spare clothes, toothbrush—oh I miss this, whistle, pocket knife, chapstick, bug spray. This guy is prepared. Putting everything back in the bag, she handed it to Michael. “Curious things you have in there. I’d be interested in seeing this phone when it’s alive again.” Smiling, he nodded.

“Richter,” Leliana called to the scout, “Escort Michael Turner to Josephine, have her find him rooms, and take him there, see what he needs to get settled. Show him around. And keep him out of trouble.” Saluting her with his hand over his heart, the elf called Richter motioned to the human.

“Come on, then.”

“You’re—those—” Michael’s eyes widened at the sight of pointed ears.

“Never seen an elf before?” Richter queried, keeping a sour look just barely at bay.
“Not a real one,” he whispered.

“Better get used to it. Now let’s go.”

The women watch the pair leave. “What are you going to tell people?”

“The truth, I suspect.” A small frown marred Leliana’s lips. “Everyone saw him fall out of the rift and the clothes he was dressed in. Skyhold is small enough that his lack of knowledge about even the most basic things will be quickly noticed. What is this, anyways?”

“He’s gonna flip when he see two moons tonight,” Aerin giggled. “It’s a flare gun. This one is not a weapon, but in the right hand, someone could turn it into one. This kind of weapon here…” she shook her head. “It could tear through metal armor, faster than anyone could move out of the way. You could stand at one end of Skyhold, shoot it at someone at the other end, and they’d be dead a second later. Destroy it.”

“But if we had this kind of weapon-”

“And how long would it be until a spy stole it or copied the design for the enemy? Thedas is still centuries away from this technology. You could obliterate our society.” Reaching out, Aerin took the gun back from the reluctant woman. “I’ll do it.” Marching to the far end of the dungeon, facing the waterfall, she set it on a protruding section of stone wall. Backing away several feet, she pulled at the Fade, summoning a molten hot fire, watching as the metal of the gun glowed red, then bright white as it melted into a solid lump of steel. Satisfied, she gave it a force push off the ledge, into the waterfall and river below.

Sighing, Leliana pouted. “I suppose it’s for the best.” Turning around, the women walked back into the main room and headed up the stairs. “Would you consider helping him get acclimated? Teach him the history and geography and whatever else he needs to know? I imagine you would be the best at anticipating his needs.”

“Plus I’ll need a break from learning Orlesian genealogy,” she added, grumbling.

“Oh, it’s not just Orlesian. Bloodlines are intertwined through all of Thedas, my friend.”

“Kill me. Kill me now.”

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“Il faut que nous donnions tous des preuves irréfutables de bonne foi.”

“Foi. You just said we must all show good liver, not good faith.”

“Ugh. Tout le monde porte du un ver cette saison.”

Dorian snickered. “Vert, not un ver. Everyone is wearing green this season, not everyone is wearing worms.”

Groaning, Aerin slammed the Orlesian primer she was reading shut. “Worms might be preferable. I don’t like green anyways.” The other man on her left snorted, face buried in a large leather bound book that read ‘Tales of the Destruction of Thedas, by Brother Genitivi’. “Something you wish to say, Michael?”

“No, ma’am,” he grinned. “Although I’d pay good money to see you say that to one of those uptight ladies in the hall. Say, this Blight the book talks about. Archdemons and Old Gods and
dragons. Is this real? Or an old legend?"

“Very real, my friend,” Dorian sighed. “The last Blight was just ten years ago. Aerin… a friend of mine, fought in it. Adrienne’s cousin, in fact. As did Sister Nightingale. You still see darkspawn every now and then, but it’s small groups.” Aerin nodded.

“How hell. I can’t even begin to imagine. A dragon? Dragons are real?’”

“Corypheus, the magister we’re fighting now, has a dragon that is probably an archdemon,” Aerin replied. “Vicious creatures. The Inquisitor has also taken a few dragons down, one in the Hinterlands and another on the Storm Coast.”

“This place is cool, but scary as shit.” Michael closed the books and shuddered. “Like living in a Tolkien novel. Maybe Robert Jordan. What else is out there?”

“You don’t want to know,” she remarked dryly. “Believe me, ignorance is bliss. Is your thing working yet?”


“I’ll get the advisors and ask,” she rose to her feet, trying to reclaim her graceful fluid movements but still falling short. Far, far short. Stepping away from her chair, a foot stepped on her inner skirts and she pitched forward into the bookcase in front of her. “Vishante kaffas!”


Glaring at him and rubbing her head, she stalked off up the stairs.

“Sister Nightingale? Do you have a moment?”

“Mistress Iseri! Of course, please, come in. How may I help you?” Aerin grimaced internally at the forced formality with her best friend.

“The Fade walker, Michael Turner. His device is ready to be presented. I thought you and the other advisors might like to see it.”

“Perfect. I’ll send word to them. Meet us in the war room.” With a stilted curtsey and a muffled giggle from Leliana, Aerin carefully stepped back down to the library, scowling at her skirts held aloft.

“Michael? Will you go fetch it and meet in the war room?”

“That room near the ambassador’s office?”

“The same,” she nodded. “Altus Pavus, may we continue our torture, I mean lesson, at another time?”

Grinning, the mage nodded, toasting his wine to her. With a flounce of skirts, she left the alcove, nodding to Grand Enchanter Fiona, and descended into the war room. Tracing a finger over the map, she found the Exalted Plains, where Ellana currently was with Solas, of course, Sera, and the Iron Bull. The Emerald Graves are next. Then, Halamshiral. Hopefully I’ll be back in fighting condition so I can go to the Graves. Being stuck here, so close to Cullen and not being able to do anything, or even talk to him informally... So engrossed was she in her own thoughts, she didn’t hear the door swing open, or the muffled steps of leather boots approaching her. A heavy arm
adorned with a metal bracer and flexible leather gloves snaked around her waist.

“Leliana told me I need to stay away from you until the Winter Palace. That’s four months away. How, pray tell, are we supposed to do that?” His breath was hot in her ear, sending delicious shivers down her spine, straight into the pool of desire that always simmered when she was around him.

“We’ve no choice, love,” she murmured, leaning back against his breastplate, glancing up into his narrowed eyes. “The risk of a scandal is apparently too great.”

“You don’t have to do this,” his darkening scowl twisted his handsome features. “You don’t have to play the part of nobility, learn Orlesian, of all things.”

“It wouldn’t matter if I was there or not, Cullen. If the nobles found out the Commander of the Inquisition was cheating on the Inquisitor’s sister, we could lose favor with people we need on our side. It’s only temporary.”

“Only temporary?” He spun her around, pressing her into the table, grinding his already hardened erection against her. “Only temporary?”

“Cullen, four months without sex won’t kill you,” she huffed, rolling her eyes.

“You sound like you don’t care at all! Why? Will you have your needs met elsewhere?”

“Cullen! This shit again? Listen to yourself!” Aerin snapped, stepping away from him. “I’ve gone years without sex. I don’t need it. Yes, I will miss you. But this is important. The Inquisition’s influence is important. Stop acting like a petulant child.” Face burning red with anger, he opened his mouth to retort just as the door swung open again, Josephine and Leliana chattering as they entered.

“Oh. Did we interrupt anything?” Leliana raised her eyebrow, taking in Aerin’s defensive stance and the Commander’s rage infused glower and clenched fists.

“No,” he gritted, “we’re fine.” Straightening his posture, he settled his hands over the hilt of his sword and stared fixedly at the map until Michael burst in a few moments later.

“Got it! It’s loading, so give it a minute.”

“I hope this is worth my time,” the blond former templar sneered. The other man raised his face, blanking at a response when he saw the formidable Commander glaring at him.

“It remains to be seen, Commander. Give it a chance,” Josephine soothed. Gathering closer to the bright device, they all watched in awe as images moved across the screen, a happy chime ringing out as the glass read ‘Samsung’. Little pictures, icons, Aerin remembered, lay in a neat, colorful grid, one labeled ‘messages’, another, ‘netflix’. How much has Earth’s technology changed in just 20 years? This is insane. Picking up the phone, Michael touched the screen and aimed it at Aerin.

“Smile!” She blinked. Turning the phone around, he showed them a perfect image of the woman, standing flustered by the table.

“What sorcery is this?” Cullen demanded.

“Ah, none, sir. It’s technology. Science. This,” he swiped to the side on the picture, “Is where I’m from. New Orleans.” Old stucco buildings with fancy iron rails lined a rough, cobblestone street, crowds of people dressed casually roaming the sidewalks with drinks in their hand, talking and
“Laughing.”

“What’s that?” Josephine pointed.

“A car. It’s how we get around.” Barely listening as Michael went on about Earth, Aerin was lost, staring at the pictures he swiped through. *Home. It looks so familiar.* The cars were different, bigger, more sleek than she remembered. The clothes were different too. More skin. Less neon for sure. But otherwise, it was like reliving the past. She could almost imagine she was back there, that this was all just a dream. Leliana’s hand found her own, reassuringly squeezing her fingers.

“Wait! That last picture. Go back!” Puzzled, Michael swiped back to the last picture he showed. “Can you zoom in? There?”

“Zoom?” Josephine wondered. “What is a zoom?”

“Uh, yeah. Like this,” he slid his fingers on the screen. Aerin snatched the phone up, staring at two people in the background. It was them. She knew it was them. Her mother was turned to the side, so she only saw a profile, and her dad’s features were slightly out of focus, but she’d recognize them anywhere. Her dad was almost completely gray now. Her mother must be dyeing her hair. A broken sob choked her throat as tears burned her eyes.

“Aer- Adrienne? Are you alright?”

“I-” she gasped, “I need air. Excuse me.” Turning, she fled the room, blindly shoving past people as she ran, no destination in mind except to get away from everyone. *They’re alive, they’re alive, oh gods. I thought I’d never see them again.* Flinging herself to the ground in a deserted corner of the gardens, she sobbed into her skirts, heartbreakingly mournful cries wracking her body. A gentle hand hovered over her upper back, then cautiously reached under her legs to cradle her to a silver breastplate. *He shouldn’t be doing this.* But she couldn’t bring herself to protest, or even care.

Cullen carried the distressed woman with ease, up to her rooms in the Inquisitor’s tower, gently sitting on her sofa, trembling arms wrapped around his neck. “Talk to me, Aerin. What’s wrong?”

It was several minutes before she had regained enough composure to talk. Blowing her running nose into a handkerchief he offered her, she sniffed. “Those people I saw… they looked so much like my parents. I was almost certain it was them.”

Pulling her in close, he rubbed slow circles into her back. “You’ve never talked about your parents.”

“Not much to talk about. They’re gone. Right before the slavers took me when I was 11.”

“No other family?”

“No.”

“I’m so sorry, love,” he murmured into her hair. “And I apologize for what I said earlier. I… It hurts to be away from you. Physical needs or not. I just… I’ll miss this. Just holding you, talking to you. I should not have insinuated what I did.”

*Always the same thing.* Sighing, she nodded. “It’s okay. I didn’t mean to imply I didn’t care. I do.”

“I know.” Tilting her head up, he placed a slow, sweet kiss to her lips. “I should leave.”

“People will talk about you carrying me in here.”
Snorting, he shook his head. “I made sure the family of the woman I love was taken care of during her time of need. No one will question that. Or Maker help them if they do.” Giggling, she caressed his cheek.

“I love you, Adrienne.”

“...I love you, too, Cullen.”

Chapter End Notes

OoooOoooO Another Earth man? WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?
It was sweltering in Skyhold. The summer was lingering, reluctant to let the season pass into the chill of autumn, sun bearing down on the training grounds, practically baking all the soldiers like lobsters in their shells. Cullen rolled his shoulders, bereft of his usual fur mantle and tabard, clad only in his silverite armor and his thin cotton underclothes that were stuck to his body and soaked with sweat. Watching his lieutenants order the recruits around, he carefully ran his experienced eye over their forms, throwing out a comment on certain soldiers’ form here and there. He missed Rylen. The man had offered to go lead Griffon Wing Keep, far in the Western Approach, apparently running from the wrath of a scorned sweetheart. The situation amused Cullen, despite his reluctance to let his second leave. But he had let him go, resigning himself to more work on his plate. His new lieutenants were nowhere near the caliber of his second-in-command. At least Rylen would be back to keep Skyhold safe while he was in Orlais for the Winter Ball.

It was strange, to detest something so thoroughly and yet desire it at the same time. The idea of rubbing shoulders with the nobility, pretending to be friendly and appreciative of their forced generosity irked him to no end. These men and women, who were wasting time and resources by dancing, of all bloody things, while there was an ancient magister trying to tear the world apart. It made no sense. And yet… the ball would signify the end of his and Aerin’s- Adrienne’s, he corrected himself for the thousandth time- involuntary separation. He missed her. The way she smelled, the way she smiled, her touch. It was beyond difficult being so close to her, hearing that damnable faint hum of lyrium under her skin, and restricting himself to remain at arm’s length. Once this was over, they would be free to resume their relationship.

It was strange, how quickly their relationship had progressed. He was normally a methodical man, favoring logic and careful strategy over impulse. And yet, with her, he wanted to leap without looking. His passion for her burned like nothing he had ever experienced or imagined he would in his life. She was attractive, yes, but Cullen had had a decent share of women over the years, beautiful and talented ones. And yet, none of them had affected him like she did. Was it just because it was more than a quick tryst, now that he had an opportunity for something more? Or maybe it was because she was so different? So willful and independent? If he was honest with himself, he wished she was more demure and yielding. Or did he? She wouldn’t be her if she was. Whatever it was, he became intoxicated every time she drew near, his blood yearning for her warmth and fire.

Maybe it was just the fact she was so desired by others. Before, as Aerin, and now as Adrienne, wherever she went, men and women alike stopped to admire her. He took pleasure in their veneration of her when she was safely ensconced by his side. But when she wasn’t… Like now. Traipsing about the castle, spending all her time with that Tevinter mage and the Fade walker. The scoundrels and miscreants that swarmed the keep had no idea that this Adrienne was taken. By him. And he could not do a Maker damned thing about it. His primal urge to take her, claim her in front of the masses rose by the hour, as he watched her smile and joke with the other inhabitants of the keep. Like she didn’t care. Like she didn’t even miss him. Like she preferred their company to his.

Ugh, Maker. His head hurt. The withdrawal symptoms were worse without her in his bed at night. Did he just yell at one of his lieutenants? He was losing it. The strain was getting to be too much. Every time he talked to Aer- Adrienne now, he veritably bit her head off. And every time, he hated
himself for the hurt that would flash across her countenance, before she resumed her icy mask that he despised even more. This wasn’t him. This… pettiness, jealousy, cruelty. He had never acted like this before, speaking malicious words for the sole purpose of seeing her recoil in anger, so that she would feel the same desperate fury as him. Was it just the lyrium withdrawals making him like this? Maybe he should be taking it. Maybe it would be better for him, for them. He would be more stable. And she deserved him at his best.

He couldn’t though. She would be so disappointed. No, he would conquer this on his own. For her. She spoke of the chantry and lyrium as if they were his slave master, and she was right. To be free was worth the risk and pain. He could do no less than her. He would rein in his temper, be the man she believed him to be. For her. Everything, for her.

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They were too late to save his friend. Cursing in a long forgotten tongue, he turned his rage to the fools who dared to rip a spirit from its home, twisting its gentle nature into corruption. The sight of their mangled bodies, burned beyond recognition, did little to assuage his fury. With a curt excuse to the Inquisitor, Solas left to seek his own solitude.

The press of bodies and constant company he endured on the road and in Skyhold grated on his nerves. The arrogance of the human barely tolerated. The fumblings of the Dalish pitied. The more he saw of this era, the more he became set in his plans. He would reclaim what was theirs, reverse his mistakes, and all would be well again. The only thing not going according to his plan was her.

She barely spoke to him, her suspicion rolling off her powerful figure in thick waves. She suspected him of something, he was sure, but he also knew she didn’t know why. Otherwise she would have told her sister, Ellana. She was a charming girl, for a Dalish. Then again, she wasn’t completely raised by them. Most of her formative years had been spent with Aerin, giving her an open mind and spirit, rare among her People. He cared about her, he really did. So when the day came that he would have to set her aside, he would grieve. But he was not just any man, to be allowed to take up with whom he wished. No, he needed someone his equal in power and will. Someone who would help him bring down the Veil and rule by his side.

He understood her, her need for control and power, tempered by her kind heart, almost human, in some respects. She would understand what he had to do. She saw the injustices the Elvhen endured, more than anyone. When he offered her a chance to raise their People up, he knew she would accept the sacrifices that would have to be made. Her sister would live, at least. And at her core, that was all that mattered to her. Her friendship with the Spymaster and Commander were fleeting, human things. Yes, Aerin would join him. And together, they would remake the world.

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The new woman in Skyhold was charming. Courteous, well-read, with a sharp mind and wit. Her grace was slightly lacking, but Vivienne was sure, under her tutelage, Mistress Iseri would blossom. The ladies took tea every other day at the ambassador’s request, and at first, the First Enchanter had considered it a trial, to teach this common woman of the Game. But Adrienne had proved herself to be a quick study, recognizing the subtle nuances of language, both spoken and seen. She understood power.

The woman was close lipped about her past, saying only that her Nevarran father and Rivaini/Antivan mother had lived a simple life, and she was unaware of their familial ties. Vivienne had been sure that one of her parents had been of the nobility. Her features were too refined, the air that she carried herself with too lofty. She would do some discreet digging, see what leads she might find. Mistress Iseri could prove to be an excellent ally for the events yet to come.
Mistress Iseri knew, the same as Vivienne, that without a title, she was nothing. Only her wits and knowledge mattered. And so they both used what they had, determined to climb the ranks, to become who they were meant to be. It was refreshing, to meet another woman of like mind, Vivienne mused. Someone with a backbone of steel, willing to get her hands a bit dirty if need be. She liked to watch the other woman train, sparring with the Seeker every morning. Her movements were gaining an appreciative fluidity, not unlike a dance, daggers flashing as she arced them into formation- soon she would be a match for even Cassandra. Vivienne smiled when Mistress Iseri would spar with a single sword. She was diverse, knowing that to limit herself to a single weapon was crippling. The Iron Lady approved at the use of all the tools at her disposal.

Yes, she would be a formidable force of nature by the time Vivienne was done with her. Beauty, brains, and strength? If only she were a mage, she would be perfect.

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Sighing, he put down his quill, stretching back to release the tension in his spine. His publisher was chomping at the bit for him to submit his new manuscript, but Varric wasn’t satisfied with it yet. Sighing, he dropped that letter into a large pile that was designated ‘respond to later’. Or ‘burn with fire’. He wasn’t sure which one yet. An envelope penned in a familiar hand caught his eye as he leaned back in the solid wooden chair. Her. It had been months since he heard from her last. She probably wanted something, he suspected. Slicing the paper open, he quickly scanned the letter, the smell of oil and metal wafting from the ink. Her scent. Yep. She wanted something. The Inquisitor’s help. Bianca had found a lead for Corypheus’ red lyrium source, deep in the primeval thaig he and Hawke had found on that fateful expedition trip. That cursed trip. Made him rich, lost him a brother.

Shaking his head, he penned a quick response, inviting her to come to Skyhold. Excitement and trepidation buzzed inside of him at the thought of seeing her again. He missed her. But he had been doing okay, and he knew, the instant he lay eyes on her, he would fall apart again. Why did they still do this? Why couldn’t he just end it, like Aerin and Alistair? Although they still saw each other from time to time, not by any grand plan, but fate. Was it destiny? Did he believe in such crap? No. Not fate. Aerin had moved on, he knew she was with Cullen now, and happy, for all intents and appearances. Sometime was off between them, he knew. He had an eye for such things.

Varric wondered where his friend went, without saying goodbye. No one knew, except the Nightingale, and good luck getting anything out of her that she didn’t want to divulge. And then there was the weirdness of her cousin, thrice removed, Adrienne Iseri. They looked nothing alike. For one, they were two different races. She had explained to him that one of Aerin’s relatives had married a human from her side of the family, so they were only distantly connected. Their eyes were the only similarity, Adrienne’s being darker, but just as intense. The voices were akin to each other as well. His friend’s voice was rougher, filled with colorful curse words, and a strange undertone to her partial Tevinter accent. Probably due to her traveling so much. Adrienne had a smoother, richer, more cultured tone, sounding more like Dorian than anything. Without the eyes, he would have swore they were lying.

He would ask Aerin about it when she got back. Nightingale had promised she would return after the Winter Ball, which was looming just around the corners. Andraste’s ass, he would have fans there, probably clamoring to pick his brain and sign their books. He really needed to get that manuscript out.

***

The campfire crackled soothingly, little motes of embers lazily floating up to the midnight sky. A
few scouts paced the perimeter of the site, a cautious eye turned out to guard the camp against the myriads of enemies, both alive and undead, that prowled the Exalted Plains. Tomorrow, they would head back to Skyhold. The Iron Bull was glad, ready to be back at the keep with Dorian. The very idea of the mage brought a lascivious grin to his face. He knew the other had been spending time with that new woman, and the Fade walker recently, but they would simply have to wait. For a few days at least.

That woman. He was almost positive it was Aerin. For one, their scents were the same. Most human siblings shared a similar smell, identifiable to the Qunari's sensitive nose, but this Adrienne and Aerin’s were identical. And many of their little quirks were alike. Like how when Aerin was confused, she’d wrinkle her nose with just the slightest twitch. Or twirl a lock of hair from the back of her head around her fingers. Or bite her nails. Adrienne didn’t bite her nails, but he caught her several times raising her hands to her mouth, before consciously lowering them again. No one else had noticed, but the Iron Bull was much more observant than the rest. The only thing he couldn’t figure out was how. Or why. Or what Solas would say when he found out that the elf he coveted was now a human. The elf thought he was being subtle when he stared at Aerin with barely concealed desire. Ha, subtle his ass. Bull worried about Ellana. The younger woman was hopelessly devoted to the strange apostate. The news that he would prefer her sister would not sit well with either female. Or the rest of her inner circle.

Solas. Accepted by the Inquisition, the mage was helpful, Bull wouldn’t deny that. Saved the boss’ life several times, led them to their home, saved his own back a couple times, too. The darkness in his eyes disturbed the spy. What was his goal? Was it simply as he said, to restore order to Thedas? The Iron Bull didn’t accept that. His face was too serene, too postured, too rigid. There was a secret hidden underneath his polite facade. A twitch of the lips, a miniscule crease of his brow, a flicker in his eyes all at the oddest points in conversation told a story. Like when Aerin had told him ‘Dread Wolf take you’. Or when the Inquisitor had been explaining her vallaslin to Dorian. Or when they had found the ancient elven ruins here in the Plains. All easily missed signals, but discernible to a Ben-Hassrath. He would keep an eye on the elf. For the boss’ sake, at least. And Aerin. Or Adrienne. Whoever she was. She would tell him when she was ready, he was a patient man.

And the Fade walker. ‘Adrienne’ knew more than she was letting on. Red, as well. But that wasn’t unusual for the spymaster to hold her cards close to her chest. To be from another world… The very idea boggled his mind. A place with horseless carriages and flameless lights, no magic, no Qunari? If he hadn’t seen the man with the strange accent fall out the rift himself, wearing those strange clothes, he would never have even entertained the idea. So what did ‘Adrienne’ know? Were there others like him? Why was he here? He didn’t think the man actually intended to be here. The shock on his face was too real, the stench of fear from him burning his sensitive nose. So who sent him? Or was it an accident? There were too many questions and not enough answers. If answers were even possible. The Iron Bull would hold off sending too many reports about the man just yet. It would be a shame to be ordered to kill him before he learned more. Just a bit longer.

A low murmur caught his attention across camp. His watch was over. Nodding at Sera, he patted the sleepy elf’s scrappily head before disappearing into his own tent. Nothing to do but wait until he was back in Skyhold. Then he’d get his answers. One way or another.

Chapter End Notes

Bit of an interlude today. A look into the thoughts of a few of the inner circle. :)}
Trees, taller than anything she had ever seen before, towered over the lush verdant landscape, dotted with the remnants of an ancient elven civilization and rocky crags. Aerin breathed deep of the thick, moist air, nose full of leaves and water and life. It was beautiful here in the Emerald Graves. She was positive she’d never want to leave. *Except for the bears. The bears can shove it. This is a really bad time to not have my swords. Stupid dagger. Stupid single sword.* Talked into changing up her weapons of choice to further protect her facade, her attack style had shifted, becoming clumsier and weaker, same as everything else. Grimacing, she examined the long scratch down her hip where the bear had swiped her.

“Hold still, I need to clean it out properly. Ae-drienne. Stop. Moving.” Ellana scowled as the human twitched again, trying to pick out bits of gravel that had embedded into the wound.

“Could tie her up for you, boss. That’d be fun,” the Iron Bull winked.

“I’d prefer not, but thank you for the offer, serah,” Aerin replied dryly.

“Yeah, I didn’t think it was your style. Figured I’d offer through.”

Rolling his eyes, Dorian waited patiently for the Inquisitor to give the signal that she was done so he could heal. “There, all better!”

Flexing her leg, Aerin felt the sealed skin, barely a twinge or a bump now. “You have my thanks, Inquisitor. Shall we be off?” Glancing over at the Qunari, who had a sly smirk on his face, she sighed. “You know, don’t you Bull?”

“I do now.”

“Dammit.”

“To be fair, everyone else doesn’t. And no, Dorian didn’t tell me. Combination of your scent and little tells.”

“Fucking Ben-Hassrath,” she muttered as she stalked away, ignoring his bellowed laughter. “I’ve been pretending to be a stranger to my own sister for the last week, just for your amusement, apparently.”

“You needed the practice anyways,” Dorian chirped.

“Speaking of practice, I can help you train now. Because fuck, you’re clumsy as a human. How are you human anyways?”

“Wished upon a star. No? The Tevinters,” she cut a glare at Dorian, who sniffed at her, “did it to me. Dagna found a way to restore me.”

He raised his eyebrows, clearly not expecting that answer. “So you’re really a human? Huh. That explains it. I always thought something was… off. But never could figure out what.” A sneaky leer broke out across his scarred face. “How’d Cullen like the new you?”
Nose turned up, she adopted her best noble air. “‘Tis not a new me. The other was merely an imposter. And a lady never kisses and tells.”

Bull snorted. “If you’re a lady, I’m the Archon.”

“Why, Radonis! My how broad and vulgar you’ve become!” Dorian giggled in the background as the mercenary chuckled. Shaking her head and grinning at her companions, Ellana led her group back along the path, pausing while cocking her head to study a set of owl statues.

“Hey boss, ‘owl’ you doing?”

Dorian groaned, as Aerin hit her head against her palm. “That was terrible.”

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Relief. At ease. Peaceful. Being in the Emerald Graves with her friends made her practically skip with delight, finally free to be inner self again after pretending to be Adrienne for weeks on end. The ball couldn’t come fast enough, so she she could be done with this charade forever. Even the presence of bears and giants did little to dampen her enthusiasm. Especially right now.

“Why,” gasp “am I,” pant “doing this?” Ellana jumped up and down atop a small formation of rocks tucked in between two large boulders, dark brown braid flopping behind her.

“Saw something weird in the Fade about this little cave. You’re the smallest that can fit back there. Keep jumping.”

Dorian and the Iron Bull snickered from behind them. “Makes your tits look fantastic, boss.”

Ellana merely growled at the pair, falling off with a screech as a disembodied voice rang around them, “Need more. More! Have to be ready. Not time to come out yet. No, not ready.”

“Yes!” Aerin threw her fists in the air. “Hey, get back on. It just said it’s not ready.” Groaning, the Inquisitor stepped back on top of the tiny cave, muttering about feeding her sister to the next bear they saw.


“Hmmm.” Aerin examined the cave. “Hey, Dor, do you have that Crystal Grace we picked earlier?”

“What in the Black City’s name are you doing, woman?”

“No clue.” Grabbing the flowers, she placed them just inside the cave, Ellana wearily flopping down in the grass beside it.

“The stairs! The stairs that go down. Way, way down. I'll be there. You'll be there.”

“What is the creepy cave saying now?” Bull inched away from the rocks, eyeing them suspiciously.

“A clue, I think. Something at the bottom of a long flight of stairs. We’ll just have to keep an eye out.”

“I did all of that,” Ellana flung an arm towards the offending stones, “For a clue?”

“Yup.” Aerin grinned.
“It better be a whole chest full of chocolate. Or those little orange tarts from Val Royeaux. Ooh! Or that apple pie the cook makes sometimes.”

“I think our dear Inquisitor is hungry,” Dorian chuckled, pulling the elf to her feet. “I am as well. Shall we go back to camp?”

“Aerin, carry me.”

Snorting, she pushed her sister off of her back. “Bull, carry her.” Grabbing her waist, the Qunari tossed her up onto his shoulders as if she weighed the same as a kitten.

“This is the best. Why don’t I always travel like this?” Ellana sighed happily, resting her head on top of the other man’s.

“Because your elven boy toy would give you a look like this,” Aerin set her face into a mixture of being cross and disapproving.

“No, no, my dear,” Dorian chided. “He looks much more constipated than that.” Dissolving into giggles, they ignored the Inquisitor’s demands that they retract their insults, instead pretending to waltz into camp, to the great amusement of the scouts already set up.

Nothing could ruin this day.

Gazing around the orderly camp, tucked against a tall stone wall, Aerin noticed a set of stepped rocks leading up to the top of the boulder, overlooking the river nearby. “Inquisitor, I would like to go scout around, see what I can up on on the ridge.” Nodding, and with an admonition to be careful, she took an extra sword and bow and full quiver, “just in case” she replied with a saucy wink, and clambered up the path, heading for a point at the crest of a nearby slope. The shallow river wound its way beneath her, crystal clear water sparkling in the golden sunlight that managed to filter through the dense canopy of mammoth trees. Dangling her feet off the edge of the cliff, leaning against the rough bark of a tree, Aerin sighed, basking in the shade, taking in the sounds of the rushing water, faraway howls of wolves, and the screams of terrified men.

Wait. What?

Opening her eyes and peering below, she spotted a single rider on a horse, galloping away from a group of bandits, the so-called Freemen of the Dales. Whipping out her bow and notching an arrow, Aerin quickly pulled back the string, aiming for one of the thugs, and let loose. It missed him, but struck his horse in the rear flank. Dammit.

With a scream, the animal went down, taking its rider with him. Forcing a pang of regret down, she ungracefully slid down the steep cliff face, rolling to her feet at the bottom, sprinting toward the men, notching another arrow to immobilize another bandit. “Run toward me!” she shouted across, hoping the fleeing rider would hear her.

He did. Turning his horse towards the sound of her voice, they rode in her direction, the two remaining Freemen giving chase. Another well placed albeit lucky arrow pierced a thigh, severing an artery. One left. Swinging herself up into a tree, she crouched, waiting for the last man to pass underneath her, leaping out to tackle him to the ground, overshooting her mark, and landing on the back of the horse instead. Growling her frustration, she whipped out a dagger, only for it to snag on her boot.

Fuck this. Ducking the man’s reverse swing, she wrapped an arm around his neck and tugged him free of the saddle, yanking her blade out as they fell to the ground, pushing him underneath her, landing in the dirt with her dagger in his chest. Finally. Retracing their steps, she found the other men, wounded and furious, deftly ending their pain and time on Thedas with a quick and neat swipe. Wiping her blade off, she glanced up at the approach of trotting hooves.

An older man, dressed in a well fitting and plain, yet expensive coat, gave her a small bow from
astride his chestnut mare. “My lady, you have my thanks. Those brigands killed my guards, and would have done the same to me, if you had not saved me. Such skill in one so young and beautiful. Are you out here alone?” His wrinkled face, still handsome and regal, looked upon her with awe and concern, as sturdy hands pushed back his jet black hair, liberally streaked with silver.

“No, my lord. I’m with the Inquisition. The Inquisitor and a few of her companions are investigating the Emerald Graves. I was simply scouting, in the right place at the right time. I am pleased I could be of service to you,” she bowed as well as she could in her blood splattered leathers.

“Oh, where are my manners.” Dismounting with remarkable agility, he gave her a proper bow, taking her hand to press a formal kiss to the back of her palm. “Reynaud Couillard, of Val Aubrais, at your service.”

“Adrienne Iseri, my lord. Of nowhere in particular, really,” she smiled. “Val Aubrais? That is between Verchiel and Lydes along the coast, if I am not mistaken.”

“Mademoiselle knows her Orlesian geography, it seems,” the Marquise appeared genuinely delighted.

“I am making a poor attempt to learn,” she laughed, “to the chagrin of my tutors. Do you need a place to rest for awhile, my lord? Our camp is just over that hill there. We have tents and food and a fire, nothing fancy, but plenty serviceable. And perhaps some of our men could accompany you in your departed guards’ stead.”

“You show too much kindness to an old man,” his warm, hazel eyes crinkled. “Lead the way.” Taking the reins of his horse, Aerin led the Marquise back up the slope at an easy pace, as they talked of inconsequential things, the matter of the Freemen, the state of the civil war, and macarons. “You have never tried a macaron? I shall have to remedy that at first opportunity. It is the least I could do, my lady.”

“I am no lady, my lord,” Aerin gently smiled, “Just another soldier, caught up in battle.”

“Hmph. I may be old, child, but I am not blind. There is more to you than meets the eye. Ah, this must be the Inquisitor. Pleasure to meet you, madam. Reynaud Couillard, Marquis of Val Aubrais, at your disposal. Your agent saved me from a grisly demise at the hands of bandits.”

Ellana’s eyebrow raised minutely as she took in the lord and her sister. “Did she now? Well done, Mistress Iseri. Please, my lord, have a seat. What we have is yours. Oh, my! Are you injured? You arm, Marquise.” Drawing the man away, both spewed idle platitudes as Ellana called for her bag, bidding the lord to remove his coat and roll up his sleeve so she could work.

“A truly humbling experience, to be saved by such beautiful women,” he grinned, wincing only slightly at the sting. “Your parents must be very proud of you.” That was directed to Aerin.

Melancholy suffused her features as she gave a small smile that did not reach her eyes. “I would not know, my lord. It has been many decades since they have been gone.”

“My apologies, mademoiselle. I did not mean to stir up bad memories. No other family then?”

“Um. The Inquisitor and I are cousins, technically, thrice removed,” she offered, deciding to change the subject. “Oh, we have a raven in camp if you wish to send a message. I’m sure your own family will be worried by your delay.”

“No family here either,” he sighed as Ellana finished wrapping his arm and snuck away. “Or none I
would care to claim. Vultures, the lot of them, hovering around me waiting for the day I die so they may pick my estate and business clean. But yes, I do have some I need to inform of my tardiness.” Parchment and a quill appeared from an observant scout to her left, Aerin nodding her thanks as she passed them to the Marquis.

“I will make sure it’s sent when you are finished, my lord. Until then, rest.” With a friendly smile, Aerin left the Marquise alone to his thought and paper.

“You were supposed to be careful,” an irate Ellana followed her, stopping to tap her foot, annoyed that her sister had risked herself. “You’re still not back to your old skills.”

“What was I supposed to do, Elle? Let the man die? I shot most of them down with arrows, anyways. I wasn’t in any danger.” Aerin stripped off her bow and quiver, glaring down at her swords. “The kill with my dagger was messy. None of the finesse I once had. Zevran would be ashamed at me. Or laugh at me. Probably both.”

“No time like the present then, huh?” The Iron Bull strode up next to her, hefting his axe down and grinning. “Clearing right there. Want to have a go?”

“Why not. I need all the help I can get.” Her sour expression glowered as she stomped her way to the clearing, pulling out a leather thong to retie her hair back more securely. Unsheathing a single sword and a dagger, letting out a hopeless groan, Aerin faced the Qunari. “Let’s get this over with.”

He started out with slow, smooth swings, testing her current reflexes, teasing her each time she stumbled. Fury and frustration began to cloud her vision, grunting as she misstepped yet again. Wait. He’s trying to make me mad. My focus. It’s been completely off since I regained my form. Inhaling deeply, she centered her mind, clearing her thoughts, pushing her awareness down her limbs, testing their limitations. Eyes cleared. The mercenary merely grinned, and swiped again. This time, it was easier to roll away. And the next. And the one after that. Barely noticing as he picked up speed, Aerin ducked and rolled and leapt, finally reaching for her blade, pushing for an opening. “’Bout damn time,” he rumbled as she laughed in response.

“Miss me?”

“You’re the only one who can kick my ass, besides the Seeker. But even she can’t do it like you. She’s too clean. You’re dirty.”

“Just the way you like it,” she smirked, spinning around to tap her dagger against his flank. With a might roar, he sprang back, twirling his axe over waiting for the perfect time to strike. A small crowd gathered above to watch the mismatched pair fight.

“Maker have mercy,” Marquise Couillard gasped, “Is this not dangerous? He is so much larger than she.”

“He is,” Ellana grinned, “But she is the only one in the Inquisition who can beat him. Adrienne is highly skilled.”

“I see that,” the lord murmured, taking in the spectacle. Dorian could almost see the gears in the old man’s head turning as he watched Aerin and Bull spar, the former finally regaining some of her grace and fluidity as the latter pushed her to discover her limits. “Ah, Inquisitor, I have heard rumors you will attend the ball at the Winter Palace in two months? Is this so?”

“Yes, my lord. We wish to be present to witness the peace talks, and support the Empire to the best
of our ability. If we are to stand against Corypheus, Thedas must be united.”

“Very well said, Inquisitor. Your cousin… will she be there as well?” Emerald green eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Yes. Why?”

“Merely curious, Inquisitor. She is an oddity, and I confess myself intrigued. Beautiful, talented with a blade, yet I wonder how she will do in the Game? If she excels, it would be a deadly combination. A great asset to have on one’s side.”

“Her side is with the Inquisition.” Ellana’s voice was curt, wary of what this lord might be plotting. *Cullen will kill him if he asks her to marry him. Plus, ew. He’s so old.*

“Yes, yes, of course,” waving away her concern, his gaze remained locked onto the human woman, who was now taunting the Qunari, hovering just out of his reach. “But, pardon me for saying, the Inquisition will not last forever. What will she do then?”

“Whatever she wishes to do,” the petite elf scowled at the human, patience wearing thin.

Startled at the tone, the Marquis glanced over at the Inquisitor, observing the extent of her annoyance. “She is lucky,” he murmured softly, “to have such a champion as yourself, Inquisitor. All I meant to say, it helps to have options.” Her stony face immediately melted at the comment, blushing furiously.

“Yes, it does, Marquis Couillard. Forgive me. We are both rather protective of each other.”

“That is not such a bad thing. What a life you must lead, always in the spotlight, constant demands being placed on your person, pulled in every direction. I imagine it helps to have a friend who only sees you as the person you were.”

Ellana snorted, fondly watching her sister, now laying prostate on the trampled grass, a victorious Iron Bull crowing over her. Aerin kicked him in his knees, laughing as the large man grunted and fell. Grinning, the Inquisitor replied, “I’m sure Adrienne will forever see me as eight years old, skinned knees, crying in the dirt.”

“The great Inquisitor actually cries?” Doriana elbowed her good naturedly.

“It’s a secret, altus. Count yourself lucky you know and are not dead,” she teased.

“I need a bath,” Aerin announced, grimacing at the new bruises that were already starting to darken over her skin. “Or maybe five. Marquis,” she bowed, “Please pardon my appearance. I will just be at the river.”

“I’ll come,” Ellana offered, “otherwise you might find more bandits to kill in the meantime.”

Giggling, the girls wandered back up the slope, leaving the men to their own devices.

Frowning, the Iron Bull studied the Marquis, who was intently watching Aerin as they disappeared. He had noticed the lord observing her while they sparred as well. He was planning something. Best to let Red know, have her keep an eye on his affairs. Perhaps it would be nothing. Maybe it will be something as simple as a marriage proposal that Aerin would giggle about while the Commander tried to glare the parchment to death. But perhaps… The lord accepted the plate of food that a scout handed him, daintily picking at the grilled bear as they waited for the women to return.
At the river, Ellana sighed in pleasure, wiggling her bare toes in the cool water, watching her sister sponge off the dirt that liberally covered her hair and exposed skin. “Something’s up with that noble. Think he might propose.” Snorting, Aerin rung out her hair.

“He can try. Seems like a harmless old man though. Marquis. That’s one rank under Duke. Wonder how important he is. I’ll have to ask Josephine when we get back. Oh, I told him we might be able to spare some men to escort him home. Can we? I feel bad leaving him on his own.”

Nodding, Ellana laid back on the shore. The stars were just visible through the thick canopy above them, twinkling merrily in the dark sky. A gust of wind suddenly shook the leaves, the beat of wings and a scream reverberating through the forest, a shadowed shape flying high above the treetops, silhouetted against the moon.

“Dragon. Of course there’s a fucking dragon.” Changing its direction, the giant beast swung north, heading for a clearing past the giants.

“Hey, it matches your eyes. Blue and gold. Bet it’d make some pretty, fancy new armor for you.”

“Hmm.” Aerin stepped out of the river, patting herself dry with a coarse, roughspun towel, ignoring the Herald’s smirk. “I guess we could kill it. Alright, let’s go back, keep Bull from wrecking the camp in his excitement. He'll probably already have pissed on the tents like a damn puppy.”

Chapter End Notes

I always bring Bull with me to the Emerald Graves just for his owl line. Kills me every time. Or when you take him to the Storm Coast and he asks if you need a hand by that giant hand statue.
A neat column of carriages and horses moved at a sedate pace down the Imperial Highway, wagons lumbering behind laden with foot soldiers, trunks, and supplies for the small army. A tall blonde man clad in silverite plate armor, covered in a deep blood red tabard embroidered with the golden eye of the Inquisition, rode at the front, flanked by a stern woman with close cropped black in the armor of the Seekers and an equally stoic black bearded man, in a simpler version of the blonde’s Inquisition armor. “They look so bored.”

“Focus, if you please, Inquisitor. You too, Adrienne. Duke Prosper’s son is…”


“Very good, Adrienne. The head of the Council of Heralds, Inquisitor?”

“Um.” She chewed on her hair, sighing as Leliana calmly tugged the strands out of her mouth. “Oh! Bastien! De Ghislain! Vivienne’s lover.”

“Correct. Adrienne, the houses of Celene’s northern supporters?”

“Er… Ghislain, Chevin, Morrac, and… d’Argent?”

“Right. Who is the Silver Lady of Churneau?”

Groaning, Ellana beat her head against the carriage wall, stuffing another macaron into her mouth in lieu of answering. Marquis Couillard had delivered on his promise to Aerin and sent a crate of the airy confections in thanks just days before their departure. Ellana had declared he was her new favorite lord and that Aerin should marry him if he asked. Or maybe she should ask.

Patting her little sister on the head sympathetically, Aerin replied, “Comtesse Solange Montbelliard.”

Sighing, Josephine leaned back. “Well, at least one of you will be ready. Hopefully Adrienne can distract the nobles well enough that they won’t even notice the Inquisitor inadvertently insulting some duchess’ ancestors and sparking another civil war in the process.”

“Everything will be fine, Josie,” Leliana smiled. “Relax and do try to enjoy yourself.”

“I shall try. I just worry, and a thousand things could go wrong, and thank goodness we left Sera back at Skyhold with the Iron Bull and his Chargers, because if she were here, I’d- oh. Right. Relax.”

“Have a macaron,” Ellana suggested.

Shaking her head, Aerin grimaced at the sweets. “How are you still eating those? We’re going to have to sew you into your waistcoat at this rate.”

“Iths goig to be worf it,” the Inquisitor declared around a mouthful. Josephine fanned herself in horror, looking for all the world as if she were about to faint.

“Sweet Andraste, Herald, please do not talk with your mouthful at the ball.”
Halamshiral sparkled. The paved streets of the High Quarter, clean and swept, were brightly lit, garlands of flowers adorning all the window sills and balconies that lined the avenue to the Winter Palace. Those not attending the ball eagerly crowded the streets, craning to catch of glimpse of the Inquisitor and her retinue. It was almost easy to imagine a massacre had not just taken place here. Almost.

Schooling her face into a mask, Aerin’s simmering fury at the nobility was barely visible to the average person. Leliana was most assuredly not one of them. Squeezing her hand affectionately, the spymaster offered a small, tight smile in understanding. *Later, her gesture seemed to say.* *Restore Orlais, ensure her safety, and we will deal with them later.* Nodding, the other woman’s stilted posture relaxed by a hair, face smoothing further into neutrality.

Clattering to a stop, the door opened and the Commander leapt down from his stallion to stand at attention, a hand held out for the women. He was dressed in a snug military style waistcoat, deep red with gold epaulets, a deep cobalt sash, and a camel leather belt and gloves, same as the rest of the men, blonde waves slicked back into neat order. The women wore variations on the men’s uniform, a military style coat fitted at the waist, flaring to the knees, open from the diaphragm up, showing the modest neckline of their corseted bodices, and the ruffle of lace underneath. While the rest of their coats were the same blood red, Ellana’s was the reverse, a midnight blue coat, tied with a dark red sash.

A slender hand grasping Cullen’s, his eyes widened a fraction, noticing the exposed swell of the top of her breasts, her bodice more daringly cut that the others’ in accordance with the current fashion in court, not even accounting for the fact that she was more endowed than the other women present.

“How am I supposed to focus tonight on security with you waltzing around like that,” he muttered, strain evident in his voice.

“Just for tonight, Cullen. Then I’m all yours,” Aerin smirked, watching the hunger darken his amber eyes.

A throat cleared behind them, as Josephine pointedly glared at the couple. Caught, Cullen dropped his lover’s hand, bowing to the ambassador as he assisted her out of the carriage, Ellana giggling at him from behind the Antivan.

“Alright. We’re here. We can do this. You can do this. Remember, Inquisitor, all eyes will be on you. The court will be dissecting every move, every word you do or do not say. Do not give them reason to doubt you. Perhaps we will make it out of here alive yet.”

“No pressure,” the Dalish woman winced.


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The masks were weird, Aerin decided, bowing to yet another noble, gracing them with her most winning smile. Spotting her sister trying to inconspicuously sneak in the ballroom, she wound her way through the maze of silk and taffeta and gilt, head held high as she approached Leliana and Ellana, heels clacking against the marble floor.

“I think the Empress has a elf fetish. Found these little halla statuettes everywhere. I’m keeping
one. I can keep one, right Leliana? Look how cute!” The Inquisitor waved the little stone halla in the spymaster’s face, Aerin sighing as she reached over to pluck a leaf out of her sister’s neat braid.

“Discretion, please, Inquisitor,” the bard muttered, gaze darting about to see if anyone was watching. “What did you find?”

“Schedule, for Briala. A reference to something going wrong ‘down there’. Gaspard asking Celene to leave Briala out of the negotiations. And Celene asking a Lady M to remain by her side tonight to guard against Gaspard. Lady M?”

“Celene’s occult advisor. A dangerous apostate of considerable skill. Her name is Morrigan.”

Jerking back, visibly startled, Aerin stared at her friend. “Morrigan is here? In an Orlesian court? Willingly?” The spymaster nodded.

“Oh, I think I just met her. She gave me a key for the servant’s quarter, that she took off the body of a Venatori. Is it a trap? Should I go?”

“Go, but be careful. Take some others with you. Solas, Blackwall, and Cassandra I think would be best. Dorian and Vivienne are of more use out here. And Cole. Wherever he is lurking. Adrienne, why are you not mingling?” Narrowing her eyes and resisting the urge to stick out her tongue, Aerin sketched a bow, flouncing off in the directions of the nobility, grumbling internally.

They are like a mass of peacocks, strutting and preening, completely oblivious to the state of the world, safely ensconced within their mansions and villas, protected by their gold and silks and lack of pointed ears. This entire ball is a frivolous waste of energy and funds. The city remains a mass graveyard, and no one here cares, because no elf was a noble. And these are the people we are trying to save. Better to just let the country burn. It was rather beautiful here, she would admit that. The architecture itself was stunning, all graceful columns, soaring arches, intricate tapestries, gleaming marble, shimmering draperies, and sparkling crystals. A particularly large wall hanging caught her eye, halting her progress as she took the time to admire how the thin threads wove together so artfully to form the picturesque hunting scene, regal men on horseback chasing a pride of lions across the grassy plains.

“Beautiful, is it not?” A older woman approached Aerin, pale gray eyes glinting behind her golden mask, thin, painted lips curved up in a bemused smile. “Commissioned by Emperor Etienne Valmont I, in 7:92 Storm.”

“Amazing, to have remained in such immaculate condition all these years,” Aerin murmured, turning to bow deeply to the noblewoman. “I am Adrienne Iseri, my lady, of the Inquisition.”

“A mystery indeed. I am known as the Dowager.”

“Marquise Mantillon, it is an honor to make your acquaintance.” A delighted laugh bubbled forth from the stately lady.

“Such a charming young woman. I spoke to your Inquisitor earlier. I fear the poor girl is in over her head.”

Aerin recognized the condescending tone underlying the noblewoman’s seeming concern. Forcing her features to remain nonchalant, she merely smiled. “The Inquisitor is a woman of many talents, my lady. I have every faith in the Herald’s ability.”

“I am sure, my dear. Ah, Duke Germain de Chalons! It is an honor, Your Grace.”
A small sausage of a man, stuffed in a dark green and gold velvet doublet veritably bursting at the seams, with a matching golden mask inlaid with emeralds and feathers, paused to greet the Dowager, nodding at Aerin, who properly bowed.

“Inquisition, hmm? Tell me girl, who does your organization support? Celene, the usurper? Or Orlais’ rightful emperor?” His watery eyes regarded her, raking over her figure with an ill disguised leer.

“I cannot speak for the Inquisitor, Your Grace, as I am not privileged to be granted entry into the inner workings of the Inquisition.”

“You, personally, then,” the duke of sausages sneered.

With a coy smile, she tilted her head at the man. “The Grand Duke seems a worthy man, well respected by his chevaliers. Such a man would hold Orlais well, bringing peace and stability to the ravaged lands, something from which the country would indeed benefit.” Satisfied, the duke waddled off, to inflict his odor upon some other unwilling guest.

The Lady Mantillon regarded the younger woman with a begrudging air of respect at her clever response, just as another man swept in between them. “Pardon me, my lady, but may I steal your companion away for a dance?”

“But of course, Lord Couillard. It was a pleasure, Mistress Iseri. I will hear more from you, I am sure.” With a delicate tilt of her chin, the Marquise floated off. Gracefully placing her hand in the nobleman’s gloved hand, she followed him out onto the dance floor, taking up the opposite position across the man for the allemande that rang out from the band.

“Beautiful, skilled, and clever- I was right, you are a force to be reckoned with.” Her laugh was crisp and pure, drawing the attention of the dancers closest to the pair.

“You flatter me, Your Grace. I am but a simple woman, doing my part to help guard against the chaos.” Linking arms, she smiled up at the man through her full lashes, kicking up her feet in time with the music as they spun.

“For now,” he agreed, switching arms with her, “But what of after? Will you return to wherever you lived previously? Take up the same occupation?”

Breaking away from his arms, she rested her hands on her hips, pirouetting in a circle around the Marquis, before being drawn back in. “The future is still uncertain, that is all I know. I have no desire to return to Tevinter, although I suppose I could go back to Antiva. It is much warmer there,” she giggled. “But I will remain with the Inquisition for as long as they have need of me.”

“No plans for a husband? Family?” he seemed genuinely surprised.

“I had not considered that much,” Aerin confessed.

His gaze softened behind his navy mask, eyes just beginning to go rheumy gazing at her bare face. “Might I make a suggestion, then? I am old. And currently without an heir. You are a capable woman, well suited to the skills necessary to run an estate. I would propose an alliance of marriage. You would be secure in your future, and my business would be guarded against the predators in my family tree that would destroy my life’s work. Just-“ he placed a finger against her lips, “think on it? You do not have to answer me tonight. But please, consider it. It would serve us both well.” Dipping her into a stately flourish, he bowed to her, to the degree befitting equals. “My lady, I thank you for the dance.” Forcing a graceful curtsy, Aerin quickly exited the dance floor, only to
find Cullen’s dark gaze pinning her to the floor.

Raising a brow at the assorted nobility gathered around him, she watched as one man pointedly stared at his backside, mouth slightly open. Wincing at her expression, he shrugged ever so slightly, before jerking forward. “Did you just… grab my bottom?” The nobleman behind him grinned unabashedly.

_I will kill them all. Creators help me, I will._ An arm suddenly looped through hers. “Come along, my dear. Have you seen the garden tonight? It’s quite lovely.”

“Dorian. Leliana sent you to fetch me away, didn’t she?”

“Perhaps. Or maybe I just missed a friendly face. All these Orlesians watching me as if they expect me to slice my arm open here just to open a bottle of wine. Or devour their children. Quite amusing, for the first three hours. Trying, after that.” His eye twitched, as it did when he was repressing his annoyance, the chill of the night air rising up to greet them as they exited the palace hall. “How is our favorite elf doing?”

“Solas? Think he’s fine. You miss him?”

“Maker, no,” Dorian rolled his eyes, picking invisible lint off his coat. “Did you see his hat? I think it’s possessed. You should stab it.”

Hiding a giggle behind her hand, Aerin leaned against the railing, watching the vapid nobles mill about, speaking of banal things, ears catching parts of a muttered conversation nearby.

“It sickens me to think of the chaos those maleficarum are causing across the Empire.”

“Even you cannot deny that the templars abandoned the faithful in their darkest hour. How can you condone that? They are the ones who should be brought to heel.”

Interest piqued, Aerin tapped Dorian on the arm, indicating she was leaving, and sashayed up to the two noblemen standing secluded by the side wall. “Pardon me, my lords, I could not help but overhearing that you favor reining the templars in? The Inquisition is also interested in much of the same, if an alliance would interest you.”

“Oh, truly?” One of the noblemen turned an appraising eye on the woman. “Hmm. I will contact your Lady Nightingale then. I have many… assets that might benefit the Inquisition.”

“Any support would be welcome, my lord.” Bowing, she offered the men a sweet smile, sauntering back to Dorian, who watched her with an amused smirk.

“Any person would think you are enjoying this ball far too much for a mere commoner.”

“These nobles. Think they’re so far above the rest of us. Elves. Qunari. It’s disgusting. How easily they are led.” Wrinkling her nose ever so slightly, she sniffed in an excellent imitation of the altus. “There have been a few I enjoyed conversing with. Sharp minds. Like the Dowager. She’s had nine husbands, you know. I like her.” The mage simply chuckled at that. “I’d better go back in and schmooze more before Josephine drags me back in by my ear.”

Leaving Dorian to his own devices, Aerin strolled back into the palace, making her way to the ballroom, absorbing the tidbits of gossip that were dropped along the way. Cullen remained in his corner, only a potted plant to guard his honor now, his face a study of long suffering patience that barely hid the rage underneath. He would also see this place burn. Dodging the nobility, who were now crowding into the ballroom, she offered her stressed lover a tiny, hopeful smile. “Almost
over,” she murmured. Amber eyes melted by a fraction as he took in her beautiful face.

“My lady, I must say, you are the most ravishing person in here tonight. Excepting the Commander, of course.” Another strutting rooster of a lord reached for her hand, dropping a slimy, wet kiss to her skin. Trying not to gag, she surreptitiously wiped his spittle off on her pants as she bowed to the noble.

“My lord is too kind. My, how this place is packed now. Is something about to happen?” she feigned innocence.

His eyes greedily drank in her form, oblivious to the thundercloud behind him that was Cullen Rutherford. “The Empress will soon speak to the gathered crowd, but…” he snaked an arm around her waist, pulling her in, overwhelming her senses with his nauseating cologne and rank breath. “It will not be important. We could sneak off, get to know each other better, hmm?”

Gingerly trying to disengage from his eel-like grip, Aerin giggled nervously, trying to think of the best way to disembowel the man without offending him or the surrounding nobility. “Ah, my lord, I must admit I’m curious to hear the Empress’ speech. It is not so often I get to listen to one as august as she.”

“It is the same old routine,” the man insisted, trying to stare down her shirt. “I promise you, I am much more intriguing.” A heavy hand wrapped around his forearm.

“The lady said no.” Cullen’s eyes snapped fire, teeth grinding so hard she could hear it from where she stood.

“Jealous, Commander? You can come, as well,” he winked. Just as she thought her lover would snap and break the man across his knee, a voice rang out, announcing that Her Imperial Majesty would be addressing the court. Ellana ran up, bow still strapped to her back, slightly breathless, motioning for them to follow her, Leliana and Josephine close behind.

“Pardon us, my lord. Duty calls,” Aerin bobbed a quick curtsy as she grabbed Cullen’s hand, sweaty and clammy, pulling him to the other women.

"Damn this place to hell," he muttered, still seething. “What’s going on? The Empress is about to speak.”

“The Grand Duchess is the assassin,” Ellana panted. “Don’t let her near Celene.”

“The Duchess Florianne?” Cullen was visibly startled at that revelation, the smarmy lord from earlier forgotten in the face of his duty. “At once, Inquisitor.” As he sped off to order his men into position, the Dalish woman turned weary eyes to the rest, blood splatters barely dried marring her jacket and pants.

“Almost over. Bloody ashes. I just want to throw this place to the wolves. Corypheus can have it. All of them. Ugh. Let’s go. She won’t go down easily.”

Nodding, Aerin moved into place, feeling for the daggers that were strapped securely to her back under her coat, listening as Empress Celene began her address.

“This would not have been possible without the efforts of many. Dear cousin, step forward.”

“Grand Duchess, stand down!” The Inquisitor’s voice rang out into the shocked silence. Florianne’s face burned red, as soldiers began to surround her. Whipping a wickedly long stiletto out from her full sleeve, she plunged the thin blade backwards into the guard behind her,
effortlessly dispatching the rest that lunged to attack her.

“Now!”

Harlequins, faces concealed by paint and masks, melted out of the walls, deftly slicing through the Inquisition’s ranks. Aerin watched, horrified, as their people fell, moaning in agony, blood pouring from the deep wounds. Anger flooded her veins, all her fury and pent up frustration from the night channeling into a single, blinding point.

“Cullen! Protect the people! Aerin, Cassandra, Dorian, with me!” Shaking off her thoughts and ranting, Aerin sprinted out, following her sister beyond the palace doors, into the courtyard, where the Grand Duchess, her dress cast off to reveal rogue’s leathers underneath, waited, bow drawn, a smirk on her elegant face.

“You stole the moment of my triumph, just as you stole the demon army from Erimond. And now you’ve chased a defenseless woman into the garden. Are you happy?”

“Defenseless?” Ellana stared incredulously, glancing down at the arrow aimed for her chest. “Right. Whatever. Grand Duchess, we have the palace. Surrender. We don’t have to do this.”

“Surrender? Now?” She let her arrow fly, Ellana narrowly dodging the wooden projectile. With a lilting laugh, the noblewoman disappeared into a cloud of smoke, agilely leaping further back into the yard, grinning as the gates slammed shut with a definitive clank. “I think not. I just need to kill you.”

“Why do they never surrender? It’s always, die this, and kill that. Same old trite fair,” Dorian sighed melodramatically, reaching for his staff.

Cassandra grunted, sword hilt firmly grasped in her hand. “It is because they are all idiots.”

Snorting, Aerin agreed.

“Soon to be dead idiots. Kaffas. She’s spry for a woman of her age.” Resisting the overwhelming urge to just freeze her in place, or maybe set her aflame along with the rest of the palace, she instead charged the rogue, drawing the attention to herself along with the Seeker, Dorian and Ellana skirting the edges of the yard, trying to pin down the would-be assassin.

A well place arrow through the calf, and a sword through the stomach did the trick quite nicely. Twisting the blade as she slid it out of the stunned duchess, watching the life fade from her eyes, Aerin casually wiped the blood off on her discarded dress. “It’s over. What now?”

“Now…” the Inquisitor groaned. “I want to just kill them all. But I can’t. So I will blackmail them all into cooperating, so help me Elgar’nan. And then, we are never coming to Halamshiral. Ever. Again.”

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Cullen watched as the Inquisitor re-entered the ballroom, tired and drained but determined as she marched up to the Empress of Orlais and all but dragged her, Gaspard, and Briala out onto the balcony. And the most powerful people in Orlais meekly followed the Dalish elf. He had now seen everything. Glancing back, Aerin had slipped into the chamber, along with Cassandra and Dorian, heading for him with a smirk. Whirling around, he demanded of Leliana, “It’s over now?”

Grinning, Sister Nightingale waved her hand. “Go to her, Cullen. Just please, use discretion.” The words barely left her mouth before he all but sprinted off, grabbing his lover up in a sweeping embrace, crushing his lips to hers, the astonished and scandalized whispers of the nobility fading
around them as the rest of the crowd disappeared from their view.

“Hello,” Aerin murmured.

“Hello,” he nudged her nose with his. “I missed you.”

“Oh? I couldn't tell,” a wide grin split her face. “Oh, Leliana’s making a ‘I’m-going-to-shank-both-of-you’ face.” Reluctantly pulling back, he kept her hand firmly ensconced within his.

“Care to take a turn about the garden, my lady?” he gallantly bowed, smiling for first time all night. Maybe for the last four months. Who knew.

“I’d be delighted.” Wrapped up in each other, the couple strolled outside, beyond the palace, onto the grassy hill below. Music faintly trickled out of the building, flowing over the land in sweet refrains of a stately waltz.

“May I have this dance?” Cullen proffered a hand, bending at the hip and smirking up at her.

“You dance?” Pleasantly surprised, she slipped her hand into his, relishing in the feel of his firm chest pressed against hers, the simple scent of oakmoss and elderflower filling her head, chasing away the perfumes of the wealthy. This is so much better.

“For you, anything.” Locked in his warm arms, she was content to remain outside with him for the rest of her life, gently swaying in no particular rhythm, to the tune of their own heartbeats, his head buried against her hair, her face in his shoulder. “Maker, I know it’s only been months but it feels like years. And then tonight, seeing all those nobles trying to stake their claim on you, I wanted…” he trailed off helplessly.

“One of them proposed to me. Don’t fret, love, he was old enough to be my grandfather. I have no desire to accept. But at least none of them pinched my ass,” she raised an eyebrow at him, reaching her hand around to demonstrate. Jumping, Cullen lowered his head sheepishly.

“They are relentless. I paid them less than no attention. I only crave your affections after all.”

“Good,” her voice left her in a breathy sigh as she pulled his handsome face down to hers again, this time for a deeper, more heated kiss than the one previously, hands gripping his back, tugging him in as close as possible, desire clouding their minds, heightening their senses. It was almost like coming home.

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A sad pair of near rheumy eyes watched them as they slowly danced, then locked themselves in a deep embrace, lost in each other. Ah. She’s in love with the Commander, of all men. Hmm. It maybe time to change my tactics instead. Nodding to himself, Lord Couillard left the couple alone, a bounce coloring his steps as he walked back inside, a plan coming together within his still sharp mind.

Chapter End Notes

Things start to get crazy as of the next chapter. For everyone waiting, Alistair will be back next weekish. :D
The world was blisteringly cold, and glaringly white. For days, a blizzard had ravaged their corner of the Frostbacks, effectively halting the Inquisition’s progress at tracking Samson and Corypheus. The stone ramparts and inner courtyard sparkled, sounds muffled, turning the place into a magical wonderland. Magical my ass, Aerin grumbled. Fucking snow. She sent a quick thank you to the gods that she had finally convinced Cullen to move to her room, so she didn’t wake up freezing and covered in snow from that blasted hole in his roof he refused to fix.

A warm hand snaked out, wrapping around her naked waist, pulling her into his overheated skin. A pleased rumble vibrated against her back, his length twitching against the curve of her ass. Gently, wandering fingers trailed up her stomach to tease at the underside of her breasts, a pair of soft lips finding her ear. “Good morning,” his deep baritone murmured, as he gently nibbled her earlobe.

“I could get used to this,” a smile inched its way across her face, enjoying his roaming hands and tender ministrations. With an arch of her back, she pressed her rear firmly against his stiffening member, a shivering running up her spine at his resulting groan. His roughened palm skimmed back down her smooth curves, finding the source of her heat, still dripping with his seed from last night’s activities. Moans now laced with dark hunger, he gently teased her folds apart, reveling in her squirms and faint hitches of her breath, as she ground her hips against his fingers, seeking more friction. “Cullen… please…”

“As my lady wishes,” His grin was feral as he rolled her on her back, covering her delicious skin with his own muscled bulk, dragging his swollen head over her clit, teasing at her core, coating himself in her arousal. She whimpered, and he broke. Sliding inside with one swift motion, her wet heat gripping his shaft tightly, they both let out tiny sighs at the familiar welcoming sensation and the perfect, snug fit. He took her slowly this time, a departure from their usual fast and hard and rough animalistic rutting, eyes locked as he torturously thrust into her, rolling his hips every time he was deeply hilted within her, eliciting the sweetest gasps.

Maker, he loved her. Despite their constant bickering, the petty arguments, immature, snappish remarks, she had stayed with him. She loved him, too. He needed her, more than he ever needed the lyrium. With her, inside of her, the world outside fell away, the cravings and withdrawals faded to a dull ache. She was his drug now. His everything. He couldn’t imagine life without her. Didn’t want to.

“Marry me.”

Her darkened eyes, hazy with lust and pleasure, widened as she processed his statement. Lifting her firm ass, he thrust even deeper within her. “Ah! Wh- what?”

“Marry me.” He meant for it to be a question, a sweet, soft, tender murmur, but it came out as a hard growl. Seeing her like this, slowly unraveling around him, at his mercy, always brought out his darker nature. A large hand came up to gently squeeze her throat, forcing a breathy gasp from
her lips. He trembled at the sound. Bringing his finger to her swollen pearl, he traced delicate circles, just short of the pressure she craved. “Marry. Me.”


He froze, twitching within her. “Yes?”

Her smile was hesitant, unease simmering just below her skin. “Yes. I’ll marry you.” Oblivous to her apprehension, a massive grin split his face, his free hand coming up to stroke her cheek, expression filled with wonder.

“You’ll… Maker’s breath.” He reared back, slamming into her, consumed with urge to claim her, mark her, devour her completely. His cock, now impossibly hard, rubbed against her in that perfect way that made her scream and her toes curl and her mind fog. Her pleasure engulfed her, penetrating her very soul, practically ripping her consciousness away from her body. Vaguely aware of his hips stuttering, she felt his fingers dig hard enough into her skin to bruise, as he roared his completion, pumping her completely full with his seed. She was lost in a haze, floating back down to reality, her heart hammering in her chest, feeling Cullen collapse on top of her before rolling to his side, cradling her gently to his chest, still firmly planted inside of her.

“Children. Do you want children?”

“I…” the question was too much for her overloading brain right now. “Don’t know?”

“We’ll talk about it later then,” Cullen sighed happily, nuzzling into her hair. “Mrs. Rutherford. Maker’s breath, I never imagined this would happen, not to me. I love you so much. That you would belong me to… Mine. Forever.”

She couldn’t figure out why those last words filled her with such a sinking dread. Fighting the urge to flee, she merely laid her head against his arm, whispering, “I love you, too.”

***

The next few days passed in a blur. Her old friends had been confused and hurt at the fact she had kept her transformation a secret, Varric more than anyone, but they understood. Well, everyone except Solas and Vivienne. Solas had been even more rigid and aloof than he normally was, brushing off Ellana’s concerns, disappearing from Skyhold for a week in the closest thing Aerin had ever seen to a temper tantrum in a full grown man. Vivienne had just sneered at the revelation that the pleasant woman she had been growing fond of was actually the crude and unpolished Inquisitor’s sister. They alone bypassed the tavern on the night of the festivities for her and the Commander’s engagement.

Varric watched the inhabitants of Skyhold jubilantly celebrating, congratulating the couple, while marveling in hushed tones at the fact that he had so suddenly gotten over the elf, choosing to marry her cousin instead. Was it because she was a human? Where was Aerin, anyways? The whole situation was odd, but it was an excuse to drink, so no one pursued that line of questioning. The dwarf sighed, watching his old friend, happy that she had been restored, but she still looked… trapped. And he would bet his last sovereign it had something to do with the former templar.

“You see it, too?” Varric nodded at the Iron Bull, who had also been studying the pair. Shaking his head, the Qunari tossed his drink back, the burning smell of the maaras-lok reaching across the bar.
“It’s not good. They’re too much alike. Both nursing the crippling wounds of their past. They can’t help each other. She’s an inferno and he’s a tornado. They will destroy each other in the end.”

“So what do we do, Tiny?”

“Nothing. Could try to talk to them, but doubt either would listen. Just gotta hope they come to their senses before it’s too late.”

“Oy, you lot. Why the long faces? Should be happy, yeah? Aerin’s free, and getting hitched to Commander stick-up-his-britches. Or less a stick now. Twig, maybe?”


“Yeah, whatever.”

“As long as she’s happy, we’re happy,” affirmed the dwarf. *Andraste help her. I just want her to be happy.*

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The elven mage frowned at the human. “What did you say?”

“Uh, I said your spell looked pretty?”

“I haven’t cast anything yet. I was only preparing to cast.”

“Really? Because I saw something. Like glowing yarn. It was cool.”

Aerin ground to a halt on the stairs leading to the rookery, intent on finding Leliana to force the bard to spend some time with her, as she was feeling lonely ever since Ellana had left for the Emprise du Lion with Dorian, the Iron Bull, and Sera. Whipping around to see the people that were talking, she spotted Fiona, the Grand Enchanter, and… Michael Turner.

“What do you see, Michael?” She slowly approached him, weaving a simple healing spell. “Compared to Fiona’s spell?”

“Um…” he squinted at her. “Fiona’s is more… rigid? Your strands are more chaotic, more similar to… vines! Nature, I guess. I’m not sure what I’m seeing. Magic? I never saw it before.”

She nodded, Fiona’s narrowing on them both. “Care to take a walk with me, Michael? Fiona, would you excuse us?”

The Grand Enchanter sighed. “I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me what’s going on, are you?”

“I might,” Aerin shrugged. “I did have something I wanted to discuss with you anyways. Later, perhaps?”

“Of course, Mistress Adrienne. You know where to find me.”

Turning to the befuddled man, Aerin motioned, “Go get your coat. We’re going to take a walk. And everything I tell you on this walk is strictly confidential. If you breathe a word of this to anyone, I will end you. Understood?” Eyes wide, he rushed to nod, all but sprinting away to his room. Scant minutes later, he bolted back into the main hall, cloak flapping behind him. “Let’s go.”

Silently, the pair walked down the stairs, through the muddy snow blanketing the courtyard, and
out the open front gates. Cullen frowned from his vantage point on the ramparts, watching them leave. Body tightening, he marched into his room, removed his clanging metal armor, pulling his winter cloak around him, and slipped out to silently follow his fiancé and the Fade walker, suspicion clouding his heart.

On a normal day, Aerin would have definitely noticed the sounds of someone following her. But today was anything but. Once she deemed them far enough away, she paused, leaning against a boulder, observing the nervous man as he fidgeted, shifting from one foot to the other.

“Relax, Michael. I’m not going to hurt you or anything. I just wanted to… talk. The weaves you see. It’s magic being woven. I can see it too.”

“Oh.” He kicked at a rock nearby. “Is that so odd? I mean, it’s probably normal here right? Crazy world, full of elves and magic and dragons and demons.”

“No. As far as I know, you and I are the only ones. I’m curious. Do you mind if I check something? I wonder if you’re a mage as well.” His eyes widened as he backed away.

“Uh… wouldn’t I know if I was? Like, shoot fire out of my hands or something?”

“Magic usually manifests for the first time when you’re under extreme stress or pressure. You might not have reached that point yet. It won’t hurt, promise.” Hesitantly nodding, he watched her as she wove a delicate spell, like lace, that settled over his skin with a faint prickle. “Well, I’ll be. You are a mage. Deep mana reserves, too.”

Rubbing his arms, trying to dispel the strange sensation, he glanced at her face, pensive and brooding. “So, what does that mean? If we’re the only ones who can see it?”

“Because we’re the only ones from Earth here. That I know of, at least.”

Michael sagged against a tree, staring in bewilderment at the woman. “What?”

“Adrienne Iseri. Born in South Carolina, May 21, 1986. I came to Thedas via an accident, when I was 11.”

“Fucking hell. Jesus Christ.” He gaped at her, not daring to breathe, mouth opening and closing like a fish. “Does anyone else know that you’re from another world?”

“Leliana. And one other, but he’s not in Skyhold.”

“She knew, all along, that I wasn’t lying then? When I was imprisoned?” Shock was giving way to anger.

“I did. It’s why you were kept clean and fed, and not tortured. You’re welcome, by the way.” Raising an eyebrow at his glower, Aerin sighed. “What was she supposed to do? Say ‘oh yes, I know he’s not lying, I have a friend who said the same thing!’? No one would believe her. You had to prove yourself. There… was another woman. From Nebraska. Jennifer. Ten years ago. She died, shortly after crossing over here. I don’t know how or why we’re getting pulled here. If it’s an accident or not. But you are the same as me. You need to be trained to control your magic at least.”

Groaning, Michael pitched forward, falling to his knees. “This is all bullshit. Wait, you weren’t even in Skyhold when I was locked up. How do you know I was kept fed and clean?”

“I was. I was an elf, back then. Aerin.” Aerin agreed.
“How- what- huh?”

“Just… it’s not important. Forget I told you. My name is Adrienne, and that’s it, okay?”

Shaking his head, he pushed himself back to sit, leaning against the rough tree bark, ignoring the snow seeping through his clothes. “So, what now?”

“Now…” she let out a long exhale. “Now, we find you a teacher. You learn to cast and control your magic. You don’t tell anyone about me, understand? It’s just easier like that. People will question Ellana if one of her closest companions is not from here.”

“I’m guessing you’re not really her family, huh?”

“Family isn’t always blood.”

“True,” he nodded. “Fine. It helps, you know. Knowing I’m not alone. You were 11, you said? Damn. I can’t even imagine.”

“No, you can’t” Aerin sighed. “Come on, let’s go back. I’ll talk to Fiona, see if she knows someone who could help.”

***

He thundered up to her, catching her in the main hall, not long after she and Michael got back. “We need to talk. Now.” Hands wrapped around her wrist in a bruising grip as he dragged her back down the stairs, out of the keep, oblivious to the whispers that followed them.

“Oh! Cullen, you’re hurting me. Let go!” He couldn’t hear her, not over the roaring of his blood pounding through his veins, or his heart, rattling his chest, violent enough to drown out all sense. Forcing her into the clearing she and Michael had just been in, he flung her away, expression cold and unyielding even as she slammed into the boulder. Rubbing her shoulder, she stared up at him as if he were a stranger.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Towering over her, his body was clenched, veins bulging across his skin, voice low and menacing. “Why did you not tell me you were not of this world, but you told him?” Growling, he advanced on her now trembling form. “What is he to you? That you could trust him, but not me? The man you claim to love? The man you are supposed to marry?!“

Aerin flattened herself against the stone, unable to breathe for the fear running through her body. “Cullen, he’s nothing to me, I promise. I do love you, I do. I just… never knew how to tell you?”

He sneered, “And yet you came right out and told him easily enough! How many times have you fucked him, hm? Spread your legs that you told me were mine for him?”

Snapping, Aerin snarled, rearing back to shove him away. “This fucking shit again? I told you, time and time again, I am sleeping with no one except you, fucking templar. Not like I would have time or energy, with your insatiable appetite.”

“I am not a templar. And who knows if you had energy, Maker knows you’re enough of a whore already. Always begging for my cock like the wanton harlot you are.” Aerin saw red. With an arm that was not hers, she lashed out, feeling her palm connect with his stubbled cheek with a loud crack. Stunned, they both stared at each for a brief moment, a red mark in the shape her hand appearing across his face.

When was the last time someone dared to slap him? It was… Kinloch. The desire demons. They
tortured him like this, staring at him with their beautiful eyes, raping his unwilling body and mind, degrading him with their taunts and slaps. The nightmares of the memories drowned out all self control. He pounced.

His fingers wrapped around her slender throat, forcing her down to her knees, the cold, icy snow seeping through her leathers. “You will not strike me again, do you understand me? You are my fiancé, and soon to be my wife. I will not have you disrespect me in such a manner again. You. Are. Mine.”

She couldn’t breathe. It wasn’t Cullen anymore, it was Erebus, his meaty hand slowly strangling her into submission as she begged and sobbed, gloating over her tiny figure that she belonged to him, that he owned her, that she was his to do as he wished. He was the nobles who bought her for a night, shoving her down to kneel, humiliating her for their own pleasure, dominating her body to their twisted desires. He was not the man she loved.

Fire burning in her eyes, she brought her elbows down hard on his forearms, yanking up her knees, aiming for his groin. Hissing in pain, Cullen released her, doubling over in pain. “You little-”

“I belong to no one except myself, **Knight-Captain,**” she spat, hate filling the place in her heart where love so recently dwelled. “Least of all, a broken, pathetic excuse for man like you.”

“I’m the one who’s broken?” He barked a mad laugh. “You said-”

“I said a lot of things. Obviously I was wrong. About everything.” Whirling away, she turned to leave, only to be held back by his much larger muscles.

“Don’t you dare walk away from me, Aerin.”

“My name is Adrienne.” Turning on him, she twisted her arm in his grip, breaking free from his clutch, and shoved him into a tree via a force spell with a loud crack. She sprinted away, not checking to see if he was injured, through the snowy forest, back into the keep, burning tears welling up in her eyes, ignoring all the concerned shouts that called for her.

Her body shook from the force of the sobs wracking her frame as she furiously blinked away tears, stuffing clothes and supplies into her leather satchel. Her door creaked open. **No! He couldn’t have-**

A dark head poked around the wooden frame.

“Adrienne? Are you alright? I saw- Maker!” Josephine gasped. “Your neck! Who did this?” Buckling on her armor, Aerin hoisted her bag to her shoulders, snatching her weapons up, double checking that everything was secure.

“Josie, I- I have to go. I can’t be here right now. I’m sorry.” Pushing past her friend, tears streaming down her cheek, she fled the main hall, still full of wide eyed nobles that stared in bewilderment after her, slipping down into the dusty stables. Throwing a saddle over the closest horse, fingers flying over the fastenings, she vaulted onto its back, kneeling the horse firmly in the ribs. With a loud whinny, the stallion reared back, jerking back onto his hooves, and galloped through the gate, narrowly missing a furious, screaming Commander. She didn’t care.

She was gone.

Leliana and Cassandra descended the stairs of the main keep into the courtyard, curious as to what all the shouting was about, not expecting to come face to face with a raging Cullen. **“Nightingale! Send your scouts after her, my men won’t be able to track her,”** he demanded, handsome features twisted into a rictus of fury and hostility.
“No,” Josephine said quietly, hands primly folded in front of her. Leliana watched the pair with narrowed eyes.

“Excuse me?” Spittle flew from his mouth.

“I saw her, Commander. What I am assuming you did to her. She was crying. And her throat… like someone had strangled her.”

“I-” the memory of their violence slammed into his gut with the force of a dragon’s tail. Crushed under the sudden weight of his guilt, Cullen sank to the ground, breath stolen from his lungs. “Maker. What have I done?” He glanced up into the harsh face of the Left Hand of the Divine, green eyes glittering with barely restrained animosity. “Leliana, I… Please. Send someone after her, just to ensure she stays safe.”

“From you, Commander?” Cassandra’s voice was harsh.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Sweet Andraste, Maker forgive me. What have I done?”

Chapter End Notes

*runs and hides from all the Cullenites* FORGIVE ME.

For everyone screaming 'but Aerin is a no nonsense, independent woman! she would never!'- we'll get more insight later.
Nightmare from the Past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ice cracked under the weight of the travelers, currently slowly creeping across the frozen surface of what was once a river.

“Mountains. Cold. Let’s bring Dorian!” the altus muttered in a high falsetto, cross at being unable to summon a heat spell for fear of melting the ice.

“Where are we again? Emper du what? I need to know. So I don’t come back here again.” Sera blew her warm breath against her fingers. “So frickin’ cold. You know what’s not cold? Cities.”

“Hey look!” the Iron Bull pointed up at a massive statue of a frozen woman. “Titsicles!” The elven archer dissolved into hysterical giggles, the Inquisitor just glaring at her companions.

“I know it’s fucking cold, dammit! I’m from the northern Free Marches! I hate this as much as you guys! Arrrghhh! Sera, you’re Ferelden, you should be used to this shit.”


“Fine. Fire. Let’s keep moving. Harding said there should be a good place to camp just ahead.”

“Hey, ain’t that Aerindrienne?”

“Aer- what?”

“Huh. It is her. Wonder if everything’s okay?” Bull peered across the ice.

Ellana squinted. “Let’s go back to shore then.”

A solemn human waited for them, huddled against a tree, black woolen cloak clinging to her legs. Her usual smile was nowhere to be found, eyes dull and pained. “Hey,” she croaked.

“What’s wrong? Are you sick? Did something happen?” The Inquisitor leaned in, closely examining her sister.

“I’m fine,” she muttered, pushing away her arms. “Just needed some air. And space.”

“A week’s worth of space between you and Skyhold? Between you and Cullen, you mean.” Dorian raised his eyebrow.

The Iron Bull coughed, nose assaulted by the sudden acrid tang of fear from Aerin that permeated the air the moment her fiancé’s name was uttered. “What did he do to you?”

“Nothing! It was me, I…”

“Aerin.”

Exhausted dark blue and gold eyes met the Qunari’s. “This was a mistake, I shouldn’t have come here.”

“No! Aerin, please. If you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have to.” Ellana shot the men a
glare that brooked no retort. “We’re headed up the path to make camp. I bet you’re freezing, too. We’ll get a nice fire, some hot tea, and everything will be okay. You’ll see.”

Finally settled by the fire in camp several hours later, the night dark around them, wolves howling in the distance, Ellana scooted over, leaning her head on her sister’s shoulder. “I wish you would talk to me. What happened?”

“I-” Aerin’s breath hitched, a broken sob rattling her chest. “We argued. He said some things, I said some worse things, he said even worse things. And I snapped. Creators, Elle, I… hit him. I didn’t mean to, I just-” Her head fell down against her knees.

“So he’s mad at you? Or hurt?”

“Probably furious still. I attacked him. With magic. And the things I said, it’s… unforgivable. I’ve ruined everything, Elle. He hates me now.”

“What did he do to you, though?” The Iron Bull’s dark eyes watched her carefully as she shook her head.

“Nothing serious. I deserved it.”

“No one deserves to be strangled like that.” Ellana’s head shot up, staring at Bull with a horrified expression. “I saw the bruises earlier. Faded, but still there. You’re afraid of him.”

Aerin broke down into tears, gulping back noisy sobs. Dorian immediately gathered up the woman into his arms, rubbing her back through her armor. “Shhhh, now. It’ll be okay. You’ll see.”

“How?” she demanded. “How do we come back from this?”

“Maybe you don’t. Look, I know you love him. And he loves you. But that kind of love? It’s toxic. The darkness inside of you both drags each other down. You and he have too much anger from your past, and I don’t blame you one bit. The things that happened to both of you, well, it’s a miracle you’re both still sane. But you won’t be, not for much longer if you stay together. He will destroy you, just as you will him.”

“No,” Aerin emphatically shook her head, “no. We can make this work. We have to.”

“Why?” Sera stared at her, face wrinkled in confusion. “Why is it so important?”

“Because, he… he knows what I was. What I am. And he accepts that, appreciates it, loves me in spite of it. How many others would do the same?”

“Pssh. You really askin’? Us. All of your friends. Me, horny Bull, the stupid Tevinter, grumpy Seeker, the dwarf, scary spy lady, the ambassador, and on and on. We all know you, who you were. And none of us give a shite.”

“You deserve better, Aerin,” Bull’s voice was soft, pleading for her to understand.

“I… It doesn’t matter right now anyways. What are we doing here?”

The fire glinted off of Ellana’s tear filled eyes. “Ah… Samson’s main source of red lyrium comes from here. There are mines nearby, and a lot of the villagers were taken there, probably as slave labor. We’re going to find them, shut it down. And a chevalier, Michel de Chevin, said that there’s a demon in a nearby red templar keep. Need to kill it, as well.”
“Celene’s former champion? Right. Slavers, demon. I can do that.”

***

The path around the tower was a dead end, a single veilfire torch bolted to a fallen section of wall. “Ugh,” Ellana groaned. “Guess we go back.”

“No, wait.” Walking up to the veilfire torch, Aerin activated it, the green fire swirling around her.

“Again with the creepy not-fire,” Sera shivered, inching behind the Iron Bull.

“There’s something here. Up there?” Leaping on a boulder, the rogue mage frowned at a massive slab of rock.

“Yes. That’s what people normally call a ‘rock’;” Dorian huffed. “Let’s turn around. We still have to clear that tower of the red templars and I’d rather do it while it’s daylight out, please. Wait. Where did she go? Did she just- into the rock?”

A disembodied head poked back out of the rock. “Come on! Something down here!”

“No chance I’m walking into a bloody rock. Sticking my arse right here.” Sera planted herself on a nearby wall. “Go on, then,” Dorian and Ellana cautiously crept forward into the dark staircase, greeted by the green glow of veilfire and a smug Aerin.

“Remember that little cave? ‘The stairs that go way down’. I think this is it. It has the same feel.” Nodding, Dorian shivered.

“Still creepy.” Down they went. And down. And down. “Fasta vass, woman, how far down does this go?”

Aerin shrugged. “Way, way down?”

“You do realize we will have to walk back up all these stairs, right?”

“Aerin, if there’s not a magical unicorn at the bottom of these stairs, I will end you,” her sister groused.

There was no unicorn. Only a simple chest. Containing a small bag of gold. And-

“Is that… a flower crown? With… lyrium in it?”

“Ooh,” Ellana snatched from the Tevinter’s hands. “So pretty!”


“Flowers. We came down here for flowers.” Dorian threw his hands up in the air, watching the Herald skip back up the stairs, the gently glowing flower crown set at a jaunty angle across her messy hair. “Well, at least she’s happy.”

***

The ancient elven fortress that dominated the landscape loomed over them, harsh, jagged growths of red lyrium jutting out of the stone walls, deformed templars guarding the heavy wooden door. A very handsome blonde soldier was engaged in a battle with one such templar, effortlessly cutting the monster down. Gaze catching the approaching party, he ran out to greet them.
“Inquisitor! Imshael has sent shades to the town. I must return to protect them.” His piercing eyes locked on to Aerin’s, bright blue eyes widening at the sight of her. “Will you find the demon and destroy him in my stead?”


“Excellent. I will be back at Sahrnia.” With a deep bow, he ran back up the path they had just taken.

“Somebody likes you,” Ellana sang, giggling.

Blushing, her sister shook her head. “Focus, Elle. Demon. Kill. Let’s go.”

The ancient snow covered keep was crawling with red templar knights and behemoths, the latter being almost indestructible against normal weapons. Resorting to her magic, Aerin kept up a steady barrage of spells along with Dorian, melting armor to reach the sparse fleshy parts underneath the crystal, freezing bodies that no longer felt any pain to the ground so Bull could hack them to pieces. Ellana and Sera’s arrows were all but useless against the creatures, no purchases for barbed shafts to penetrate.

“Friggin’ useless crap piece of shite,” Sera kicked the downed behemoth, violently spewing curses at the dead monster. “I don’t like things I can’t stick arrows in.”

“Hey, Sera. I got something you can stick an arrow into.”

“Ew, Bull.”

“What? Ha! No. That.” They all looked to where the Qunari was pointing.

_Fucking giant. It’s a red lyrium GIANT._

“Fucking balls mother fucking vishada keffy veneded shite piss-”

Dorian rolled his eyes. “It’s vishante kaffas, venhedis, Sera.”

“‘S what I said, innit?”

Aerin watched the infected giant lumber around, swiping at low hanging tree branches, like a child playing by itself outside. “Take out the templars first. Then we can focus on the giant.”

***

A massive courtyard opened up in front of them, decorated with the same red lyrium spires as the rest of the fortress, pushing up stones and crumbling walls that had already lasted centuries. A shrine of sorts lay in the center, a massive red crystal growing from a worn stone base, bathing the air with the pulsing infected aura, a very plain sort of man in a black velvet coat standing in front, arms crossed, waiting on the group to approach.

“Careful,” muttered Dorian. “He is not what is seems.”

“Ah! The hero arrives. Or is it murderer? It’s so hard to tell.”

Ellana bristled. “Murderer? Us? You’re one to talk, demon.”

“Doesn’t matter what you are,” Aerin twirled her sword in a gloved hand. “You die the same way.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Imshael raised his hands in defense, backing up. “Inquisitor, your friends are very violent. It’s worrying. You have a choice. It doesn’t have to end in blood. I could offer you power. Riches. Virgins. Your pick.”

“Virgins? Why would anyone want virgins?” Sera snorted. “All bumbling and confused. ‘Sides, Solas is close enough for you, yeah?”

Flushing, Ellana stammered, “Ah- no, thank you, Imshael. I’m afraid you just have to die, demon.”

“Choice! Spirit!”

***

The walk back to town was considerably more lighthearted than previously, despite the new bruises and burns they all sported, Sera nursing a broken finger from when she punched the demon called Imshael. Ellana had sent a raven out to Skyhold, assuring them that the Emprise du Lion was slowly being reclaimed, and that they now had a new base, Suledin Keep.

“Hey, Adreni, your boyfriend’s up there, waitin’ on you.”

“Sera. Adrienne. Say it with me. A-dri-enne. And who?”

“Ser Fancypants, defender of the little people. Handsome for a nob, yeah?”

Aerin frowned at the elven archer. “I’m still with Cullen, you know. Until he tells me otherwise,” she added sourly.

“Shouldn’t be,” she grumbled, stuffing her hands in her pockets. “Stupid jealous prig.”

Ellana bowed slightly at the waist, relieved to the find the town still standing. “Ser Michel. Imshael is dead. The Inquisition has claimed Suledin Keep.”

“It is finally over,” the chevalier breathed. “My lady, you have my eternal thanks. It is a good day.”

“What will you do now?” the Herald inquired, cocking her head up at the handsome blonde.

“I find myself free to choose a new direction. I would be honored to serve the Inquisition, if it would have me.”

“Welcome to the Inquisition then, Michel de Chevin.” Smiling at the Orlesian, Ellana turned to the town, calling over her shoulder that she needed to check up on some things, the rest of the group following on her heels. “Might I have a moment, my lady?”

Aerin turned back to the chevalier, a charming smile across his face. “Yes, Ser?”

“I would know the name of such a beautiful creature as yourself,” he reached for her hand, pressing lips that looked like sin to her gloved hand.

Oh, Creators, is this guy for real? “Um. Adrienne Iseri, Ser Michel. Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” he purred, somehow chivalrous and alluring at the same time. She couldn’t move, unsure if she should vomit, curtsy, or cackle hysterically in his face. He’s actually
“Me, too,” she blushed. *Why the hell am I blushing? He’s so smarmy, for fuck’s sake. Cullen. You still have Cullen, who is at least four times as handsome as this fancy ass. The man you love. Who probably hates you now. And wants nothing to do with you. Stop, stop, stop.* Turning her back to the gorgeous, cocky knight, face burning red, she fled after her sister, oblivious to the smirk across the man’s chiseled face.

***

Aerin sifted through the papers she had plucked from the a nearby table, splattered with the blood of the nearby fallen red templar. “Letters from Samson. Says he’s… a Vessel? And looks like his armor is made from red lyrium, which gives him superhuman powers. A man named Maddox is working on it. And something about ‘the red grows at their touch. It is proof any suffering is worthwhile’. He’s a madman. They’re harvesting this shit from fucking people.”

Peering over her shoulder, the Inquisitor took the sheaf of letters, flipping through the contents. “We should get these to Cul- ah, Skyhold as soon as possible. Leliana might be able to track the origin.”

“You can say his name,” Aerin rolled her eyes, sliding back down the ladder from atop the scaffolding. They were in a quarry, once used to mine for fine granite, now put to use by Samson’s minions growing red lyrium. From people. It was disgusting. Dropping down to the snowy ground, tinted red with blood, she headed for a tunnel that would lead them to the next clearing. Bull pulled her back, motioning with his hands.

*Eleven red templars up ahead. Two cages of villagers. Kaffas. This is going to be tight.* The sound of bowstrings being pulled taut echoed in the narrow tunnel, the prickle of mana tickling the back of her skull. Feeling the familiar grip of her hilts in her palms, she nodded at Dorian to cast, lending her strength to his spell. The crushing weight of a Silence blanketed them as they waited, cutting them off from the Fade.

“Vishante kaffas! There are templars up ahead, not as far gone on the red. They still have their skills.”

“Guess we’re doing this the fun way then. Adrienne and I’ll take those guys down. You two stay back and protect Dorian until he gets his mana back. Let’s go, Lightning. What? I like it. Suits you.”

Smirking at the Qunari, she leapt into the clearing, Bull’s scream of “Katara, bas!” making the guards scatter. Dodging a greatsword, she rolled up, one sword slicing into a templar, fighting against the nausea of the Silence. She felt it first. The Silence, combined with her still unfamiliar human form. She was too slow, too unwieldy. Like a newborn foal, lurching with each step. Another sword jabbed at her, just barely missing her neck as she stumbled backwards. *Focus, dammit!*

A shout from above pulled her attention. *Behemoths.* “Fenedhis lasa!” Her mana returned in a pulsing wave as the Iron Bull shook his axe free of the last nontainted templar’s chest. A wall of fire exploded to her left. *Thank the gods. Wait. Why were there templars here not affected by the red lyrium yet? Something isn’t right.* Opening her mouth to shout a warning, another Purge slammed into her, forcing her to the ground as she struggled to breathe. A large shadow covered her shaking body.

“All this time I was looking for the elf, still. Looks like you’ve learned a few new tricks.”
Erebus’ cruel grin flashed across his face as he leered down at her, his large bulk and bald skull just the way she remembered, face slightly more lined. Fear like she had not known in twenty years gripped her as she stared at the memory of her past.

“NO!” Ellana launched herself across the bloodstained, snowy ground, rapidly emptying her quiver as she attempted to bring the Tevinter down. He lazily swiped her arrows away.

“Oh, my dear, you’ve grown up, haven’t you? Rising up the ranks? Inquisitor I hear, now? You, Tevinter. You’re on the wrong side.”

“I think I prefer where I am, thank you,” Dorian spat. “Aerin, get over here. Now.”

She struggled to stand, to move, but the vice of her terror combined with the Purge’s suffocation left her too vulnerable. Erebus calmly reached out, grabbing her by the throat, raised her in the air, and squeezed. The Iron Bull roared, ground shaking at the sound, lowered his horns and charged the man, ravaging bloodlust taking over his control. The bellowing of six behemoths answered his charge, storming down the slope to impede the rampaging Qunari.

The screams and shouts of her friends faded into oblivion as Aerin lost consciousness. Swinging the limp human over his shoulders, Erebus ripped the cuffs off her wrists, smiling maliciously as her form rippled, shrinking back into her former elven prison. “Her necklace, too,” a mage behind him muttered. Grabbing the chains, Erebus yanked, throwing the amulet and a golden ring into the snow.

“Kill the rest. I’ve got what the Elder One wants.”

***

“Fenedhis lasa! It’s enough! We have to go, now, while the trail is fresh!”

“Ellana, your leg has been shattered. My magic can only do so much, I am not a healer.”

“Well, what good are you, then?!”

“We have to get you back to Skyhold.”

“We will lose her!”

“Corypheus wants her for some reason. He won’t kill her. We will have time to rescue her.”

“You don’t understand!” the elf screamed. “The future I saw, Redcliffe, she-” A soul rending wail ripped through her lungs, eyes fractantically twitching from side to side, desperation coloring her tone. “In the future we saw, do you remember what Aerin told me? To never let them take her. And if they did…”

“Kaffas. To assume rescue would not come,” Dorian whispered.

“She’ll try to commit suicide,” the Iron Bull grunted, Sera stiffening in fear to his side.

“I can’t- we have to-”

“Boss. We can’t do anything in our current state. We barely defeated those behemoths. We need rest. We need more resources. We go after her now, we will die. Thedas will fall. Is that what you want?”

“That isn’t fair!” she snapped.
“I know,” he murmured gently. “But it’s the truth.”

“Aerin… I’m so sorry. Please… hold on, for me,” Ellana’s voice was hoarse, begging the Creators to watch over the only family she had left as she turned over the broken necklace in her hand, running her fingers over the icy blue stone and mabari. “Let’s go. Now.”

Chapter End Notes

Working on a few one-shots. If there's a scene you were curious about, let me know!
The mounts of the Inquisition varied greatly, from horses of every kind, to harts and dracolisks, a war nug, and even undead creatures. All of them enjoyed a life of comfort, well treated and respected by their riders and the staff who cared for them. Except for now. Pushing her red hart to the brink of exhaustion, forcing her companions to similarly urge their own mounts, Ellana galloped over the mountains, reaching Skyhold in record time. Her advisors met her at the gates, a hushed crowd gathering close to observe.

“Inquisitor! We received the letters you sent. I have my scouts searching for her trail as we speak.”

“Anything yet, spymaster?”

“Not so far. We will find her, Inquisitor.” Leliana’s gaze was hard, lips pressed into a thin line. Ellana glared up at her Commander, standing rigidly beside the former bard, eyes hollow and cheeks sunken in. He looked like walking death.

“Anything to report, Commander?”

“Yes, Inquisitor. Dagna is looking for a way to break Samson’s red lyrium armor as we speak. My men are also in the process of tracking down Samson’s lair based on following the trail of materials Maddox needs- his tools, reagents, and lyrium. Hopefully, we will have a location soon. This is-” his stance fell, “all my fault. I will get her back. I promise.”

“It may be too late for that already, Commander,” Ellana growled, pushing past him. “War room. Everyone, now.” Silently, her advisors filed in a single line behind their leader, the mood in the keep solemn, mourning the loss of their Herald’s cousin and the Commander’s fiancé. Shutting the massive doors, Cullen hesitantly approached the Inquisitor, offering her a single piece of parchment. “What is this?”

“My letter of resignation, Inquisitor. It is clear I am not suited for this position. I’ve recommended Ser Rylen to take my place, or Cassandra, if she wishes it.” The others in the room stiffened in shock at his announcement.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Ellana rounded the table, advancing on the tall blonde former templar, spitting rage. “She ran off because of you, and now you want to quit? No, Commander, I do not accept.” Viciously ripping the paper to tiny shreds, she leaned in close to his face, looming over the man despite the vast difference in heights. “You keep your post. You find my sister. If she is already lost to me, then you will do everything in your power to avenge her. Or you will die trying. Do you understand me?” The sweet, bubbly Dalish girl was gone, replaced by an imposing, regal woman who demanded blood.

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

A messenger burst through the door. “Inquisitor! Raven just arrived. From Samson.” Leliana reached out, snatching the letter from the man, who silently slipped back out.

“He has her. Samson. He’s daring us to come get her, says-” she paled. “He says the blood has placated her, the red will consume her, and she will rule alongside Corypheus.” Josephine gasped, as Cullen roared.
“NO!” his fists came down hard on the thick war table, scattering markers across the room.

“Blood magic,” Ellana whispered. “Erebus, he… told Aerin that if she didn’t cooperate back when we were slaves, that he would kill me and control her with blood magic anyways.”

“Her will is extraordinary. She will remain strong,” Leliana stated confidently.

“No. She will kill herself if given the opportunity. I told her…” Hot, heavy tears fell onto the map, splattering across the Kocari Wilds. “She will kill herself to prevent Corypheus from using her if she can.”

Cullen slumped against the wall, tears streaming down his own cheeks. Josephine’s face was deathly pale, crying as well. Only Leliana remained stoic. “Commander. How many troops do we have ready to march once we located Samson?”

His breath hitched, “I can recall some of our patrols, but our forces are already stretched thin across Orlais and Ferelden. We would be leaving some areas vulnerable to the rifts still present.”

“Alistair. He would help us. Wouldn’t he?” Ellana pleaded with Leliana, who slowly nodded.

“He would. I will send a message to him now.”

“The king?” Josephine’s brow creased in confusion. “He would help us regain a single woman?”

“Of course,” Leliana smirked at Cullen, who also stared, uncomprehending the reason. “He loves her. The man would do anything for her.”

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“I’m sorry, vhenan. She is still not in the Fade. I cannot find her.”

Ellana slumped on the sofa in Solas’ room, for once ignoring the murals on the wall that she used to love to peruse. “What does that mean? It’s been almost two weeks, Solas. Why isn’t she there?”

The elf clasped his hands behind his back, tilting his head at the younger woman, eyes guarded. “If she is controlled by blood mages, they could be shielding her from the Fade. Or, she could be…”

“No. I refuse to entertain that notion.”

“Of course, vhenan.” Scowling at the man, Ellana briefly wondered if he even cared for her anymore. Not that they had ever been particularly intimate, but he had been even more distant than usual. It didn’t matter, either way. She had more important things to worry about right now.

“Riders approaching under the Ferelden banner!”

Glancing toward the ramparts, Ellana nodded to Solas, pushing the door open to the walls, racing to get a better view of the soldiers. Two units on horseback, about 100 men, marched towards Skyhold, the rhythmic pounding of the hooves reverberating through the keep. *Creators. That’s a lot of people. All for Aerin.* Two men rode at the head of the army, their armor shining like a beacon as they made for the gates. Running back inside the keep, Ellana scrambled to reach the main stairs so she could properly greet the captain of the Ferelden forces.

“Your Majesty?!”

A tall strawberry blonde man, clad in golden armor marked with the crimson twin lions of his house, strode up the stairs to greet the assembled. “Inquisitor.” His strong jaw was set in a
determined line, no sign of the lighthearted, jovial man she had met in Redcliffe all those months ago. “Any progress?”

“We were not aware you would be accompanying your men, Your Majesty,” Josephine wrung her hands nervously, already frazzled nerves fraying even further. “I’m afraid we don’t have proper accommodations re-”

His hand came down in a firm gesture. “I don’t care about that. Where are we in the search?”

“If you’ll follow us, Your Majesty,” Leliana bowed to her old friend, leading him into the war room. Head held high, ignoring the simpering nobles who attempted to curry for his favor along the way, Alistair marched behind the spymaster, holding his rigid posture all the while. “We believe we have found Samson’s lair. An ancient Tevinter shrine in northern Orlais. Josephine has already arranged for passage of your soldiers under the Inquisition’s banner.”

“The last of the supplies for the men arrive tonight. We can leave before dawn tomorrow,” Cullen added stiffly, unsure of how to react around his sovereign. “I would like to accompany the troops as well, Inquisitor.”

“Very well, Commander,” Ellana nodded. “Oh, Alistair…” She pulled a ring, threaded through a broken chain, and gently placed it in the man’s outstretched hand. The king blanched, complexion ashen, muscles clenched as he examined the ring. “She never took it off.” Cullen’s eyes widened as the realization hit him. It was his ring. She kept it on, even after… She still loves him.

Alistair tucked the ring safely away and spoke through gritted teeth, “Let me know when we’re ready to march.”

“Did you know? Where she was really from?”

Leliana’s head snapped to focus on the Commander, a slight frown across her lips, Josephine’s and Ellana’s perplexed expressions indication they had no idea what he was talking about. Alistair coolly regarded the other Ferelden. “I do.”

“What are you talking about,” the Inquisitor demanded. “Where was she from?”

“Oh, that’s right. You don’t know either,” the bard mused.

Ellana shook her head. “I asked her once, and she told me she was from another wor- Oh, fenedhis. She is from another world, isn’t she? She wasn’t lying. And I didn’t believe her. Creators. She’s from the same place as Michael.”

“Michael?” Alistair asked.

“Some call him the Fade walker. We found him in the Fade, at Adamant, when I and my companions fell in.”

“Andraste have mercy,” Josephine muttered. “The poor woman. To have dealt with so much, and now this.”

Groaning, the king rubbed his face. “Right. I’m headed back to let my captain know what’s going on. Just send word when we’re needed.” Nodding to the Inquisitor, he swept out of the room, leaving the advisors staring at the map in silence.

It was Josephine who spoke first. “You said this Erebus destroyed the cuffs? What story will we give the people? When Aerin comes back as an elf? And Adrienne does not?”
When, not if. Ellana grasped onto that word like a life raft, keeping her afloat in the turbulent seas. Sister Nightingale drummed her fingers on the table surface. “We shall say Aerin attempted a daring rescue on her own, managing to switch places with her cousin, smuggling Adrienne out to friends in Orlais, where she will remain until further notice, recovering. Aerin is the one we are rescuing.”

“You think people really will buy that?” the Inquisitor snorted. Leliana offered her a tremulous smile, chin lifted up with growing confidence.

“Why, Inquisitor, the people have seen her fight and cast. If anyone could do it, it would be her. They will believe it.”

***

The night was clear, myriads of stars twinkling in the velvety sky, the air crisp and chilled, signifying that winter was coming to an end. Campfires burned in the valley below, flickering shadows moving amongst hastily constructed tents. Further into the valley, a small town slept, home to most of the Inquisition staff and soldiers. A single man stood on the battlements, facing west, towards Orlais. Running his fingers through tousled blonde curls, Cullen sighed.

She loved Alistair still. Did she ever love Cullen? She said she did. No, he knew she did. He told her he trusted her, and he did. But… the Iron Bull was right. They were too much alike. The trauma that had poisoned them both now infected their love and everyone around them. But that was why he had been drawn to her. The darkness within her called to his own demons. The lyrium in her skin soothed his cravings. She was his drug. But that wasn’t healthy, was it? She didn’t deserve that burden, to be his crutch. She deserved so much more, a man who was her equal, who didn’t want to dominate and control her like he did. Aerin was right. He was a broken, pathetic, shell of a man. He loved her, so much it hurt to even breathe. If he lost her to his own cruelty, his callous stupidity… Maker. He would never recover. He had to find her, bring her home. And then he had to let her go.

“Figures you’re up here, too.” A tall, broad man moved into position next to him, also intent on the western horizon. “I just got finished talking to Leliana a bit more. She said you and Aerin were… engaged. Congratulations.” Alistair’s voice was flat, devoid of all emotion.

“We were. But now… This is my fault, that she was captured. If we hadn’t argued, if I hadn’t said the things I did, if I hadn’t… she would have remained in Skyhold. Safe. Now she’s out there, and I-” A sob choked him, forgetting to be embarrassed at crying in the presence of his king. A firm hand rested on his shoulder. Cullen looked over, only to see matching tears on Alistair’s face, shining in the moonlight.

“She’s easy to love, isn’t she? We will get her back. And we will make them pay.”

“I’m coming, too.” The men turned around to stare at the smaller man, who shuffled nervously behind the imposing, broad, fully armored leaders. “I’ve learned a bit of magic. Dorian says I cast a lot like Ad- Aerin. I can help. She’s… important to me, too.”

Alistair raised an eyebrow at the slip of the tongue, but decided against questioning it further. “You’re from the same place as her.”

“I- uh, yes. Same part of the country, even.”

“Maferath’s beard. That’s so weird. Alright, you can come. Just… don’t get killed. Aerin would never forgive me. Or him.”
“I don’t think she’ll forgive me regardless,” muttered the Commander.

“Chin up, Commander. Stranger things have happened. For instance, a bastard became king. Who would have thought?” Offering a half-hearted smile to the other man, Alistair bid them a goodnight, climbing back down to the courtyard. Aerin was getting married. To Cullen. He should be happy, right? After all, he couldn’t be with her. She should be happy, with whomever she chose. At least she chose a Ferelden. And another former templar. Blonde, too. Did she have a type? Or did she pick him because he reminded her of him? No, that’s just silly. He wondered how the man was holding up, after Kinloch and Kirkwall. By all accounts, he had come out of both unscathed. He rebuilt Kirkwall after Meredith did her best to rip it apart. He led the Inquisition successfully so far. He seemed like a good man, if slightly stressed. Then why did the Inquisitor and Leliana glare at him so? Was it because he was the reason she ran off? Was this really his fault, or was that just a guilty conscience speaking? He had never known Aerin to run away from a fight. Was it that bad? What did the other man say to her? Unless she’s changed. People did that, especially after ten years. Maybe she wasn’t the person he knew anymore. Maybe, maybe, maybe. Alistair sighed, pulling out the ring, watching the starlight glint off the jewel. _She never took it off..._

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It was back. The suffocation, the ripping, tearing, choking, she was being buried alive, her magic hovering just out of reach, she was... trapped. The past days of travel were all a blur. She was kept just on the edge of consciousness, enough to know the pain and the agony of her old form, but deep enough under than she had no idea where she was. It was hot. And the wind carried sand. The desert, then. But where? If she could get to the Fade, she could find Solas, and he might be able to track her. But she was cut off. Almost as if she were Tranquil. Ellana’s old warning came back to her. _Assume rescue is not coming. Kaffas. I will not be the cause of the destruction of this world._ Did she have her hidden daggers? No. The familiar press against her thigh and calf wasn’t there. In fact, neither was her armor. The fabric that lay next to her skin was rough, scratchy. Attempting to move her arm, she realized she was too weak to do anything at the moment. _Weak._ The word left a bad taste in her mouth. She had not been weak in so long. And now here she was, once again at the mercy of this monster.

Vaguely, she was aware of voices, the sound of one in particular that she had all but forgotten echoing through the air around them. _Samson. I will rip his heart out._ The blessed relief of shade welcomed her even as a painful buzzing nesting in the back of her skull. Cracking open a gritty eye, she saw only red and darkness. Down, they descended, her limp, useless body flopping over a large shoulder like a sack of potatoes. They paused, gently shifting her down. Then suddenly, a cool, dusty floor rose up to meet her, head cracking against the stone.

“I told you carefully, imbecile. I need her whole.” The sound of cruel laughter rang in her head. “Your Tranquil can patch her up. I intend to have a little fun with her. She took _everything_ from me when she killed the lanista.” _Erebus is pissed. Good._ She would have smiled if she could have moved her lips.

“You will not. Bring the mage forth. We should do this now. The Elder One has claimed her, Erebus. Will you go against his wishes?”

Silence, then a growl, and the sound of retreating steps. A sigh. “I’m sorry, Aerin, that it came to this. You were- are a remarkable woman. It’s for a righteous cause, at least. You there. Do it.” The spinning, dim room faded from view as slimy snakes invaded her senses, forcing her consciousness down, crammed down into her soul. _No! Stop_ Her limbs were being wrested from her control. _My will. My will is stronger than theirs. They will not have my mind._ Valiantly, she pushed back,
fighting for control against the blood mage that was trying to take her from herself.

“She’s too strong, General Samson. I…”

“What do you need?”

“More power.”

“Will the blood of the red suffice?”

“Yes, my lord.” There were several steps, metal boots tapping against the stone, then a wet gurgling, a few grunts, and the crash of armor colliding with the floor. The grasping tendrils in her brain were back, this time pulsing with an unholy aura, singing a horrendous, tantalizing melody. She wanted to relax, let it consume her, breathe it in. No! That’s red lyrium! They will use you! She struggled against the invasion still, yet weaker this time.

“If you don’t cooperate, Aerin, you will be of no use to us. I will have no option but to give you to Erebus. Is that what you want?”

Nonononononono. She faltered for one terrible, wretched second. The red seized control from her grip. Defeated, she fell back, down, down, into the depths of her mind, only able to watch from afar in horror as her body sat up, eyes glowing with a crimson sheen.

“How may I serve, my lord?

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the cliff hanger! Going out of town since my MIL is here visiting, so I'll be back Tuesday, possibly Wednesday with the next update. YAY ALISTAIR.
“Who is coming with us to save Aerin?” Ellana stood on the lower steps that led into the main hall, looking out over all her grim and determined companions assembled in the courtyard.

“Aerin? I thought ‘twas her cousin who was taken.”

“Aerin managed to rescue her cousin by taking her place, Lady Morrigan. She is the one we rush to now.” Empress Celene’s occult advisor raised a delicate eyebrow.

“I’ll come. I should have prevented her from even being taken,” the Iron Bull growled. “Let me make it right.”

“I, as well. This is our fault. We need to fix it.” Dorian stood firmly, arms crossed.

“Yep,” Sera nodded.

“My blade is always yours, Inquisitor,” Blackwall nodded.

“Pain, blinding, the red, the red, so small, hidden now, please don’t let him near me again.”

“Cole? Are you hearing her?”

“It’s hard. The song is too warped.”

“You know I’m coming,” Varric hefted Bianca onto his back. “Woman’s saved my ass so many times, I’ve lost count. I need to get her back.”

“I would lend my aid as well, if you have need of me, Inquisitor,” Vivienne inclined her head gracefully.

Cassandra merely saluted Ellana, hand over heart.

“I will go, vhenan.” Solas smiled gently down at the elf.

“Me. I want to go. Please?” Michael shifted nervously from foot to foot.

Overwhelmed with the affection she had for her inner circle, Ellana blinked back tears burning in her eyes. “Right. Cassandra, Blackwall, Madame Vivienne, Solas- would you stay and help Ser Rylen defend Skyhold in our absence? The rest of you, with me.”

“I would go as well, Inquisitor.”

“Lady Morrigan?” Yellow eyes serenely regarded the Dalish woman.

“She was once my friend, as well.”

“Very well. Let’s go.” Was that disappointment in Solas’ eyes? Ellana wasn’t sure she should leave him behind. After all, weren’t they together? But Aerin had once asked her to keep her talents a secret from Solas. And she had so far. What was it Michael had said? They cast the same? The same abilities. It wouldn’t do for Solas to see the Fade walker in action then. No, it was best he
remain here. Not like he was too torn up about it anyways. Bastard. The man had been acting strange, ever since he found out Aerin was a human. It didn’t sit right with her. Something was going on. “Your Majesty, are your men ready?”

“They are, Inquisitor.”

“Then let’s go bring my sister home.”

***

It was the longest journey of Cullen’s life. The Inquisitor set a hard pace about which no one dared complain. The small army, comprised of the Inquisitor’s companion and the king’s two units, broke camp every day before the sun rose, not stopping until well after sunset, resting only enough so the men wouldn’t fall asleep on the march. It was still taking too long.

They made good time to the coast, greeted by the sight of two large ships, waiting for the Inquisitor, one captained by none other than the Pirate Queen of the Eastern Seas. “Ellana!” The busty rogue strode across the beach, arms outstretched to pull the Dalish girl into a crushing hug. “Andraste’s tits, look at you, all grown up and saving the world. The rowboats are ready to start hauling your men to the ships whenever you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Isabela. This means to world to me,” Ellana smiled at her old friend.

“Anytime. Especially if you bring Alistair around,” she cooed at the king, who just grinned lazily back at her. “And my favorite templar! Must be my birthday.”

“I am no longer a templar,” Cullen muttered.

“Of course, of course. Varric!” She wrapped her arms around the dwarf in a bear hug. “Shit, all we need now is Aerin, a giant Qunari, and a crazy magister and it’s like old times again.”

“We have the Iron Bull. And Dorian. But he’s only an altus,” Varric smirked.

“Also, not crazy,” the altus interjected. Alistair groaned.

“So much for discretion, Isabela.”

“I’m discreet. I haven’t said what for, now, have I?” She winked at the frustrated monarch. Turning to her crew manning the rowboats, she bellowed out, “Faster, you lazy bastards! Put your back into it!”

***

Alistair gripped the railing of the deck, staring out over the choppy water, twisting Aerin’s ring around his finger. His mind ran over a litany of prayers to the Maker, Andraste, the elven pantheon, and every other deity he could think of, begging them all to let her be safe. He did not know what he would do if something were to happen to her. A pair of soft footsteps interrupted his thoughts.

“How curious, the bumbling idiot becomes king and somehow has not been dethroned still.”

“I missed you too, Morrigan,” he replied dryly, glancing aside at the woman, dressed in the familiar rags he once knew. “How’s your kid?”

Her eyes narrowed at him. “He is well. Safe in Skyhold.” The witch’s glare softened by just a tiny fraction. “She will be fine, Alistair. She’s strong. Her will is like none I have ever encountered.”
“I must look really depressed if even you’re trying to cheer me up.”

“Fine. Stay here and sulk. I don’t know why I even bothered,” glaring at the King of Ferelden, Morrigan huffed away, leaving an opening for Varric and Isabela to saunter up to him, Michael cautiously creeping up behind them, resting on either side of the man. “Deja vu?”

He chuckled. “Seems like it. Lot more people this time though. Varric, I’m… so scared. What if we’re too late? What if…”

“Lightning’s the strongest person I know,” he assured him. “Stronger than you. Ellana. Cullen. Leliana. Stronger than Hawke, even. She will make it. Woman doesn’t know what failure is.”

Isabela nodded in agreement, reaching for Ellana who had just approached the group. Tucking the younger woman under her arm, the pirate murmured, “You okay, kitten?”

“No. I just want my sister back. I saw Erebus take her. He… I froze. Every bad memory I had of Tevinter revolved around that monster. His main source of delight was torturing Aerin. And now he has her. Creators,” she whispered. “I will tear him apart.”

“I think Aerin would fight you for that right,” Varric snorted. “How you holding up, Michael?”

“This is real, isn’t it? We’re going to war. With swords and magic and arrows, of all things.” He sighed, combing a hand through his black hair. “It still all feels like a dream sometimes. I can’t imagine how Aerin must have felt.”

“She was terrified, but still, so, so strong,” Ellana murmured. “I need her. I can’t fight without her at my side.”

“We’ll get her back, Inquisitor. I’m sure of it.”

Cullen stood on the opposite side of the rocking ship, fighting the nausea of the rolling waves, watching Alistair comfortably chat with Ellana and their friends. People respected Cullen, for what he did and had done, his leadership skills, but they loved Alistair, his easy going nature, warm personality, kind heart. Two months ago, he would have been seething over the man. And now, he couldn’t find it within him to be jealous anymore.

“You okay there, Cullen?” The Iron Bull leaned against the railing, enjoying the feel of the cool air and salty spray against his face.

“I’ll be better when I’m off this bloody ship,” he muttered, skin tinged with green. The Qunari chuckled. “Bull… you were right. About what we talked about. He would be better for her,” he motioned to the king. The other man sighed, rubbing his chin.

“It’s not about who would be better for her, Cullen. Hell, she might be better off alone. But it wouldn’t matter anyways. She’s an elf again.”

“But Dagna can remake the cuffs.”

“Not right now, she can’t. The materials she used to craft it were extremely rare. Fade touched everite. Dragon bone. Stormheart. It will be months before she can do anything, especially with all her time and resources devoted to Samson’s armor right now. She was developing a spell that would be permanent with Dorian, but they hit a snag. So who knows. Adrienne is gone for now. Maybe forever.”

A deep exhale escaped Cullen’s lips. “It won’t be forever. It can’t be. She deserves so much more.
She deserves to be herself.”

“Bullshit, isn’t it?”

***

It took just shy of three weeks to reach the Shrine of Dumat, hidden deep in the northern Orlesian desert, nothing around for miles except sand and rocks and quillbacks sniffing about. An old Tevinter construct was the only man-made building dotting the horizon for miles.

“We should reach it by tomorrow,” the Commander lowered his spyglass, passing it to Alistair. “Is everyone prepared?”

“Yes,” Ellana nodded, her companions echoing their leader, Alistair merely staring at the distant shrine. The tension in camp that night was palpable, reminiscent of the night before Adamant, except infinitely more solemn and resolved. There were no jokes, no laughter, no cards passed around. Only quiet murmurs and long sighs, the crackling of the fires, and the shifting of armor and fabric as cloaks were pulled tighter around bodies to ward off the desert night air, each impatiently awaiting the pale light of dawn. No one slept for more than hour, adrenaline pumping through twitching veins as blades were sharpened and arrows fletched.

Dawn broke, the faint golden rays just barely breaching the eastern horizon, illuminating the Tevinter shrine.

“It is time.” The Inquisitor stood, pointed ears twitching in anticipation, mahoghany hair pulled back in an austere braid, emerald ribbon glinting with golden threads fluttering in the breeze. Her Commander, tall and strong, firmly planted to her right, fierce lion’s helm tucked under his gleaming arm. The King of Ferelden, determined, face grim, golden armor reflecting the early rays from the sunrise. One by one, a yellow eyed witch, imposing and indomitable, massive Qunari, snarling at his failure, a dwarf, desperate for his friend, an elf, quiver full of arrows, a ghostly boy, reaching for the pain he felt even across the desert, a mage, bristling with rage against his countrymen, and a human offworlder, untried in battle and lacking confidence yet filled with courage, slowly filed in behind the imposing trio. Mere paces behind, a small army of men and women, sworn to their king and cause, armor polished to a shine, the twin lions of their liege stamped on their shields. They marched.

The Qunari and Inquisitor glanced at each other barely a few hundred paces out from where they camped, frantically sniffing the air. “What is it?” Alistair demanded.

“Fire. They’re burning the shrine. Hurry!” The warriors broke out into a run, rogues steadily overtaking them, desperation coloring their steps as they raced toward the smoke, praying their gods to let it not be too late.

Cullen felt his steps falter as the song of the red lyrium assaulted his body, insinuating its siren’s call into his mind. It was everywhere. Jagged crystals, glowing with that deadly miasma of anguished temptation, grew out of every crevice in the well preserved shrine. With a cry, he fell to one knee, hands over his head, trying to force the cruel melody out. Beside him, Alistair’s ashen face trembled.

“Maybe you should wait behind, Cullen. This can’t be good for you,” Ellana frowned.

“No,” he gritted, shoving himself to his feet, only slightly wavering, “I must see this through. Please, Inquisitor.” Lips pursed, she nodded once, focused on what lay in wait- a battalion of red templar knights, surrounding the only entrance to the shrine, unseeing eyes focused on the
intruders.

“My men will take these. The rest of us should push on,” Alistair glared at his former brethren. “Soldiers! Keep these ‘knights’ occupied!” With a valiant roar, the Ferelden warriors rushed around the Inquisitor and her companions, slamming into the twisted templars in a cacophony of metal and screams. “We need to hurry!”

Sprinting through the gate into the courtyard, Ellana ground to a halt, frozen at the sight of six behemoths lining the upper ramparts, barreling towards the group with their earth shattering roars. “Michael! Blizzard, now!”

Gulping, the man stepped forward, Dorian murmuring in his ear, helping him reach deep into the Fade, pulling on his mana and- the entire courtyard froze, save for a frighteningly small circle around his companions. The monsters shrieked, pulling at limbs cemented to the stone, scrabbling to break free.

“That was effective,” Morrigan drawled, curiosity staining her voice. “Thank you for not turning us all into icicles.” Michael flushed, panting with the exertion his spell had cost him. The Iron Bull had already launched himself at the nearest behemoth, shattering it into fragments, while the two elves brought down one more apiece, arrows unerringly finding the alarmingly few vulnerable spot in their armor. The Commander stood, gasping over the body of another, struggling to fight off the call of the red, Alistair and Cole withdrawing blood soaked blades from the last two.

“Impressive, I must say.” A slim elf, ruby hair reflecting the glow of tainted lyrium, emerged from the smoky shrine.

“Aerin! Thank the Creators!” Ellana sprinted to her sister.

“WAIT!” Alistair lunged for the Dalish, restraining her. “Something is wrong. Look at her.” Cullen gaped, the pit in his stomach bottoming out as his veins turned to ice. The thing wearing Aerin’s face stared vacantly, bright red eyes, edged with dark gold, impassively watching them.

“Like what we’ve done? I must say, we should have done this to her much sooner. She’s so much more… pliable.” A hulking, muscled bald man, scars covering his face and arms, grinned in triumph from atop the staircase, trailing his hand down the side of her face, across her breasts, down her waist, settling on her hips. Cullen roared his fury.

“You will not have her!” His gauntlets cut into his hand as he gripped his sword and shield in an iron fist.

Erebus laughed. “Who’s to say I haven’t already, Commander? You’re too late, pet,” he sneered at the trembling Inquisitor. “We had hoped it would take you longer to find us, the Elder One is eager to see what she can do in the field. Can you imagine? The Inquisitor’s own sister bringing the torment of annihilation to all of Thedas? No matter. Samson is gone, safely away from this place. And Seraphina has her orders, don’t you, love? Kill them and bring me your sister's marked hand.”

Dorian hissed to the leaders, “Find the blood mage controlling her. If he dies, she is freed.”

Ellana gave him a curt nod. “Bull, Varric, Sera, go inside, see what you can salvage from the fire. The rest of you, bring down the monsters.” Notching an arrow, she sent up a prayer, “Forgive me, Aerin.” Drawing her bowstring back, she let go, projectile hitting its mark, burying itself into the other elf’s calf. She didn’t even flinch. Glancing stoically down at the shaft protruding from her leg, Aerin calmly snapped it in two, ripped it out, and tossed it to the side.
“Maker,” Alistair whispered, just as his former love launched herself at him, twin swords glinting in the red light that bathed them all. Grunting, he blocked her swing with his shield. “A little help here!” Grimacing, the Commander raised his own shield, charging at his fiancée, knocking her back. Lightly flipping over, she landed gracefully on her feet, rebounding off the stone, flinging herself back in their direction just as a pale, blonde boy leapt out of the shadows, daggers bared. With an idle parry, she shoved the assassin back. The men regrouped, circling her as a thin barrier sprung over their sight.

“I shall dispose of the rest of the rabble. Tevinter, you find the blood mage.” Morrigan smiled as she and the others faced the remaining red templar knights, her form shimmering as her body melted away, a giant bear taking her place. Michael watched in awe from where he remained, slumped against the back wall, struggling to maintain the barrier over the Commander, King, and Cole.

“There!” Dorian snarled. “Behind that pillar!” Ellana swiveled, eyes locking onto the robed mage hiding behind a section of wall, focused on Aerin. Drawing her bow, a massive shadow fell over the woman.

“I don’t think so, pet.” A meaty fist swung at her head, the Inquisitor barely dodging him in time.

“You shall not harm her!” Dorian shouted, slamming his staff down, raising the surrounding behemoth corpses. “Destroy him!” The mangled remains of the monsters advanced on the human. With a roar, Erebus unraveled a whip at his side, aiming for the altus. Instead, an arrow pierced his hand, his swears echoing off the walls, the leather handle falling from his hand. Ellana nimbly jumped away, out of his range, perching atop a broken column, smirking at the undead behemoths converging on the bleeding man. Narrowing her eyes, she took aim at the blood mage. Her arrow struck true, bouncing off his shimmering barrier. The mage gasped. A shout called up from the courtyard below.

“She stumbled! Keep doing whatever you’re doing!” Alistair shouted. “Aerin, Aerin, it’s me, Ali! I know you’re in there, love. Please, come back!”

“Screaming, suffocating, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Cole muttered, flipping out of her range. “It’s all so red. It burns.”

Cullen grunted as her leg struck him in the back of his knee, tripping a step forward. “Aerin, please- Fight it. I know you’re stronger than him. You can do this. Come on!” Magic erupted from her hands, gravity around their bodies growing denser, forcing them to the ground. Slowly, she advanced on the trapped warriors, wicked edge of her sword gleaming. Cursing himself, Cullen struggled to pull off his helm. “Aerin. Look at me.” Red eyes met amber. Her sword raised. Resigning himself, Cullen held her stare, determined that she would be the last thing he saw in this world. \textit{At least it’s her hand I die by.}

“He’s down!”

A soul shattering scream ripped through the courtyard, paralyzing everyone where they stood. It was the sort of heart rending wail of complete loss and utter failure. Tears sprang up unbidden in the spectators’ eyes, their hearts clenching in sympathetic pain. Huddled on the ground, curled up on herself, the solitary elf howled, until her voice and lungs finally gave out. Ignoring the bodies of tainted enemies scattered across the courtyard, the Inquisitor slowly approached. “Aerin?”

Anguished blue and gold eyes looked up, voice barely a harsh whisper. “Where?” Ellana pointed to the far wall, where the mangled body of a man lay, chest rising just enough to indicate he was still alive. Skin blazing, the last aura of red lyrium still clinging to her form, the warrior stalked over to
her former captor, his lips still spewing venom and hate.

“Gonna kill me, slave? Like you killed your master?” He spat to the side. “Don’t matter if you do. You’ll still always be less than dirt, sentina.” She didn’t flinch, instead, reaching out to the red lyrium crystal at her side, breaking off a jagged shard. His eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

“Aerin,” Alistair stepped up cautiously behind her, Varric not far behind.

“Don’t do this, Lightning.”

“What’s she gonna do with that?” Michael peered over their shoulders.

“Stop,” Morrigan murmured. “Let her finish this. She has earned it, a thousand times over.”

“Hate, the lash, sand in her eye, raping her into submission, the pain, fear clouding her mind, no not Ellana, I’ll do anything, please, begging, the scum beneath his sandals.” Cole blinked. “She requires an end.”

The elf was oblivious to her friends surrounding her. Kneeling almost tenderly beside the battered Tevinter, she rasped flatly, ”Doctore.” And plunged the crystal into his heart. He screamed, the shriek of a wounded animal at its end, skinned alive, bleeding out. Devoid of all emotion, Aerin watched at the red lyrium slowly spread through his veins, skin pulsing that unholy, sickly red, his face contorted in never ending agony. He screamed for what felt like hours, the rest of the group scattering, trying to block out the sound, knowing they would hear it again in their nightmares. Only the Inquisitor, Morrigan, Alistair, and Cullen remained at her back.

His eyes were the last to go, glaring at her with all the malevolence he had in his blackened soul, cursing her with his last thoughts. Staring at the crystallized statue of the former Doctore of Ludus Therion, Aerin lifted her sword, slamming her blade into the center of his body, shattering the red lyrium into dust. It was done.

Broken and battered, she collapsed. Drenched in sweat from the battle with her and the lyrium, Cullen cautiously approached, leaning down to lift her up. She flinched. Reeling back, the Commander stumbled. “Ah- I’ll go check on the other men. At your word, Inquisitor.”

“We need to get out of here,” Varric muttered. “Smoke is getting worse.”

“I’ve got her. Hey, Aerin. Let’s get you out of here, yeah?” The Iron Bull tenderly pulled her into his arms, cradling her against his chest, Alistair still staring at the remnants of the man she had just brutally tortured to death.

Sera jogged up behind them, hefting a clanging sack onto her back. “Found some tools inside. Looked fancy, so we snagged ‘em all. There was one of those creepy Tranquil, too. Killed himself. Poor blighter. Maddox, something or other, his name was.”

“Good work, guys. Let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

One shot work is up! http://archiveofourown.org/works/12794187/chapters/29199561
First one is taking a look at the reactions of all the remaining companions (mainly Varric and Solas) when they find out Aerin is human.
An Open Future

Chapter Notes

TW- mention of rape

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mood of Skyhold was of reserved rejoicing. The Inquisitor’s sister had been rescued, and Samson had lost his stronghold. But the elf was unwell, mind still infected by blood magic, her screams and sobs echoing through the keep, unnerving all who heard.

“Any difference?”

Ellana sunk down into a chair, staring listlessly into the fire. “She floats in and out of consciousness. Dorian and Fiona said the red lyrium wasn’t in her blood, praise Mythal, but the blood magic used to control her tainted her thoughts. It’s slowly leaving, but it will take time to completely flush out. From what I can understand, she…” her voice broke. “She was conscious the whole time. Watching from a corner of her mind. She was aware she was attacking us. She keeps begging me to kill her.” Burying her face in her hands, the elven rogue sobbed, Josephine scooting closer to lay a comforting hand across her back.

“Maker,” Alistair leaned back, unable to comprehend what she had experienced. “She will be back to normal though, won’t she?”

“What kind of normal do you think she’ll have?” muttered Cullen, staring into the fire. “She’s already endured so much, and then this… Others have broken over far less.”

Leliana sighed, swirling the dark red wine in her glass. “We shall have to wait and see. When are you leaving for Val Royeaux, Inquisitor?”

She scowled. “I can’t believe Blackwall picked this time to run off, of all things. First thing tomorrow. I also promised Vivienne I would help her find a snowy wyvern. And Bull said the Qun wants to meet me, possibly form an alliance. Alistair, are you staying longer?”

The king sighed, shaking his head. “No, I’ve been gone long enough as it is. We’ll be marching out tomorrow as well. Can- Can I see her? Or would that be…”

“Ask Fiona,” Ellana mumbled. “She’s been the main one taking care of her.”

“Really? That’s nice of her. I guess. I’ll go ask her then.”

***

Her head was surprisingly clear today, the hum of the red almost a memory. Taking a sip of water, she winced when she swallowed since her throat still raw, vocal chords all but shredded. The setting sun filtered through her balcony window, casting a red glow over her room. Red. Nonononono. The crushing weight of her anxiety slammed into her, suffocating her in a vise-like grip, heart pounding in her ears, the urge to run overwhelming. I need to get out of here, run, run run-
Pushing her covers off, she sat up, ready to bolt, then hesitated. Slowly raised one leg. Then the other. Wiggled her toes. Her fingers. Bringing a hand to eye level, she shook it. *Control. I am in control. I am not there. I am in Skyhold. I am safe.* It was a litany she had repeated to herself many times these last few days. *Safe. Ellana is safe. Cullen is-* He had come to rescue her. Even after everything she said and did to him. Did that mean he loved her still? Did he still want to marry her? He hadn’t come by to see her. Then again, not many of the others had, either. Her screaming fits and mental breakdowns had left her poor company. Dorian and Fiona were her only constant companions, trying to dispel the last of the magic that held her.

Closing her eyes, she focused on the sounds around her. *Shouts, laughs, conversation. There was none of that at the shrine. Just silence, screeching of crystal dragging against stone, the hushed tones of Samson speaking to Maddox, the emotionless tone of the Tranquil, the clink of his tools tapping on lyrium and metal, the creak of her cell door, the heavy footsteps of him coming to her at night, his grunts as he took her pliant body, the wet sounds of- NONONONONO stopstopstop please stop.* Grabbing at her head, she buried her face in her knees, wailing piteously as someone knocked. *I’m here. In Skyhold. I am safe. Someone knocked. No one ever knocked there.* The door slowly swung open on smooth hinges. *No creaking.*

A familiar strawberry blonde head poked in.

“Oh! You’re awake. Um. Hi. Is it alright if I come in?” Silently, she nodded, warily watching the warrior as he awkwardly sat across from her bed in a chair. “How are you feeling?” Cocking her head at him, she shrugged, tapping her head and her throat. “Your head hurts? And your throat…? Oh, you lost your voice. I can only imagine. I, um…” he scratched his head, searching for the words he so desperately wanted to say. “I just wanted to check on you, before I head back to Denerim. Eamon is probably throwing a fit right now.” She frowned at the mention of his advisor, Alistair slightly chuckling at her reaction. “Yes, I know you’re not fond of him. But he’s been a tremendous help over the years. I couldn’t have gotten this far without him.” Aerin rolled her eyes at that, causing him to grin for the first time in weeks. “So much faith in me? I’m touched. Ah… Here. This belongs to you.” Fumbling into his pocket, he drew out a chain, whole once more, a golden ring swinging from his fingers. “You sister found it, gave it to me. Dagna fixed the chain. I wasn’t sure if you wanted it back, you know, since you’re getting married at all…” Opening her mouth, Aerin tried to force words out, only succeeding in rasping. Her nose screwed up in frustration. Alistair had to physically resist himself from leaning forward to kiss her nose. He always loved it when she made that expression, even though it usually occurred when she was exasperated with him. He settled for smiling at her. Sighing, she held out her hand for the ring. “Oh, you do want it back?” She glared at him and mouthed, ‘It’s mine. Gimme.’ Stupid grin once again plastered on his face, he dropped it into her outstretched hand. She examined the ring carefully, then pulled the chain around her neck, patting it into place, satisfied. “Aerin, I…”

He wanted to tell her. How much he loved her still. How every night, when he lay down to sleep, he pictured her beside him, snuggled against his side, sleepy lips kissing him goodnight. How every morning, he imagined her bare skin softly illuminated by the rising sun, hair a tangled mess, curled up in a ball, lightly snoring as he left to start his day. How he sometimes talked to her in his mind when he was having a particularly bad day. He would think of what she would say to him, how she would roll her pretty eyes, smack him in the arm, and kiss his cheek. It helped keep him sane. He wanted to tell her, but it wouldn’t be fair. She wasn’t his to love anymore.

“I’m glad you’re back here safe. Well, I should get going. Have to get my men home and all. Take care of yourself, Aerin.” With a last wistful smile, he was gone. Aerin frowned at the doorway where he had just been and his abrupt departure. Fiona peeked in, glancing around the room.

“Oh, is His Majesty gone?” Leaping out of bed, Aerin suddenly grabbed the older mage’s wrist and hauled her behind her through the hallway. “Aerin, what is wrong? What has gotten into you,
child?” Alistair paused at the end of the corridor, turning to see what the commotion was.

“Aerin? What’s going on?” She shoved the mage at the king, glowering at Fiona, whose eyes widened nervously. Aerin pointed to Alistair’s mouth, then at the elf’s. “I… honestly have no idea what you’re talking about. Grand Enchanter, do you know?”

“I, um. No, I do not.”

‘Liar’, Aerin mouthed, hands on her hips. ‘Tell him.’

“Tell me? Tell me what?” Alistair read her lips. “Fiona?”

“I do not have any idea what sh- Ow, Aerin!” She rubbed at a bright red mark where the younger woman had pinched her. “Fine! Fine. But not out here.” Nodding, Aerin herded them back into her room, closing the door and leaning against it so the mage couldn’t escape.

Wringing her hands, Fiona began to pace, a befuddled Alistair sitting in a chair. “Soooo…”

“I was a Grey Warden. With Duncan. I was there, at his Joining. Did he ever tell you that?” she blurted out, the king sitting ramrod straight.

“No, he never mentioned you.”

“Right. I- Oh, Andraste preserve me.” She sank down to the bed, staring at her hands. “There was a Grey Warden expedition to the Deep Roads. Duncan and I went, tasked to accompany King Maric, in 9:10. We… Maric and I. We became close. I ended up pregnant.”

“Oh? That’s- wait. Maric. As in, my father Maric? You’re saying- no, that’s impossible. My mother was a serving girl at Redcliffe.” Alistair leapt up from his chair, taking up Fiona’s previous route as he paced the small room anxiously.

“I asked them to tell you that. To spare you the shame of being raised elf-blooded. Duncan and Maric swore to look after you. There was an amulet. A heart shaped pendant I gave to Eamon to give to you.” She glanced up nervously, hands slightly trembling.

Alistair gaped at her, slowly reaching under his tunic, pulling out the amulet Aerin had found for him so long ago. “You’re… my mother? I have family? All this time, and you never…”

“Alistair. You are king. What would the nobles say if they found out your mother was an elf? And a mage? They would tear you apart. No, it was better you did not know.”

Groaning, he slumped back into the seat. “I threw my own mother out of Redcliffe. Yelled at you. Maferath’s beard…” A snort escaped him. "Well, Maric and Eamon did an excellent job of looking after me. Duncan was the closest thing I ever had to a father."

"Maric cared for you," the elf whispered.

"I... know," he sighed, the memory of his father in the Fade coming back to him. "You were a Warden. So was me being recruited part of the plan, as well? Or just a way for Duncan to keep me from the templars?"

Aerin tapped her chest, pulling his focus away from his mother. 'Taint,' she mouthed.

"Taint? What- oh."

Fiona nodded. "Being pregnant with you cured me of the Taint, but it did not spare you. The
Joining was your only hope of surviving longer."

"Maker," he shook his head. "What a mess. How did you know, Aerin?"

She cocked an eyebrow at him, as if to ask, ‘Really?’ Leaning over she tapped his face, pointing at Fiona’s, mimicked him biting his lip and twirling a small lock of hair at the back of his head, and pointed to Fiona again, who was currently doing the same thing. She put her hands back into her lap. “She knows you well, Alistair. And she loves you very much.” Aerin paled.

“That’s why you offered to take care of her, isn’t it?” Alistair smiled at the mage.

“I- yes. I had hoped...” Fiona gaze at the pair, sadness etched in every line on her face. “It does not matter. Now you know.” She stood up to go.

Reaching out a hand, Alistair gently touched her arm and stilled her. “May I hug you?” Tears sprung to both women’s eyes as she nodded, Aerin pressing her hand to her mouth in glee. His own eyes were watering as he embraced his mother for the first time. “Mother.” Pulling back, he carefully wiped her face. “I really do have to go, but... maybe you could come to Denerim? Stay at the castle for a bit as a guest? I would love to get to know you, maybe hear some stories about Duncan and- my father.”

She smiled. “I would love that as well.” Alistair turned to the still crying elf by the door.

“Aerin.” He pulled her to his chest. “Thank you. I will never be able to repay you for this.” She snorted and flicked his ear. “Ow, hey! Alright, fine.” Leaning over her hair, he breathed in deeply of her scent for what he knew was the final time. “Goodbye, Aerin.”

The two elven mages watched him disappear at the end of hall. “Thank you, Aerin. I would never have had the courage to do that without you.” She pulled the younger woman into a crushing hug. “I wish things could have worked out for you and him. A love like that is rare.” Aerin sniffed, rubbing her nose on her sleeve, and wobbled slightly. “Lay down a bit. I do not want you overextending yourself, do understand?” Climbing back into the bed, she mouthed, ‘Yes, mother’. Fiona chuckled. “Sleep now, child. I will fetch some food for you.”

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Standing on the ramparts, the Commander watched, fur mantle lightly fluttering in the wind, as the Inquisitor rode out alongside the King of Ferelden, both heading their separate ways. The king had left happy and grinning the whole time. He could only assume it had been Aerin to make him so excited. What had she said? Was she going to leave Skyhold?

“You haven’t gone to see her yet, have you?” Leliana approached him, face hidden in the depths of her cowl.

“No, I... I haven’t. I don’t know what to say. Or if she even wants to see me.”

“And what if she does? And she thinks that you are avoiding her because you do not want to see her?”

Cullen sighed, breath puffing out in a tiny fog. “You are right, of course. I’ll go when she’s awake.”

“She’s awake now,” Leliana said. “I just came from there. No time like the present.” Gathering his resolve, he nodded to the spymaster and headed into the keep, taking the familiar path up to her room.
"Aerin?" he called out. No answer. Was she asleep? Gently pushing the door, he found it unlocked and open. “Aerin?” The door swung open, revealing an empty room, balcony doors thrown open to the early morning chill. A ruby head poked around the wall, eyes wide. “Um. Hi.” Hesitantly, she stepped back into the room, running a hand through her unbound hair, head lowered. “I just… wanted to see how you were doing. And I needed to apologize.” Her head snapped up at that, curiosity spreading across her face.

‘Why?’ she mouthed.

“Oh, is your voice still gone? I, uh… Why? What do you mean, why? The things I said to you, I- I hurt you, Aerin. I swore to never harm you and I…” his voice choked as that memories of their argument came rushing back. She grabbed a piece of parchment off a side table, bent over the desk and furiously scribbled.

“I should be the one apologizing.”

His face screwed up in confusion reading what she wrote. “You? For what? You did nothing wrong.”

“For what I said. I didn’t mean it, honest. And I attacked you first. With magic, no less. I understand if you hate me. I’m so sorry.” Tears filled her eyes as she watched him read.

“Aerin. Aerin, Aerin,” he stepped closer to her, gathering the sobbing woman up in his arms, sinking down into the sofa, gently rocking her. “I was so scared I had lost you. That you were taken, when you should have been safe here, all because I was a jealous fool, I- I will never forgive myself.” She curled up against his chest, sobs slowly growing quiet. “I love you. More than I have ever loved anyone. But-” she stiffened, “I talked to the Iron Bull. He helped me realized some things. Mainly, that you and me, we’re very much alike. Our past. Our darkness. We’re not doing any favors for each other.” Raising her head, her eyes held his. Maker, how much he loved her. He would gladly die for her. Instead, she almost died because of him. The Iron Bull was right. They would destroy each other. “We can’t keep doing this. I think.. We’d be okay at first. But eventually, we’d…” Aerin mimicked an explosion, hands blowing apart. He chuckled. “Yes. Boom.” She nodded understanding.

‘What now?’ her lips asked.

“Now… we have a job to do. Samson has lost his base. Corypheus will make a move soon. Ellana plans to go to the Hissing Wastes soon, there are rumors of Venatori out there. You need to get better. Those are our priorities right now.” Nodding, she laid her head back down in the crook of his neck, sighing. Wrapping his arms around her, he decided this would be okay, one last time.

***

“Where is she?” His office door flew open with a bang, as a petite blue eyed mage in matte black armor marched in, a white haired elf close behind her.

“Hawke, Fenris. So lovely to see you,” Cullen remarked dryly.

“Cut the bullshit, Rutherford. The last letter we got from Varric said Aerin had been captured and we’ve had no word since. Where is she?!” Fenris growled, his tattoos glowing softly.

“Library, I think. It’s where she usually is these days.”

“She’s here?” Hawke blinked, stunned.
Cullen nodded. “We got her back.”

Sighing in relief, Fenris sagged against the desk. “How is she?”

“She is…” the Commander frowned, searching for the right phrase. “Much more subdued. She went through a lot there. Quieter. Softer. More… fragile.”

“Thank you for rescuing her. Is Varric here?” Hawke asked.

“Wasn’t just me. Half of Skyhold went. And the King of Ferelden. Varric is with the Inquisitor. Do you plan on staying long?” He held his breath, begging the Maker they would say no.

“Yup.” Dammit. “As long as Aerin needs us to. Aw, don’t look so glum, Curly,” she grinned. “We’re gonna have her back to herself in no time. Then it’ll be like Kirkwall, all over again.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Cullen groaned. “You and her together always spells trouble for me.”

“You love it. Come on Fenris, let’s go find her.” Grabbing her lover’s hand, Hawke tugged him out of the office, Fenris waving to the Commander of his shoulder.

“See you, Curly.” He chuckled at the sound of the former Knight-Captain groaning again.

“Library’s up that way, Hawke.”

“I knew that!” she exclaimed, backtracking down the hall. “Aerin! Where in the Maker’s hairy ball sack- oops, sorry Sister- are you?” A stunned face popped over a chair nestled in a side alcove.

“Aerin? Fen?” she whispered, her voice still broken and harsh.

“One and only. Heard you got into a scuffle.” Aerin snorted.

“Scuffle. Right. Weisshaupt?”

Grinning, Hawke draped herself over her old friend, Fenris electing to sit in an actual chair across from her. “Reported back and was asked to wait on further instructions, but the First Warden is notoriously slow for deciding on anything, so we left as soon as Varric sent word you were missing. Obviously, we’re a little late, but hey, everything worked out.”

“Oh, there are you.” Dorian grinned as he walked into the library, spotting the Champion petting Aerin as if she were a cat. “I was wondering what was keeping you. Did he come with you?”

“He?” Aerin watched them, utterly lost.

“Him,” Fenris muttered sourly. “Anders.” Her eyebrows almost flew off her head.

“Why?”

“Because we did it.” Dorian leaned down into her face until their noses touched, grinning wider than she had ever seen. “We did it. Dagna and I. We have the spell to remove your rune.” Aerin just stared at him, unable to process what he was saying. “You said it took one mage four sacrifices, right? So the spell needs four times the mana of a regular mage. Fiona, Hawke, Anders, and Michael. Actually, Michael might be enough his own,” he huffed, “But better to be safe. I can cast the spell. We can break it, Aerin. For good this time.”

Free. They actually found a way to- “No.”

Jerking back, he studied her, brow furrowed. “No? What do you mean, no? This is what you
wanted!” Fenris watched her curiously.


“Oh. I see.”

“See what?” Hawke demanded.

“Dagna created a temporary solution awhile back. Aerin was a human, but she was clumsy, unused to her original form. Tripped a lot, ran into walls, made careless mistakes in battle.”

“So why I got taken. I fell,” she scowled.

“So you want to wait until Corypheus is defeated first, right?” She nodded. Sighing, the altus threw his hands up. “Fine, fine, just shove aside all my hard work. Hours of sleepless nights, when I could have been abed with my amatus.” Smiling, she reach over and patted his arm.

“Thanks, Dor.”

He sniffed. “Yes, well. We’ll just have to find a way to hide the Grand Cleric’s murderer from the Knight-Captain until then, won’t we? Where is he, anyways?”

“In that old guard tower,” Fenris motioned to a corner of the keep.

“You mean that guard tower the Commander is walking into right now?” Raising an eyebrow, Dorian leaned out the window. The shouts could be heard all the way across the fortress.

“Shit!” Hawke sprung off Aerin’s lap, vaulted over the stairs, landing on an outraged Solas, and bolted outside, a string of elvish curses following her out.

“Never a dull moment with that girl around, is there?” the Tevinter mage remarked dryly.

“Not a day,” Fenris sighed, pushing himself to his feet. “Come on, Aerin, let’s go save the idiots from each other.” The two elves raced down the stairs, following the sound of angry voices across the keep.

“You there! Arrest him, now!”

“So you can just lock me up, Knight-Captain? Make me Tranquil? Kill me?”

“That is not my title! And what about those that you killed? Do they not deserve justice?”

“Justice? Ha! What do you know of justice?”

An ear piercing whistle cut through the bellowing men. “Shut up! Both of you,” Hawke snapped. Cullen rounded on the petite mage. “This is your doing! Why have you brought him here?”

“To help,” Fenris growled. “It was not our first option, believe me, but we needed mages Aerin trusted. Powerful mages.”

“Aerin trusts- Do you really trust this crazed terrorist?” He stared blankly at the elf, who in turn, had her wide eyes focused on the blonde mage in front of her. His hair was longer, more straggled, face worn down even more than it had been in Kirkwall. These past few years had not been kind to him. But his eyes, his warm golden honeyed eyes, were the same. Cautiously, she crept forward,
placing her hand against his rough bearded cheek.

“Hi.”

The mage grinned at her, his muscles protesting the unfamiliar action. “Been awhile, Aer Aer.” Fenris made a noise of contempt behind them. Smiling, Aerin walked into his open arms, resting her head against his fur cloak.

“Huh. I didn’t realize they were that close,” Hawke murmured.

“They understood each other. As mages and slaves. Their imprisonment wasn’t the same, but they understood,” Fenris replied.

“And she is just okay with all the people he murdered? The city he helped destroy?” Cullen’s jaw was clenched, fury barely restrained behind bulging veins and muscles and plate armor.

“No,” the tattooed elf sighed. “But she believes in second chances. I’d think you’d know about that, wouldn’t you, Knight-Captain?”

Face screwed up in disgust, the Commander glared at Anders, still holding Aerin in an embrace. “Just keep him out of my sight,” he spat, marching back out of the tower.

“Well. That went well.”

Chapter End Notes

GUYS. Just 9 more chapters and 1 epilogue. AHHH.

I dub this Chapter 'Where Shit Actually Starts Happening'.
The day the Inquisitor finally returned was gray, a thick drizzle covering the land, blanketing the keep in a shroud of damp misery. The nobles and staff of Skyhold crowded the edges of the keep, straining to get a glance at the man they once called Blackwall, who had been revealed to actually be a disgraced Orlesian captain of the army, being led away to the dungeon in chains, flanked by a stormy faced Commander and a weary Inquisitor.

Ellana approached Leliana and Josephine, who stood waiting for her on the stairs. “Please tell me some good news. Something. Anything.”

Josephine smile wavered only slightly. “Aerin has her voice completely back. And thanks to Serrah Hawke, she is much restored to her old self.”

Snorting, Leliana continued. “The downside to that is that Hawke and Sera get along well. Too well. Cullen should probably lock his doors at night. They have been plotting ever since he left Skyhold.”

A bright smile lit up the Herald’s face at the mention of her sister’s recovery. “We should celebrate! A banquet! Something like... A banquet.”

“Perhaps after we defeat Corypheus, Inquisitor,” Sister Nightingale grinned. “Go see Aerin, then take a bath. A nice, long, hot bath. Everything else can wait for now.”

Giving her new favorite advisor a spontaneous hug, startling the former bard, Ellana skipped up the stairs, eager to find her sister. She followed the sounds of giggling to Solas’ tower. The elf was standing in the middle of his room, glaring up at the library above him, where dozens of paper parachutes were being launched over the railing, cluttering up his otherwise neat space.

“Inquisitor,” he spoke through gritted teeth, eyes flashing with annoyance, “could you perhaps speak to your sister and her companions? My requests for them to cease their childish antics have fallen on deaf ears.

A voice rang out from above. “Not deaf, you eggy tit, just don’t care!”

“And, Sera. Vhenan. Please.” Stifling a giggle, she patted his arm.

“I’ll see what I can do, Solas.” Climbing the stairs, she found Sera, Hawke, and Aerin huddled on the ground, busy constructing more animals, among other things, out of paper. They were surrounded by bears, dragons, frogs, and penises, tying each one to bits of fabric before throwing them below. “Having fun, are we?” She grinned at the women.

“Thank goodness the voice of reason is here,” a cultured voice called out from behind a tall chair. “They’ve been insufferable this past week.”

“You like it.” Aerin smirked at Dorian, before turning to Ellana and hugging her. “How was it?” Her voice was a little huskier than usual and there was a dark edge to her smile and eyes, but otherwise, she seemed much like her old self.

“Horrible. Blackwall isn’t a Grey Warden. He’s an Orlesian captain who was ordered to kill a
noble, and ended up killing his wife and children too. He’s been on the run for years. I brought him back. No idea what to do with him. Josephine has been a minor wreck since he left.”

Aerin frowned. “Kaffas, that’s… shit. I keep forgetting they have this weird non-relationship thing going. It’s obvious he’s been trying to atone though. How many lives has he saved since then?”

“I don’t know, Aerin. He killed children.”

“So have I.” Her gaze was distant, lips flattened into a thin line.

Ellana froze. “I- you’re right. The Inquisition is a place for second chances. His heart is good.”

Her sister nodded once. “What else?”

“I met with the Qun. It was a mess. We were clearing the area of Venatori, two separate sites at the same time so the dreadnought could take out a smuggler ship loaded with red lyrium. We took one camp, while his Chargers took the other. They… they were overrun. We had to make a choice. Retreat and save the Chargers, lose the ship, or save the ship and lose his men. I told him- I told him to save his men. He did.” Ellana’s voice lowered to a whisper, eyes haunted as she relived her horrific choice. “One hundred Qunari were on that ship. I told him to let them die. Now he’s Tal-Vashoth.”

Aerin slid her arm around her, pulling her close. “No, Elle. You told him to save his family. That’s what his men are to him. Not just his employees. You made the right call. He could have not listened to you and saved the ship. But he made the choice.”

Sighing, Ellana leaned her head against Aerin’s shoulder. “I’m so tired. So ready for this to be done. I miss life with the Dalish. Oh. Duke Bastien Ghislain is dead. The wyvern heart Vivienne needed was for a potion for him. It didn’t work. She’s taking time off to be with his family right now.”

“Go wash off the dust of the road and take a nap, Elle. You’re exhausted.” The older woman pressed a kiss to her dusty brown hair. “Everything will be better tomorrow, you’ll see.”

“Oh. How are you and Cullen?”

“Ah,” Aerin looked over where Sera and Hawke sat, now just drawing pictures of butts and breasts and flinging them at Solas, including graphic instructions on how to use both. “We ended it. For the best, really, it- We weren’t good for each other.”

“I know,” she murmured. “How are you holding up?”

“I think everyone is in on some plot to keep me busy. I’m never alone, either practicing with Michael and Dorian, or sparring with Cassandra, picking flowers or hunting mice with Cole, baking with Sera. Hawke and Fenris being here is a huge help, too. I’m glad you’re back though.”

“I’m glad I’m back, too.” Hugging her sister, Ellana stood up, stretching. “Sera, what is that a picture of?”

“Peaches. Showin’ elfy how to eat them. Bet he doesn’t know, eh Quizzy?”

“Peaches? What? Oh- fenedhis lasa, Sera! Stop!”

***
Josephine stood in front of the golden throne, hands faintly trembling, as she approached the Inquisitor. “For judgement this day, I must present Thom- ahem, Thom Rainier, formerly known to us as Warden Blackwall.” Her voice cracked, changing in pitch at the mention of his alias. “His crimes... well, you are aware of his crimes. It was no small expense to bring him here, but the decision of what to do with him is now yours.”

Ellana folded her slim hands under her chin, studying the defeated man in chains before her. “Have you nothing to say for yourself, Thom Ranier?”

His eyes, full of guilt and despair, raised slightly to stare at her feet. “I accepted my fate. I was ready to die, for all this to end. Why did you bring me back here?”

“You are free,” she replied simply.

“What?”

“The Inquisition is a place for second chances. A wise person recently reminded me that it’s the person we are now, that we are trying to be, that matters. Regardless of our pasts. I first met you as you were teaching farmers how to defend their families. By all accounts, you had been doing that for years. You have saved my back countless times, and the lives of our companions. So this is your sentence. You are free, to atone as the man you are now, not the traitor you thought you were, or the Warden you pretended to be. If you die, those you murdered may be avenged, but others may die for it. I choose to let you live, so your good deeds may continue.”

“The man I am now? I barely know him.”

“I do,” she stated confidently. “And he is a good man, loyal, and fair. Guard, release this man.”

Thom Rainier stared at his unbound wrists, bending a knee to the Inquisitor, his voice fervent, worshipful. “I will not let you down.”

“I know you won’t.” Smiling, she watched him walk out the hall, ignoring the nobles who muttered amongst themselves. “Ok, time to get ready.”

“Ah, Inquisitor, we have one more pressing matter to take care of...” Josephine cleared her throat, motioning for the guards to bring in the next prisoner. What they brought in was... a box.

“What? I’m judging a box? Creators, it smells horrible! Josephine. I don’t have time for this. I have to leave tomorrow for the Hissing Wastes and I have a dozen things to do before I go.”

“I realize that Inquisitor, but the Empress has asked us to take care of this matter, an issue borne of titles and heir apparenicy and... These are the remains of the Grand Duchess Florianne. Halamshiral is having difficulty freeing trade routes that she formerly controlled. Had she been tried, her assets would be forfeit and considerable bureaucracy avoided. We have been asked, as a neutral party, to judge her.”

“Oh for the love of Mythal- I designate Aerin as my regent or second or whatever. She can judge the box. Do you need more? I, as Inquisitor, do hereby appoint Aerin of Clan Lavellan with all the responsibilities and power needed to blah blah pass judgement. Okay?” Without waiting for an answer, Ellana sprinted off the dais, fleeing the horrible odor emanating from the box. Groaning, Josephine motioned for Aerin to take the throne. Gingerly sitting in the uncomfortable chair, Aerin grimaced at the smell.

“Halamshiral was what, almost four months ago? Did they dig her up?” The ambassador nodded. “Ugh. This is... Fine. With the power invested in me by the Inquisitor, I do hereby pass judgement...”
on the remains of Duchess Florianne. I call for rehabilitation! The skull shall do public theater about the evils of evil! I also judge the box! End table for orphans.” There were several choked coughs around the main hall, as the gathered nobility attempted to stifle their amusement. Hawke and Sera had no such qualms, howling with laughter to the side.

“That’s quite enough, Mistress Lavellan. Point taken.” Attempting to hide her smile, Josephine motioned for the guards to take away the odiferous remains. Grinning at the Antivan, Aerin hopped off the throne, heading into the library only to find a brooding Dorian.

“There you are. I need a favor. Come with me to Redcliffe.”

“Oh, romantic getaway? Bull will be jealous.”

Dorian snorted, crossing his arms as he glanced up at her, nose wrinkled in disgust. “Nothing so fun as that. My father, apparently, has sent a retainer to collect his prodigal son. I’m of the opinion this henchman is just planning on knocking me out and dragging me back.”

“Would he really do that?”

“No. Maybe? Who knows. I’m not willing to chance it. Will you come?”

“Of course.”

“Good. If it’s a trap, we escape and kill everyone. You’re good at that.”

“Who are we killing?” Hawke popped up behind her.

“Dorian’s father’s minions, apparently. You want to come?”

“Sure. I haven’t killed anyone in weeks. I’ll start forgetting how, soon. Fenris, let’s go with them.”

The elf glared at the Tevinter. The two kept an uneasy truce, Fenris acknowledging that the mage had reasonably good intentions and that Aerin trusted him, but she doubted they’d ever be friends. “Must I? I’d rather not.”

“You might get to kill some Tevinters, Fen Fen,” Aerin said.

“You truly know the way to my heart.”

***

It was freeing, to finally leave Skyhold again, to travel on the road with her friends. The past several weeks had been rather pleasant, spending time with her friends. She couldn’t believe the lengths to which they went to ensure she was never alone. Someone always crashed in her room at night, usually Sera or Hawke, sometimes Dorian, occasionally the Iron Bull or Leliana. Once or twice, Fenris and Anders. And there was one time it was all of them, plus Josephine, after several glasses of Bull’s maraas-lok and a multitude of wine. Gods, that hangover was the worst.

The rest of the time, there was always an undercurrent tension within the keep, as everyone knew that her and Commander had split. She couldn’t completely avoid Cullen, although they both tried, the moments when they had to interact stiff and forced. She missed him. Missed waking up next to him, missed seeing him smile and laugh, missed the way he looked at her like she was the best thing to ever happen to him, even know she now realized she wasn’t. He deserved better. And so did she. Her heart was light now, the burden of their relationship that she wasn’t even aware she was carrying lifted. It was strange, she mused, how something she fought so hard to keep was the
very thing that had been bringing her down.

Anders barked out a laugh, grinning at something Dorian was saying. She had missed the mage, his wit and dry humor, ever since they split up outside Wycome five years ago. He told her he had been wandering, offering his services as a healer in exchange for food and lodging, doing his best to make a difference, saving as many lives as he could. Smiling, she watched her friends. How far they had all come from the horrors they had seen. That they caused.

“You’re smiling into space. Stop that. It’s creepy.” Aerin patted Fenris on the head, skipping past him.

“Just happy you guys are here, Fen Fen. It’s been too long.”

“So, I heard a rumor. You and the Knight-Captain, hmm?”

“Anders, if you don’t quit calling him that, he will kill you, you realize that, right?”

He chuckled, stepping lightly down the grassy path. The Hinterlands were so much more pleasant now the area had been stabilized and the rifts closed, Inquisition soldiers guarding the highways.

“Having him yell at me is nostalgic. I think he missed it, as well. So? What happened?”

“Yes!” Hawke sidled up closer to her. “Sera mentioned that you two were engaged? Seriously? You and that priggish templar? Then she launched into a series of expletives that I didn’t even understand. Mainly just repeated cock sucker balls of shite over and over until I slowly backed away.”

Aerin frowned, staring down at the ground as she continued on. They should reach Redcliffe in just another hour or so. “We weren’t the only ones scarred by Kirkwall. He feels it, too. We… tried. Loved each other as best we could. It wasn’t enough. That’s all.”

“Oh, Aer Aer.” Fenris swept her into a hug, Aerin turning as still as a statue, staring in horror at the other elf.

“Um. What?” Anders and Hawke both gaped.

“I’m guessing this is a highly unusual event, yes?” Dorian chuckled. “You should see your faces. Priceless.”

Ignoring them, Fenris didn’t let her go. “I was wrong, Aerin. About what I said about us deserving families and a home. It’s not enough to be free unless you have people to share it with you. You know that, right?” Nodding against his shoulder, she gently touched her face, stunned to realize she was crying. “It’s okay. I didn’t realize, we’ve been keeping you so busy, you haven’t had time to properly grieve. Let it out.” Breaths now coming in gasping sobs, she let her friend lead her to the side of road, sitting down as he pulled her into his lap, gently rocking her, humming an old lullaby. The rest of their party sat down as well, Hawke leaning against Ander’s shoulder, smiling as she watched her lover and best friend. Dorian dabbed at his eye, muttering about dust.

Eventually her sobs grew quiet, her shoulders stilling. Sniffling, she took the handkerchief Anders passed her. “Sorry, guys.”

“You needed it,” the altus replied simply. “Feel better?” Nodding, she pushed herself to her feet, splashing a bit of her water from her skin on her face.

“Better. Alright, let’s go meet your dad’s retainer and kick his ass.”
It was not his father’s retainer. Magister Halward Pavus himself descended into the dimly lit tavern, only to face two snarling former slaves with an intense dislike of magisters. “Down, guys,” Hawke hissed. “Let Dorian talk first.” Anders smothered a laugh at the notion of attack elves.

“What is ‘this’ exactly, Father? Ambush? Kidnapping? Warm family reunion?” Dorian’s lips curled in disgust as Aerin’s fingers twitched, ready to leap on the older man at first signal from her friend.

“Dorian, please, if you’d just allow me to-”

“Do you know why I left Tevinter, Aerin? My father,” he spat, “taught me to hate blood magic, as he should. ‘The resort of weak minds’. Those were his words. But what was the first thing he did when his precious heir refused to play pretend for the rest of his life? You tried to change me!” Dorian’s eyes were stricken with the pain of remembrance.

“I only wanted what was best for you,” Magister Pavus pleaded.

“You did what was best for you! Your fucking legacy!”

“If I had known I would drive you to the Inquisition-” the older man began.

Dorian whirled on him. “You didn’t! I joined because it’s the right thing to do. Once I had a father who would have known that.” Turning, he made to stomp out of the empty tavern.

“Once,” his father called out, “I had a son who trusted me. A trust I betrayed. I only wanted to talk to him. Hear his voice again. Ask him to forgive me.” The altus stopped in his tracks, facing his father, uncomprehending what had just happened. He glanced over at Aerin, who was still glaring daggers at the magister. Meeting his gaze, she sighed, stepping back, eyes still narrowed.

“Your call, Dor.” For a long minute he stared at her, trying to figure out what she was thinking, what he should do. He nodded once, and slowly stepped back into the tavern, examining his father with eyes full of suspicion.

“You want to talk? Let’s talk.”

Tugging on Fenris’ sleeve, Aerin motioned to the rest. “Let’s give them space.” She wandered outside, heading down to the lake shore, sitting cross-legged on the edge of the docks to stare across the smooth waters.

“Should’ve known. Blood magic is in his blood. And he willingly goes back,” the other elf growled, leaning against a post. Anders and Hawke dropped down next to Aerin.

“It’s not that simple, Fenris. None of us have family. If I had a chance to reconcile with my parents…” she sighed, tilting back to stare up at the bright blue sky. “Dorian’s father is all he had. Yes, his father made an unforgivable mistake, one I would gladly kill him for had Dorian asked. But… second chances. All of us have done some pretty fucked up shit. Anders especially,’ she nudged the mage in his ribs, ignoring his wince. “It was his choice to give his father a chance to explain himself. We can’t fault him for wanting to try.” A grunt from the surly elf was the only response.

Hawke pointed up. “That cloud looks like a nug eating a sandwich.”

“Never change, Hawke,” Anders sighed.
Chapter End Notes

The line when you sarcastically judge Florianne's remains is my FAVORITE line. I die.

The idea of Hawke, Sera, and Aerin pranking everyone gives me life.

Oh, in case anyone is curious, I posted another one-shot of when Aerin won the gladiator tournament and became Victorem.
“Field and forest shall burn, the seas shall rise and devour them, the wind shall tear their nations from the face of the earth, lightning shall rain down from the sky…” The sister softly chanted as she walked stately around the edge of the garden, the sweet scent of embrium mingling with the acrid tang of rashvine. Tracing a gentle finger over the large red petals, Aerin watched a boy, dark and pale like his mother, curled up on a wooden bench, nose buried in a frightfully large tome compared to his slender stature.

“Aerin. We have not had much chance to talk since you have recovered.”

“I’m sorry, Morrigan. Time keeps slipping away from me.” Aerin politely smiled at the yellow eyed witch, unsure of where they now stood. Or where they had ever stood, really. Were they friends? Merely companions? Acquaintances? “Is that…?”

“Kieran, yes.”

“Such heavy reading for a young boy.”

His mother scoffed. “Education is important. Knowledge is power. You of all people know that.”

Closing the book, the boy jumped off the bench, running to where the women stood. “Mother, I’m done reading that section. May I go play a little now? Oh, hello.” Morrigan’s gaze softened as she considered her son.

“Kieran, this is Aerin Lavellan. She was one of my companions during the Blight.”

Giving her a proper Orlesian bow, the boy solemnly replied, “It is a pleasure to meet you, Mistress Lavellan.” Smiling, Aerin reached out to ruffle his hair, to his surprised delight.

“Just Aerin is fine, Kieran. It’s lovely to meet you, as well.”

“I hear your blood,” he cocked his head to the side, studying the elf. “Your spirit is lost.”

“Kieran, that’s enough. You may go play for an hour, then it shall be time for supper.” Nodding, he scampered off, not willing to lose any of his precious free time to something as mundane as walking. “I… apologize for his behavior. He says the oddest things upon occasion.”

“The Old God soul,” she murmured. Morrigan nodded. “He seems like a delightful child. It’s still weird to think of you as a mother, though. It suits you, strangely enough.”

“I… it has been difficult, I will not lie. But he is an easy child, if very inquisitive.”

“Inquisitive is good,” Aerin agreed. “He looks a lot like… Has Leliana met him?”

“No,” the other woman wryly smiled. “I do not think she cares to remember that night.”

“Can’t blame her,” she snorted. “By the way, I wanted to say thank you, for coming to help rescue me.”

“Of course. We were friends, of a sort, once. I’d like to think we still are,” the witch hesitantly
replied, a questioning note in her tone.

“Sure,” Aerin smiled easily. “Did you see Alistair while he was here?”

Rolling her eyes, Morrigan shook her head. “He came down to badger me incessantly one day about nothing substantial as usual. He really has not changed at all.”

“You don’t think so? We’ve all changed, Morrigan. Him, most of all, I think. Barring Aedan. I still haven’t see him, so I can’t say.”

“You have changed, indeed. You are… heavier. Darker. More intense. The world was not kind to you.”

“No,” she smiled wistfully. “But I made do. It wasn’t all bad. My friends saved me.”

“Friendship,” Morrigan murmured, “is a strange and powerful thing.”

“‘Tis love,” Aerin grinned.

“Love,” she scoffed, her voice softening as a smile played around the edges of her lips. “Hopeless romantic fools.

“And you talk about people not changing?”

***

The cacophony of ravens cawing and flapping feathered wings echoed against the stone walls. Nestled in a small nook was a carving of Andraste, Illuminated by white burning candles, looking down upon a redheaded woman, who was kneeling at her feet, eyes firmly shut, muttering under her breath.

“Copper for your thoughts.”

Without turning or opening her eyes, Leliana asked in a slightly accusatory tone, “How can you be friends with him still?”

“Who?”

“Anders. After all that he has done. It was his actions, the murders he committed, that began all of this.”

“Oh, Leli.” Aerin stepped up to the wall in front of her friend and slid down it, sitting on the ground to look at the spymaster. “The war was a long time coming, you know that. The Gallows was a bomb, just waiting to blow. I know you sympathize with the mages. Tell me. Had Anders not done what he did, which, by the way, I don’t condone at all, what do you think would have happened?”

“We could have found another way, the Divine…”

“Corypheus did not care about the mage-templar war. He would have found her no matter what. She still would have died, Leliana. More than likely, the Gallows would have been annulled. Meredith would have killed every last mage in that city. You were not there. Her madness was… There were so many Tranquil. Branded for the slightest offense, real or perceived. The mages were all terrified. And yes, the place saw more than its fair share of blood mages and abominations. That’s what happens when you corner a mage in a situation with no way out. The circles are sick,
you know that. Anders knew that. I don’t agree with what he did, but honestly? He probably saved more lives in the end than not.”

Sighing, Leliana sat back, staring at her friend with exhausted eyes, her face more lined than Aerin had ever seen. “I am one of the candidates for the next Divine. Cassandra and Vivienne are the others. They both wish to restore the circles.”

Aerin snorted. “Same problems, different master. What would you do?”

“You’re right. I know it doesn’t work. Cassandra wants gradual change to the circles. It’s what I thought I wanted as well, but… Maybe a revolution is what we need. Drastic change. Free all the mages. I never forgot what you said. We fear what we do not understand, what is unknown. Time to take the fire off the shelf.” Grinning, Aerin pulled her into a hug.

“How are you holding up? Besides this crisis of faith you’re having up here. You’re always so busy.”

She waved away her concerns. “I already had my major crisis of faith a few months back. Your sister was most helpful.”

“Where was I?” Aerin frowned.

“Probably arguing with Cullen and sulking back then,” Leliana smirked. “You both are much more… stable now. More melancholy, perhaps, but that is to be expected. Things will get better, you’ll see.”

“How do you know?” the elven woman muttered skeptically.

“Because I have this,” standing up with a sly grin, Sister Nightingale walked to a nearby table, shuffling through a stack of correspondence, pulling out a thick, crisp white envelope. The fine, delicate calligraphy on the front read ‘Adrienne Iseri’. “Go on, open it.”

Brow furrowed, Aerin took the envelope, pulling out the letter tucked inside, beginning to read.

To whom it may concern, I, Marquis Reynaud Lucien Couillard, being of sound mind and body, do bequeath my estate and all its related holdings to my daughter, Adrienne Iseri Couillard- Leli, what the fuck am I reading?

Taking the stack of papers away, the spymaster scanned for a particular document. “Ah, this one.” Snatching it from her hands, Aerin eyes narrowed at the neat penmanship.

“On this, the 17th day of Nubulis, year 42 of the Ninth Age, hereby referred to as the Dragon Age, I do declare the legal adoption of Adrienne Iseri by Marquis Reynaud Lucien Couillard, of Val Aubrais. Adrienne Iseri will assume the name of Couillard and all the rights entitled to firstborn of that House. Leli- what the fuck am I reading?”

The spymaster was positively jubilant. “You remember the Marquis, I assume? You did save his life, after all. Turns out his previous beloved wife died years ago, leaving him without heirs. Poor man never had the urge to remarry. Until he asked you at the Empress’ ball. He never did follow up with you on that, did he? That is because he spied you and our Commander later that night, cozying up to each other in the gardens. He did not wish to separate you from your purported true love.”

Aerin glared at her friend, confusion muddling her features. “Okay? That doesn’t explain this,” she waved the expensive parchment around overhead.
“Marquis Couillard was quite taken with your courage, strength, wit, and command of the Game. It’s all in this letter he wrote to you, here,” Leliana pulled out another sheet from the pile. “He had no heirs, and he detested his next of kin. He suspected his wife’s death to be their doing. Not wishing for his estate to fall into their hands, he believed you would be a suitable replacement for when he was gone. Since you would not marry him, he did the next best thing- adopted you as his heir, as he knew you had no family of your own. Signed and sealed by none other than Empress Celene and Grand Cleric Callista of Val Royeaux.”

The elf gaped in paralyzed silence. I’m… adopted? By the Marquis? Wait, I’m a noble now? Shit. I have to run an estate? I don’t know the first thing about that! Kaffas. Vishante kaffas. Venhedis. What the everloving fucking fuck “Fuck.”

“Eloquent as always,” Leliana giggled, then sobered. “Unfortunately, the Marquis is quite ill. Healers do not expect him to last the month. Everything is all set for you to inherit, but only if you want it. He has left you the option to decline, if you wish.”

Aerin just continued to blankly stare at her, blinking slowly.

“Think about it at least. Mull it over. This could be the opportunity you’ve been searching for.”

“But I’m an elf,” she blurted out. “I mean, Dagna could remake the bracelets, but there’s no telling how long it will be before she has the materials again, and I know Dorian said he and Fiona created a spell and Anders and Hawke have been helping tweak it and Michael can help with the extra mana but it might not work and I’d be-”

Leliana clamped her hand over her friend’s mouth, muffling her ramblings. “We will get to that when we get to that. It is understood that you would not take the marquisate until after your oath to the Inquisition was fulfilled anyways, when Corypheus is defeated. There is no rush, Aerin. His steward will care for his properties and holdings until you are able to take over. If this is something you want. Take your time.”

Nodding, eyes glazed over, Aerin stood up and walked out of the rookery, steps forced and jerky, oblivious to the people calling for her. Down, her feet carried her, toward the war room. Val Aubrais. I should see if I can find it on a map. The ambassador was bent over her desk, not a hair or scrap of fabric out of place as usual, squinting at a fancy scroll while a scribe furiously scribbled notes next to her.

“…I don’t believe the Inquisitor will be able to spare the time to go, with the preparations for the Arbor Wilds full underway. Maybe a small delegation? We should definitely send at least a few representatives to His Majesty's wedding with a gift. Let’s see… two weeks to Denerim, so plan on five weeks away from Skyhold.”

His Majesty…? “…Alistair? Alistair is… getting married?” Aerin’s voice rose, breaking in pitch.

Sighing, Josephine straightened. “Yes, he- oh, Aerin! Forgive me. I did not see you there. You were… close to him, were you not?” Her dark eyes were warm with sympathy. Aerin suddenly despised her.

“Once. Pardon me.”

Abruptly turning, she rushed out of the office, out of the main hall, intuitively finding the deserted and crumbling parts of the massive fortress that had never been rendered fit for habitation. In these dark warrens, Aerin mindlessly wandered for hours, numb to everything within, only one phrase repeating in her mind- Alistair is getting married.
It was dark, a cool early summer night breeze ruffling the strands of hair that had escaped her braid. She stopped aimlessly roaming when she realized there was no more ground in front of her, only a sheer drop and the majestic snowcapped Frostbacks ahead. Swinging her legs over the railing, she sat on the edge of the ramparts, thoughts still too muddled to make sense of what had just happened. The sound of soft leather scraping against stone crept near.

“Aerin? What are you doing? Please get down from there. I haven’t seen you all day.” A worried voice moved tentatively closer, not wishing to startle the other into accidentally falling. “Aerin?” Ellana leaned against the wall beside her sister. “What happened? Talk to me.”

Slowly she swiveled, blank stare turning to her sister. “I… I’m adopted.”

“What?”


“Uh. Yeah? Macaron man. Didn’t you say he asked you to marry him?”

“Yes, he… Changed his mind, I guess. Ellana. He adopted me. He wants me to be his heir. Take over his estate. As Marquise.”

The Inquisitor stared, jaw dropping open at her sister, who still had the air of a spooked halla about to bolt. “Is that even possible?”

“Celene and the Grand Cleric approved it. I… Creators, Elle. I’m an elf. A former slave. Not even from this world. I can’t be a- a noble.”

Shrugging, a tiny smile starting to form on her face, Ellana leaned her back against the wall, studying the older woman. “You’d be a hell of a lot better at it than the rest of them, that’s for sure.”

“You’re saying I should do it?”

“What else would you do after this is all over? Go back to wandering Thedas, taking contracts? Bouncing from town to town? You could have a home. Hold power. Make a difference in people’s lives.”

“Do something worthwhile with my life,” she added dryly.

“That’s not what I meant,” Ellana frowned.

“I know,” Aerin sighed, sliding backwards off the edge of the battlements, to the other elf’s great relief. “I just… It’s a lot to consider, you know? The life of a lady is not one I’d ever imagined or wanted. I’d have to hide my magic. Hang up my weapons. Marry some poncy lordling.”

“Sure you would,” she snorted. “I’d like to see anyone try to make you do anything you didn’t want to do. That can’t be all that’s upsetting you. No, don’t shake your head at me. What else?”

Sighing, Aerin leaned her head against the cool stones, breathing deeply of the crisp mountain air. “How are you and Solas? You haven’t really talked much about him lately. And I never see you with him either, not like you were.”

The lines of her vallaslin distorted as she screw up her nose. “He’s been… ugh. So weird for months now. Barely talking. He says he still cares about me, but he definitely doesn’t show it. It’s
whatever. I have more important things to do than to worry about some stupid man anyways.”

“His loss. Want me to stab him? Lop off a pinky? He doesn’t need it anyways,” Aerin pulled her little sister in for a hug, pressing her lips to her mahogany hair. “I’m sorry, Elle. You deserve a man that treats you like the amazing, wonderful woman you are. Someone that makes you his priority.”

“Same as you,” she muttered into her chest.

Aerin snorted. “I think I’m done with love and men for awhile. One heartbreak per decade is my limit.”

“What about Anders?” An impish smile crossed the Inquisitor's face. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“Anders is…” she scrubbed at her face with her hands, sighing. “Just a friend. Maybe in another lifetime we could have. He’s still bound to Justice. I can’t. And he knows. We don’t talk about it. It doesn’t matter.”

“You still haven’t told me what else is wrong.”

“It’s…” Aerin stared out at the mountains. “He- he’s getting married. I figured he would, eventually. He should have a long time ago. I just…” she blew a lock of hair out of her face. “It hurts.”

“He?” Sidling up closer, Ellana laid her head on her shoulder. Pulling out her necklace, Aerin twisted the ring in her fingers, watching as the starlight caught the icy blue gem and the shadows run along the carved gold. She still vividly remembered the day he gave it to her. Standing by the wooden barricade around Vigil’s Keep. She was covered in mud and darkspawn ichor, muscles burning from the battle that had raged for hours, heart shattered from the separation. And he had strode through the gates, shining in his armor, eyes searching for her, holding her like she was the most important thing in the world. And she had been, once. Just as he was to her. Now… it was time to set old dreams aside. It was better this way, right? He deserved a bride who was pure and whole. Not whatever the hell she was. A broken shell filled with rage and hate. Fenris was right. She had too much blood on her hands. She had her memories of him. That was enough. It would have to be.

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The torchlight flickered over the map, dozens of iron markers scattered across the worn parchment. Sheafs of paper, some covered in tiny, neat letters, others, in loopy scrawls, still others in orderly, blocky lines, lay in piles around the edge of the heavy oak table. A young Dalish woman, chewing the end of a quill ragged, stared unseeing in front of her, listening in as her advisors discussed the upcoming strategy.

“With an eluvian, Corypheus could cross over into the Fade in the flesh…” Leliana shook her head. Ellana shivered. Morrigan had showed her the eluvian she brought to Skyhold. The same type of mirror Merrill had tried so hard to such disastrous results to fix. And this human had managed what the Dalish could not.

“He would unleash forces that would tear the world apart,” Morrigan murmured.

Josephine frowned at the map. “So this mean everything is lost unless we reach the eluvian before him?”
“Corypheus has a head start,” Cullen scowled. “No matter how quickly our army moves.”

“We should gather our allies before we march.”

“Can we wait for them? We should send spies ahead to the Arbor Wilds.”

“Without support from the shoulders? You’d lose half of them!”

“Stop, Creators, please, just stop fighting!” Ellana groaned, slamming her hands into the table, several markers falling over.

“What should we do, Inquisitor?” Six sets of eyes watched her intently.

Blinking rapidly, she gathered a deep breath, glancing briefly at her sister, who just smiled and nodded at her. “Right. Josephine, have our allies to send scouts to the Arbor Wilds. Leliana, your fastest agents will join them. That should be enough on our part to slow down Corypheus until Cullen’s troops can get there. Should work. Right?”

“The Arbor Wilds is not so accommodating, Inquisitor. Old elven magic lingers in those woods.” Morrigan replied.

“We’d be remiss not to take advantage of your knowledge, Lady Morrigan. Please, lend us your expertise.” Aerin choked on a laugh at the ambassador’s flattery, launching into a cough fit. Not bothering to hide her own grin, Hawke pounded on her friend’s back while the witch glared at them both.

“Any further instructions, Inquisitor?”

Ellana stared down at the map, hands firmly planted against the war table they had spent so many sleepless nights gathered around. “Hawke, Cassandra, and Rylen will lead Skyhold’s defenses while we’re gone. There shouldn’t be any issues, but just in case, Aerin will check in on Hawke in the Fade every night, so any messages for me, pass through her if urgent. Otherwise, send a raven. The rest come with me.” Looking up at her advisors, she paused. “The Inquisition began as handful of chantry heretics, the most random assortment of volunteers ever seen, and one unwilling Dalish elf. Thanks to you all, it is now a force that stands among the nations of Thedas, a force that will topple this so-called god.” Leveling a steady gaze at the men and women gathered, she continued, “I could ask for not finer council, no better guidance.”

“Inquisitor. We could ask for no finer cause,” the Commander bowed, a slight smile curving his lips, the rest of the assembled murmuring their agreement.

“Well, then,” she grinned. “Let’s go ruin Corypheus’ day, shall we?”

Chapter End Notes

We finally find out what the sneaky Marquis was up to! No stabbity stabs after all.
This is what the prehistoric jungle must have looked like. I would not be surprised if a velociraptor burst through those leaves right now. I wonder if Thedas had dinosaurs? Dragon dinos. Dragosaurs? The Arbor Wilds was a lush, untouched, verdant hellscape. Thick, creeping vines snaked their way up reaching branches, winding their hairy leaves around massive tree trunks, the species of which remained unknown. Air, thick and wet enough to drown in, stifled the soldiers as they marched, steaming them alive inside mildewing leather and rusting plate. But, oh, the life. Delicate, lacey flowers blanketed the path, translucent petals glittering in the morning dew. Tiny birds, feathers gleaming as if adorned with precious gemstones flitted in and out of the greenery, while glowing, yellow eyes blinked and spotted tails flicked warily from secret vantage points, keeping out of the way of the intruders.

It was a shame, to bring their war here. Everything was so pure, pristine, and... hostile. Healers worked overtime, trying to create antidotes and poultices to a myriad of stings and poisons as they advanced, warning the army to touch nothing, although they were helpless to avoid the insects that swarmed them, bellies swelling from their feasting on blood and skin. Grimacing at the sweat coating every inch of her body, Aerin kept up a small breeze around herself and the Inquisitor, just enough to keep the offensive bugs away from their meal.

“Why couldn’t the stupid elves build Mythal’s temple somewhere else? Like Ostwick? Ostwick is nice this time of year. Great breeze from the mountains, ocean, no jungle full of mosquitoes the size of my head,” the Inquisitor grumbled. “I thought the further south we go, the cooler it should be? Why did this Void forsaken place not get that memo?”

Cole tilted his head, floppy hat shading his large eyes. “It’s a forest. Can forests read?”

“The Inquisitor is just being grumpy, kid,” Varric patted his arm. “Forests can’t read, no.”

“Oh, sweet Creators, there’s the camp. I am going to strip naked and lay in the river the rest of the day.”

“That’s one way to raise morale,” Aerin snickered.

“Raise a lot more than morale,” the Iron Bull called from behind them,

“Half to full mast in record time,” Sera giggled.

“But we’re not on a ship,” Cole frowned.

Laughing, they let their horses trot into camp, the creatures glad to finally rest, get brushed down, and dig their noses into a waiting bag of oats. Passing their reins to a soldier, Ellana and Aerin jogged over to the command tent, where Cullen, Grand Duke Gaspard of Orlais, and Colonel Graeme Eremon of Ferelden were all gathered around a makeshift table, maps and correspondence and reports covering every inch of the rough wood. “What’s the word?”

“Inquisitor, you’re here. Red templars and Venatori are pressing back hard. Samson, as well as Corypheus, have been spotted by our scouts, heading for an elven ruin to the north,” Cullen pointed to the map, marking the path of the enemy.
“My men are moving into position, clearing a path straight through the fighting for you to get to the ruins,” Eremon spoke, his deep, gruff voice confident with years of experience.

“The Orlesian forces are flanking the scattering red templars. Soon Corypheus will have no army left to him,” Gaspard chimed in, face hidden by his mask. *How the hell is he wearing that in this heat?*

“No time to rest, then,” Ellana sighed. “Alright. Aerin, will you gather Varric, Morrigan, Iron Bull, and Solas? We’ll be the forward team. Dorian, Cole, Sera, and Blackwall can follow. Vivienne will remain in camp, as additional security for the Empress.”

Nodding, Aerin pushed the tent flap open, heading across the path to gather their team, when a voice called out to her. “Aerin! A moment, please?” Stopping, she turned to wait on the approaching man. Cullen jogged over to her, armor jangling quietly, footsteps cushioned by the trampled moss.

“You must be roasting in that armor. Glad you at least left the fur at home,” she smiled.

“Ah, yes,” he reached a hand up, rubbing at the back of his neck in an overly familiar gesture. “I just… the forest is crawling with enemies, both the templars, but also the wildlife. There are bears, several different types of large cats, and strange creatures with massive horns. Most have been scared off by the fighting, but some might still attack. Do not let your guard down.”

“Cullen. We got this. Not our first time in unfamiliar territory, yeah?” He frowned down at her. *He hasn’t been taking care of himself again.* The dark circles were back, his skin ashen under his new tan, curls matted to his head from sweat. *Sweat from the heat? Or from withdrawals?* “Is it okay if I cast?” Eyes brightening, he nodded without a trace of hesitation. Weaving her magic through her fingertips, Aerin pressed icy cold hands to his brow, trailing a thin sheen of frost over his skin, sending a small frigid wind rustling through his armor.

A heaving sigh of relief breathed from his lungs as he sagged in pleasure. “Maker’s breath, that is perfect. Thank you. All I meant to say was… be careful. Please. I- We cannot lose you. The Inquisitor, that is. And you.” His amber eyes darkened as he studied her weary, stained face.

“We’ll be careful, Cullen. After all, Hawke’s not with me,” she grinned.

“Thank the Maker for small mercies.”

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Hot. Burning. Searing. The heat of dragon’s fire bore down upon them, scorching the ancient stones of the bridge as they sprinted, the rush of wings beating the air, towards the temple doors that stood slightly ajar.

“Move it!” Cursing in every language she knew, Aerin shoved Ellana in front of her, urging the Inquisitor to run faster, faster, almost there and-

The massive doors slammed behind them with a mighty roar from the Iron Bull, the heat scalding them through wood and stone. Gasping for breath, they collapsed on the smooth floor, shaken by what they had witnessed, as a golden glow sealed the entrance shut. “He’s immortal,” Ellana breathed. “How are we supposed to defeat someone who is immortal?”

“Not immortal,” Aerin shook her head, feeling the tingle of the powerful elven magic surging through her body. “Like an archdemon. Essence passes through the taint. Maybe a Grey Warden can kill him.”
“If they could get close enough without getting possessed,” the Iron Bull grumbled. “So, Lady Morrigan, what was that about Corypheus wanting a ‘Well of Sorrows’? Is that code for eluvian?”

The witch shifted uncomfortably, haughty features screwed up as if she had swallowed spoiled meat. “I… do not know to what he was referring.” Aerin turned to face her, eyebrow raised as she observed the woman. “Yes. I was wrong. There. Are you happy?”

“You feel it?” Solas inquired, face impassive as usual. She nodded, following Morrigan and Ellana as they ascended the center dais, inspecting a worn Elvish inscription on two worn stone pillars, carves stone tiles illuminating in a blue swirl as they stepped upon them.

“What does it say?”

“Atish’all Vir Abelasan. Enter the Path of the Well of Sorrows,” Solas translated, squinting at the ancient language.

“Something about knowledge. Respectful or pure. The rest, I do not know. Supplicants to Mythal would have first paid their respects here.”

“That is what we shall do, then. We dare not anger Mythal in her own home. So these tiles…” Ellana frowned, poking another with her toe, watching the second piece glow, then dim as she stepped backwards. “Decisive. No hesitation, no backtracking. Always moving forward.” Nodding to herself, she gracefully moved in a sinuous path, tracing over each tile only once. The sound of a lock releasing echoed through the chamber. “Hey! I did it!” A large explosion shook the temple floor, the smell of smoke drifting down from the upper level. “Oh no. Did I do it wrong?”

“Nope,” the Iron Bull growled. “Samson. Guess he didn’t feel like saying hello to Mythal. Look sharp. We got company.” The hairs on the back of Aerin’s neck prickle as she watched the monstrous red templars lumber down to greet them.

“There’s others here,” she hissed. Whirling around, the group watched as hooded and armored elves, taller and broader than any other elf emerged from the shadowed corners. Any other elf, except for… Solas. They all have the same build as Solas. What does this mean? Is he one of them? The Qunari caught her eye as a brief glance passed between the two. “Let’s hurry. We need to catch up with Samson. I need to repay a favor.”

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“I can’t believe Morrigan just left us all back here. Her greed will be her downfall,” Aerin grumbled, following their creepy, silent guide.

Ellana trailed after her blindly, mumbling under her breath, “Tevinter didn’t destroy Arlathan. We destroyed ourselves. How much of what I was taught is a lie? Abelas and I… nothing alike. I’m a shadow?”
“He’s a relic, Elle. Clinging to the past. Full of himself and his self righteous duty. Reminds me of someone else I know,” Aerin glared at the other elf, surprisingly silent in these well preserved ancient halls. Solas ignored her, as was expected. “Oh, hey, creepy guide stopped.”

“The Well is through here then?” the Iron Bull pushed open the last wooden door. “Woah.”

“Creators,” Ellana gasped. “It’s beautiful.” The balcony on which they emerged opened up to a vast cavern, larger than any cave she had ever seen before, stone walls built around and into the towering cliffs, forming a stunning architectural meld of man and nature. “There! The Well!”

“And Samson,” Aerin hissed, unsheathing her swords. Her blood pounded through her head, as she remembered how he had apologized to her before letting his pet mage take her mind. How he gave her over into Erebus’ guard. How he used her and controlled her, all for Corypheus.

“I’ve got the rune to destroy his armor, so do not attack him until I can get close enough to activate it.”

“Or I can serve as a distraction so you can get close enough.” The sisters glared at each other. A guttural roar distracted them, the song of the red lyrium humming like a siren’s call, the sounds of dying elven sentinels bloody groans and bones cracking grating on their ears. Jaw set in a firm line, Aerin sprinted down the stairs the cavern floor, intent on destroying the man who dared try to enslave her again.

“Why, Aerin, how lovely to see you again my dear. Or is it Seraphina?” Samson’s sallow face curved up in a mocking grin, the pulsing glow of his armor bathing his skin in red.

“I will end you,” she snarled, stalking toward the former templar, heedless of the other knights that surrounded them.

“You cannot harm me. I have been chosen by Corypheus, twice,” he sneered. “Once as his general, and again as the Vessel for the Well of Sorrows. I will gain the kind of wisdom that can scour the world. The Elder One will finally be able to walk the Fade.”

“He will die first. You will all die,” Aerin’s eyes glittered in the fading sunlight that trickled down to the shallow pools they stood in, bloodied water muddling around her boots.

“How will you stop him? You’re no match for his power. You will never master the Well as he could. It’s a new world now, girl. With a new god.”

“I do not acknowledge your god. Or any god, for that matter.” Baring her swords, she leapt into motion. “Ellana, now!”

The Inquisitor, who had snuck up behind the man during his rant, activated the rune in her hand. With a pained yell, Samson fell to his knees, the red lyrium embedded in his armor shattering, leaving nothing but common metal behind. “No! What did you do! My armor, the lyrium… I need it!”

Grinning, Aerin spun, bringing her swords around in a severe arc to slam into his shoulder, watching him stumble to the side. “Well, I need you dead.” It was chaos, what happened next. More Sentinels poured out of the deep crevasses of the temple, joining them against the lyrium warped templars, who screamed in animalistic, unearthly shrieks of rage. Tiny red crystal shards, blood, and even body parts flew through the air with wild abandon, as the enemy was cut down, one by one, until all lay dead and broken on the temple floor. All except one.

“You,” teeth bared in a feral grin, Aerin lazily thumbed a dagger, “I will enjoy killing.” The
battered man just stared at her in defeat, lank, greasy black hair clinging to his pale, scarred skin.

“Aerin, wait,” Ellana called softly. “No.”

“No?!” She spun around to glare at her sister, rage coloring her vision. “What do you mean, no?”

“He’s done. Beaten. We will take him back to Skyhold, where he will face trial. You cannot keep playing judge, jury, and executioner.” The Inquisitor’s voice quavered, unused to standing up to her older sister, especially when she was this furious. But her eyes were firm, jaw set. “That is an order. Stand down.”

Knuckles whitened as she gripped her hilts tight enough to hear the wood crack, muscles straining as she fought with herself for control. Just walk away? Let him live? After all he’s done to Thedas, to Ellana, to me? Every fiber of her being screamed to kill him, to plunge her blade deep within his chest, bathe her hands in his blood. And she was just supposed to walk away?

A heavy, gray hand firmly clasped her shoulder. “Let it go, Aerin. He’ll get what’s coming to him. But the people need to see. You’re not the only one he’s wronged.” Shame burned her cheeks. No, she wasn’t the only one. What about all the mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers whose sons and daughters were tainted by this man? All the ones who lost loved one to their blades and claws? They deserved to see justice done as well. Nodding shakily, she stepped back, sheathing her daggers. Forcefully exhaling, Ellana sagged.

“Thank you. Bull, tie him up, will you? Hey, there’s Abelas! And Morrigan? How in Mythal’s name did we beat them both here even after all that?” Squawking indignantly, a large crow soared past the group, landing gracefully as a human at the top of the dais, facing down Abelas, Sentinel of the Well, his eyes flashing with anger.

“So the sanctum is despoiled at last,” the ancient Elvhen sneered, ignoring Morrigan’s snapping. “Better that it would be lost, than granted upon the undeserving.”

“Samson is done. Without him, there is no Vessel for Corypheus to use. Surely we can just leave it be?” Ellana reasoned, eyeing the shimmering pool beyond them with unveiled apprehension.

Morrigan narrower her eyes at the younger woman, voice turning soft and sultry. “The moment we leave, he will send others to claim the Well. It offers power, Inquisitor. If that power can be turned against Corypheus, can you afford to ignore it?”

“Do you even know what you ask?” The branches of Mythal’s vallaslin wrinkled as Abelas furrowed his brow. His tone turned contemplative, regretful even, as he stared into the golden depths of the Well. It holds the collective memory of every servant of Mythal? Creators. Everything that was ever lost could be found again. “All that we are, all that we knew- it would be lost forever.”

“I’m sorry, Abelas,” Ellana murmured. “This cannot be easy for you.”

“There are other places, friend. Other duties. Your people yet linger.” Aerin had never heard Solas’s voice so… animated. Hopeful. A barely discernable smug smile twitched at his full lips. Is he just truly sympathetic to their plight? Or is he pushing for something?

“Elvhen such as you?”

“Yes. Such as I.” Wait. Wait, wait, wait. Elvhen? As opposed to just elves? What the fuck is Solas? One of these ancient ones? Is that how he knows so much?”
Sighing, Abelas shook his head. “You have shown respect to Mythal, and there is a righteousness in you I cannot deny. Is this what you desire? To partake of the Vir’Abelasan, to fight your enemy?”

“Only with your permission, Sentinel,” the Dalish woman straightened, hands clasped serenely in front of her.

“One does not obtain permission. One obtains the right. Those who drink from the Vir’Abelasan pay a great price. You would be bound to the will of Mythal for eternity.”

“Bound to the will of a goddess who no longer exists, if she ever did,” Morrigan scoffed. “Elven legend says that Mythal was tricked by Fen’Harel, and banished to the Beyond.”

“They are wrong. The Dread Wolf had nothing to do with Mythal’s murder. She was slain, if a god can truly be. Betrayed by those who destroyed this temple.” The man’s eyes were filled with such a deep remorse, the centuries of guarding the last of their history and duty, that it burned within Aerin’s heart. To have lost everything, after so long, just like that...

“Are you leaving then?” she asked softly.

“Our duty ends. Why remain?”

“There is a place for you, lethallin. If you seek it,” Solas offered. *A place with us? Or with him?*

“There may be places the shemlen have not yet touched,” Abelas conceded. “It may be that only Uthenera awaits us.”

“Thank you,” Ellana called out to his back as he turned away from the Inquisitor and her group.

“Do not thank me yet,” was the response, just as Solas spoke softly to him, in the musical tones of Elvhen that was long lost. Pausing only to stare at the other man, the Sentinel quickly disappeared, melting back into the shadows of the temple.

“What did you say?” The Iron Bull studied the tall elf, expression neutral and searching.

“His name. It meant sorrow. I merely said I hoped he finds a new name,” Solas replied, gazing levelly at the Ben-Hassrath.

“Hey look, eluvian,” Aerin pointed across the platform, rolling her eyes at Morrigan’s smug smile. “So what now?”

“The Well is the key to controlling the eluvian.” Her yellow eyes widened in unexpected shock. “I did not expect it to feel so… hungry.”

“That’s comforting,” Ellana muttered.

“I am willing to pay the price the Well demands. I am also the best suited to use its knowledge in your service.” Her voice was as desperate as Aerin had ever heard, almost begging to be allowed to acquire the Well’s knowledge.

“Or use it for your own ends,” Solas hissed.

“What would you know of my ends, elf?”

“You are a glutton, drooling at the sight of a feast. You cannot be trusted!”
“Stop, both of you!” the Inquisitor shouted. “We don’t have time for this. Solas? Would you take it?”

“No,” his tone was clipped. “Do not ask me again. She is right about one thing, however. We should take the power that lies within.”

“So… I should?”

“No, vhenan. I would not see you under its compulsion.” Throwing up her hands, she rounded on her former love.

“Not Morrigan, not me, not you. I’m sure as hell not asking Aerin to take it. And I doubt submitting to ancient goddesses is in the Iron Bull’s contract. What would you have me do?”

“Let Morrigan drink,” Aerin cut in. “She wants it, and she’s prepared to pay the price. Give it to her.”

“Thank you,” the witched breathed. Staring the mage down, Ellana slowly nodded.

“It’s yours.”

Tilting her head in gratitude, Morrigan reverently descended down the shallow steps into the pool, golden water rippling around her waist as the magic within swirled around her slender figure and rushed to consume her. It was like nothing Aerin had ever felt before, like the magic itself was alive. She heard the rush of hundreds of voices whispering as a small tidal wave of water rushed from the Well, inviting her to learn the secrets of a nation long since destroyed. It looked like… like stars. Billions of stars, interlaced by strands as delicate as spider’s silk, fluttering all around. Creators, this is beautiful. Like the beginning of creation, an infinite web of lights and explosions and pulsing magic. In shock, she reached up to touch her cheek. Wet?

“Morrigan! Are you alright?” Rushing into the now empty Well, Ellana helped the prostrate mage gently up to stand, the latter woman suddenly babbling in Elvhen.

“That’s new,” Aerin muttered to the Iron Bull, who just grunted in response. “Kaffas, he’s coming. Corypheus! I can feel his taint.” Dark smoke crept along the ground, curling around their feet, as a monstrous figured appeared on the far balcony. Corypheus screamed, a primeval roar of rage echoing through the vast cavern. Spurred on by his fury, the blighted magister leapt into the air, barreling like a torpedo straight for the Inquisitor.

“Through the eluvian! Hurry!” Rippling, the elven mirror glowed a bright blue, surface liquefying, allowing them to rush safely through to the other side. Grabbing Ellana’s arm, Aerin sprinted through the mirror, shoving the younger woman into the gray mist beyond. With a grunt, they fell through, toppling on the crumbling stone surface on the other side, just in time to see Morrigan slam the portal shut, Corypheus’ snarling, twisted face mere inches away. “The eluvian shattered. He cannot follow us.”

“Fucking hell! We left Samson,” Aerin growled, shoving herself up to stand. “If Corypheus takes him…”

“Doubt it,” the Iron Bull dusted off his leather pants as he pulled himself up, casting a wary eye around the place they found themselves standing in. “The Well is gone and his army is scattered. Corypheus has no need of a general or Vessel any longer. He won’t have reason to keep a broken human around any longer.” Marginally pacified, Aerin relaxed by a fraction but kept her glower.

“So, where are we?”
“I call it the Crossroads,” Morrigan shrugged. “It is a place between places where the eluvians meet. Most are inactive or broken, as you can see.” Hundreds of mirrors, dark and dull, like Merrill’s eluvian had been, or even broken, littered the yard, a dim light coming from someplace that was not a sun illuminating their way. *Looks like a graveyard. I wouldn’t be surprised if zombies started popping out of the ground. Oh wait. I’ve already fought zombies, haven’t I?* “I should be able to find our way back to Skyhold, through the eluvian there.”

“Should. That’s comforting,” Aerin grumbled. “You okay, Elle?” Still shaken by the close encounter, Ellana slowly nodded.

“Let’s just hurry. This place is creepy.”

Chapter End Notes

Last bit of canon-y stuff before the end begins. EEEK.
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

On lazy Sundays like this, Jackson Square was always packed with locals and tourists, the colonial stone walkways lined with buskers and fortune tellers, crystal balls and tarot cards neatly displayed on covered card tables. In the distance, the steeple of St. Louis’ Cathedral rose, towering behind the manicured lawn and bronze statue of Andrew Jackson, the smell of beignets and chicory coffee wafting out around them. The people that milled about were just blurs here, faded memories of what once was.

“This is… remarkable,” Solas gaped in awe at the antebellum mansions and shops that lined the square, fancy horseless metal carriages parked along the street. “This is your home?”

“Yes,” Michael sighed wistfully. “Nothing like New Orleans in the world. Any world, probably. The music, the magic- well, not like magic in Thedas. But people with little gifts, able to tell the future, find lost things, hex your enemies, hell, some even claimed to talk to spirits.”

“Little magicks. You said there are no mages in America, right?”

“Not in America, not in the entire damn world. We have legends, of course. Of ancient times when wizards and sorcerers existed. It’s said there are still spots on Earth where what we call ley lines converge, or where great battles occurred, places that still have magic and where it’s possible for spirits to cross over.”

“Where the Veil is thinner, you mean.”

Michael frowned, “Solas, we don’t have a Veil.”

“Hmm.” The elf leaned back in his chair, out of place and time, perched on the wrought iron chairs of Café du Monde. “I would surmise that you do. Especially since your legends speak of it. Perhaps it is just sealed away, so tightly that none can access it? It explains why you have access to the Fade here. The ability is innate within you.”

“That’s… weird,” the human muttered, thoughts drifting to Aerin. She is a mage, too. So does that mean Solas is right? There is a Fade on Earth?

“It’s curious, however, the amount of mana you possess. Your power is akin to those of the ancient Elvhen, so I’m led to believe. Your presence in the Fade is a blinding beacon, just like-” Solas froze. Just like Aerin. They both glow so brightly here. Is she from this Earth as well? Realizing the other man was staring at him in almost suspicion, Solas smoothed his features and smiled. “I apologize. You remind me of a friend from long ago, that is all. Your world looks very peaceful.”

Snort, Michael shook his head. “Earth is a mess. Hunger, poverty, war, famine, disease- you name it, we’ve got it. Humans have been slowly ruining the world for decades now. And no one in charge really cares because they’re getting richer, while the poor get poorer. It’s all bullshit.” He told the elf about their wars and their weapons, summarizing the fossil fuel and landfill dilemmas, and the crime and natural disasters that plagued his own city.

“That sounds… horrible, to be honest,” Solas exhaled, unable to fathom everything that had been said.
“Yeah. It is. But it’s home. I’m used to it, it’s how I grew up. It’s familiar danger, at least. Not like Thedas.”

“You still wish to return home?”

Nodding, Michael leaned back, propping his feet up on the table like he would never have done in real life. “I don’t think I can though. I don’t even know how I got here.”

“There might be a way,” Solas mused. “I’ll look into it.”

“Really? Thanks, man. That would be great,” he grinned. “Come on, anything else you wanna see?”

“You mentioned larger cities than this? With taller buildings?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ll show you L.A. Place is massive.” Closing his eyes to concentrate on their next destination, Michael missed the calculating gleam in the Elvhen’s eyes.

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The wooden chair creaked as the elf that lay sideways, hanging upside down, shifted to find a more comfortable position.

“It might be better if you actually sat up, instead of hanging like a bat off the chair,” Cassandra remarked dryly.

Groaning, Ellana waved the papers in her hand around. “Nothing helps. I’ve been staring at these reports for hours and nothing is getting through to me today. All I’ve managed to absorb is that Cullen found Samson, trussed up like a turkey in the temple, he has him, and they’re all heading back to Skyhold. All of my advisors are riding separate of the army, and they’ll be back any day now, going by the date on this. I just can’t believe we’ve come this far. We have the upper hand now.”

“All thanks to you, Herald.”

“Don’t call me that, pleeeeease, Cassandra.”

Ducking her head to hide a tiny smile, the Seeker replied, “Of course, Herald.” A balled up parchment sailed out from under the table, bouncing harmlessly two feet to the left of its intended target.

“Something troubling you, vhenan?”

Scowling, Ellana peeked over the edge of the table in the main hall. “Vhenan, is it still? I wasn’t aware.”

He bowed slightly, a frown marring his elegant features. “I have been neglecting you as of late. I apologize. Will you travel with me? A place just a day away. This may be the last quiet moment we have to ourselves.”

“All thanks to you, Herald.”

“Don’t call me that, pleeeeeease, Cassandra.”

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“Sure,” she perked up, only the barest trace of suspicion on her face. “Cassandra, will you let Aerin know where I’ve gone? I haven’t seen her today.” Nodding her thanks at the Seeker, Ellana trotted up to her room, hurriedly packing with practiced ease and familiarity, the small leather satchel barely full. He met her at the stables, smiling as she saddled her usual hart.
“Elgara’len. The name you chose suits her. Little sun.”

She patted the creature on her neck, ducking to avoid the antlers as the hart craned her neck back to check for snacks. Giggling, she held out an apple in offering. “She’s my little ray of sunshine. Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise, vhenan.” His expression was warm and inviting, wholly opposite of what his demeanor had been the last few months. He confused her. Kissed her once in the Fade, claimed to care about her, love her, but refused to do anything else physical with her besides holding hands or the occasional chaste kiss to her cheek or forehead. It was maddening. Why she didn’t just leave and forget and move on, she had no idea. There was just something about the elf that drew her. Maybe his wisdom and intelligence? How he knew the ancient secrets of their people better than her own Keeper? Even though he refused to divulge much. Just something about him.

They rode north, the jagged peaks of the Frostbacks mountains leveling into rolling, rocky hills, the smell of the salt water in the air. Seagulls called in the distance, as they trotted side by side in companionable silence. Well, Solas did. Ellana sat tense in her saddle, insides twisted up into knots in her attempts to decipher his motives. Were they coming out here because he wanted to take the next step in their relationship? Was he going to end it? Maybe murder her? She breathed a small sigh of relief when they finally stopped, outside of a cave paces away from the crash of ocean waves.

Gently tucking her hand in his, he led her deeper into the cavern, smiling at her enraptured face. “It’s… beautiful.” It really wasn’t a cave; there was no ceiling, only the blue sky above. Hallowed statues, worn down by centuries of rain and wind, guarded the entrance of what could only be described as an oasis. Slender, graceful trees swayed in the breeze, lacy ferns spread out like a blanket over the mossy ground, all surrounding a rippling pool, a waterfall from somewhere high atop the cliff splashing into the clear water.

“Can you feel it? The Veil, how thin it is here?” he murmured. She could, despite her not being a mage. There was an electricity in the atmosphere, not necessarily unpleasant, calling to something deep within her soul. Cupping her face, the elven mage gazed tenderly down at her. “I brought you here because, well, I was trying to determine of some way to show you what you mean to me.”

“Oh?” She meant for it to come out low and sultry, suggestive even. Instead, she squeaked. And immediately flushed red.

“The best gift I could to think to offer was… the truth.” Confused, she pulled back, examining his normally impassive face. There was something hidden behind his eyes, sadness, maybe? Regret? The truth about what, she wondered. “You are unique. I never expected anyone to find someone who could draw my attention from the Fade as you have. You have become more important to me than I could ever have imagined.” Ellana’s insides did that twisting, fluttering thing again at his sweet words, words she had never anticipated, not from him. His gaze sharpened, gaining intensity. “The vallaslin. In my journeys of the Fade, I have discovered what the marks mean.”

“What they mean?” her brow furrowed. “They’re to honor the gods. Mine is in respect for Syllaise.”

“No, vhenan. In the times of ancient Arlathan, they were slave markings.”

“No,” she began shaking her head violently. “No, they can’t be. My Keeper said these are the gods’ symbols. That can’t be right!”

“That is right. A noble would mark his slaves to honor the god he worshipped. After Arlathan fell,
the Dalish forgot.”

“Are you- Just one more thing we got wrong, then,” bitterly snapping, she jerked back, hugging her arms tightly around her shaking body. “Of all the things we chose to preserve, it is this. Relics of a time when we were no better than Tevinter,” she spat.

“For all they got wrong, vhenan, at least the Dalish did one thing right. They made you.”

Shrugging his hand off her arm, she turned away, breathing heavily. “Slave markings. And I voluntarily, joyfully even, welcomed them onto my skin. Why would you tell me this? I can’t take them away. Why would you tell me of all people, knowing what I was? Oh gods. And I asked Aerin to… Creators.” Ellana crouched on the ground, cradling her knees to her chest. Carefully stooping to kneel beside her, Solas held out his hand.

“I did not tell you this to hurt you, Ellana. I know a spell. I can remove your vallaslin.”

Her response was immediate, unflinching. “Do it.” Tugging her down to sit on a nearby rock, slick with moisture from the pond, he raised his fingers, and in a fluid sweep, bathed her face in the cool glow of his magic.

“Ar lasa mala revas. You are free.” Hesitantly, afraid of what she might see, she leaned over the clear water, raising trembling hand to touch her now bare cheeks. Did she feel relieved? Angry at the deception? At whom? Her Keeper, who had encouraged her to take the vallaslin? At the Dalish, for managing to forget something so important? At herself? To think I willingly accepted the markings of a slave. I should have known. How could I have known? Unsure of how to respond, she tilted her head up to look at Solas, who was now studying at her with an almost rapturous gaze.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured. Sliding his arms around her waist, she felt herself pulled to his body, melting against him as he lowered his full, soft lips to hers in a kiss that was languid, tender, and filled with so much yearning it made her heart clench with the beauty of it. She loved him. Ellana knew that now. And she knew he loved her too. “I’m sorry. I distracted you from your duty. It shall not happen again.”

Mind still muddled from the warm affection he had just shown her, she just blinked. “Wait, what?”

"This is just a distraction, Ellana, I-

"You’re ending this? Are you fucking kidding me? You bring me here, all the way from Skyhold, tell me all that shit about the vallaslin, remove it, be all sweet and loving towards me, and then just end it?”

“I’m sorry, vhenan,” Solas’ voice pleaded. “I never wanted to hurt you.”


Stiffening, Solas bowed curtly. “I will see you back at Skyhold, Inquisitor.” With clenched fists, she watched him leave, waiting to break until she heard the echo of his horse’s hooves fade into the distance. Only then did she allow herself to fall to the ground, curling up in the soft, damp ferns, and cry herself to sleep.

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Aerin shot up out of bed with a growl. Flinging her legs over the edge of the mattress, she stalked around her room, yanking on the first pair of leather leggings and tunic she came across, not
bothering to braid or even brush her hair, stuffing her feet into her boots, jerking the laces angrily tight. Her door slammed open with a loud crash, startling the others in the hall, who took one look at her face before flattening themselves against the stone wall, eager to get out of her way.

“Hey Lightni- oh, shit.” Varric dove to the side, pulling Hawke away with him, safe from the rampaging elf as she crossed the hall.

“Solas! You fucking asshole filius canis, plenus stercoris, vacca foeda, irrumator!”

The elven mage calmly regarding the furious rogue. “I assume you visited the Inquisitor in her dreams last night? I am not proud of what I had to do.”

“Had to do?” she hissed, fingertips sparking. “You just had to break my sister’s heart? It was innocent and pure and unbroken until you waltzed into her life and shit on it, you motherfucking eggheaded son of a bitch!” Advancing on him, blind in her rage, Aerin was unaware of the crowd that had gathered, or of scouts urgently running to gather as many templars as possible into the solar, unsure if just one would be enough to hold back the magical explosion brewing from both elves.

“It was a distraction,” Solas snapped. “She will now be able to harden her heart, hone her pain to use against Corypheus. The blame is mine, not hers. I was blind and irresponsible.”

“Damn right this is your fault. You didn’t think she had enough pain in her life? You really think she needed more? Her heart did not need to be hardened. Life has done enough of that for her, you-you-” Snarling, her hands blazed, reaching for his exposed throat. Throwing up a barrier, Solas backed up, gathering his mana around himself, only to gasp in shock as she ripped it away from him.

“How-”

“Tace! Tu non loqui.” Backing against the wall, Solas for the first time in his life desperately wished the templars would arrive. Instead, Leliana rushed in.

“Aerin! I need your help!”

“WHAT!” the elven woman roared, whirling on her friend.

“Kieran, he’s- he’s missing! Morrigan went after him. I need you to come!” The normally restrained and reserved spymaster gasped, panic etched onto her pale face.

Eyes widening by a fraction, Aerin nodded, turning to pin Solas with a glare once more before she left. “You. Utinam barbari spatium proprium tuum invadant et logica falsa tuam philosophiam totam suffodiant.” From somewhere above her, Dorian howled with laughter, Fenris chuckling from off to the side, just as Cassandra and Cullen ran in, the latter still dressed in his traveling gear, Rylen on their heels, glancing around bewilderedly.

“Solas, would you care for me to translate?” the altus called down in a jubilant tone as Leliana and Aerin raced out of the solar.

“I think I can imagine what she said,” the elf replied tightly.

“Translate for me,” Varric chortled, pulling a quill out of his pocket as Anders called out in agreement.

Cullen blinked at the assembled crowd. “What in Andraste’s name happened here?”
“Where did he run off to?” Aerin asked as she ran beside the bard through the garden halls.

“The eluvian. He disappeared inside of it, Morrigan said he activated it somehow. I’ve never seen her that terrified. Here! Be careful, my friend.” Nodding, Aerin plunged into the rippling mirror without hesitation. And skidded to a stop.

This wasn’t the Crossroads. There was no gray, swirling mist or creepy, dull, shattered mirrors. This was the Fade. Sickly green light, the same color as Ellana’s mark, as the light that had brought her to Thedas all those years ago, flickered around her, rocks levitating in mid-air. Eyes wide open and alert, she slowly jogged up to Morrigan, just ahead of her.

“How could he do this? How could he do this?” Morrigan’s voice was frantic, eyes wild as she searched for signs of her son. “It would take immense power to direct the eluvian here. If he is lost to me now, after all I have sacrificed-” She broke off in a sob.

“No, Morrigan. He’s a smart lad. And powerful. He’s not lost. Come on. We’re going to find him.” Aerin reached to hug the woman, drawing her hand back at the last minute to awkwardly pat her on the shoulder instead.

“The Fade is infinite! He could literally be anywhere!”

“Good thing you have a somniari around then, isn’t it?” Smiling gently, Aerin nodded to the mage and closed her eyes. It was harder to direct the Fade now that she was here physically. Everything was much more solid, more real. She pushed and it pushed back. Gritting her teeth, Aerin shoved her magic out in hard, sweeping arc, scanning for signs of life. ”Over here, come on!”

Together they sprinted through the crags and dips of the Fade landscape, the sound of trickling water and ghostly wind rustling through their heads. She could feel the power thrumming underneath her, but it wasn’t the same. This strength she felt was deeper, more chaotic than the Fade she encountered while asleep. She was drawn to it, and at the same time repulsed. It was disturbing. Trying to ignore the sensation of her skin crawling, she turned a corner and spotted a young boy not too far ahead, standing in front of a familiar woman she had not seen in over a decade, pushing magic into her… eyes?

“Mother.” Flemeth smiled, rising smoothly to her feet.

“Well, isn’t this a surprise. Hello, daughter. And you brought my old friend with you as well. Aerin.”

“Kieran, step away from her. Let him go!” Morrigan demanded.

“Let him go,” Flemeth scoffed. “As if I was holding him hostage. Always so ungrateful.”

“Ungrateful?” her daughter screeched. “I know how you planned to extend your life. You will not have me, and you will not have my son!” Wrapping her hands with her mana, Morrigan wove a spell.

“That is quite enough,” Flemeth snapped, her eyes glowing a brilliant blue as the mage stumbled back, her magic dissipating.

“What have you done to me?!”


“Mythal.” Aerin gasped as Morrigan shook her head violently in denial. “Creators, you’re-Mythal.”
Smiling up at his grandmother, Kieran ran towards his mother, leaping in her arms as she crushed him to her chest.

“I’m sorry I ran off, Mother. I heard her calling to me. She said now was the time.”

“I do not understand.” Morrigan’s face fell, love for her son wrenching her soul apart.

“Mythal came to me when I was only a woman, crying out for justice, a wisp of an ancient being, granting me all I wanted and more. I have carried Mythal ever since, seeking the justice denied to her. She was betrayed, as I was betrayed— as the world was betrayed! Mythal clawed and crawled her way through the ages to me, and I will see her avenged!” Her voice, ragged and husky, burned with a fiery vengeance. “Alas, so long as the music plays, we dance. And you, Aerin. Have you found what you seek?”

“It… yes. I think. I owe you a great debt, my lady,” Aerin gave a slight bow.

“Ah, there’s the manners I remember from the angry, untried girl I met by the shores of the Minanter. And now you stand here, still angry yet more weary than before.”

“My anger serves me well,” she replied stiffly.

The goddess’ laughter echoed eerily through the Fade. “Yes, I can imagine. You know what it is to truly suffer. Sadly enough, I do not think the world is done with you yet.” Her gaze hardened. “I will help your Inquisitor against Corypheus. Once I have what I came for.” Her eyes focused on Morrigan.

“No! I will not allow it!” Kieran peered up at his mother. “He is not your pawn. I will not let you use him!”

“Have you not used him? Was that not his purpose, why you agreed to his creation?” Aerin blanched, wishing she could cover the boy’s ears. He did not need to hear this.

“That was then,” Morrigan snapped. “Now he-” her eyes grew glassy and her voice hitched, “He is my son. Is this because I would not let you possess me? Now you wish to take Kieran in my stead?”

“Mother,” her son croaked. “I have to.”


“I did not know where he was. Until now.”

“The Well…” she murmured. Morrigan gasped, hands clamping over her gaping mouth.

“Always grasping beyond your reach, despite all that I taught you,” Flemeth sighed, gaze softening as she witnessed her proud daughter sink to her knees. “Hmm. As you wish. I have a proposal. Let me take the lad, and you are free of me forever. Or keep him with you, and you will never be safe from me. I will have my due.”

“He returns with me. Do whatever you wish, take over my body now if you must, but Kieran remains free of your clutches.” Entreating the goddess, she straightened, taking a pleading step towards Mythal. “I am many things, but I will not be the mother you were to me.”

Taken aback, Flemeth stared at her daughter, a fleeting wave of sorrow flitting across her features. Slowly, she faced her grandson, grasping his hands with a smile, and pulled, a tiny glowing orb
breaking free of his body and passing into hers. Lightly shoving him back towards his mother in a fond gesture, she murmured in a gentle, hushed voice, “A soul is not forced on the unwilling, dear child. You were never in danger from me.”

“Yavana,” Aerin blurted. “She said it was a gift. It was Mythal’s essence, wasn’t it?”

Mythal smiled. “My other daughter always did have a better hold on her temper than her sister. Morrigan. Listen to the voices. They will teach you… as I never did.” With a wry smile, the witch disappeared.

_Morrigan could have held the power of a goddess. Instead, she bound herself for eternity to her mother. Damn. This is… what did she mean about the world not being done with me? What else does she have planned? Haven’t I done enough? That line of thought was not comforting. What else was coming?

“Let’s go back to Skyhold.”

“A dragon,” her friend muttered. “That is the key. The voices… they say I can shapeshift into a dragon, equal to Corypheus’ pet. If we destroy it, he is no longer immortal. He can be killed.”

“Best damn news I’ve heard all year,” Aerin sighed, wondering if she should try to comfort her old friend. _She’d probably turn me into a toad if I tried._ "You okay?” The witch hesitantly nodded. "Alright then. Come on, kid. I think the cook made cinnamon buns today. If we hurry, we can snag a few.” Grinning at each other, the two sprinted across the gloom of the Fade, racing each other to the eluvian.

“Children,” Morrigan scoffed, unable to hide her smile this time.

Chapter End Notes

- *Filius canis-* son of a bitch
- *Plenus stercoris-* full of shit
- *Vacca foeda-* dirty cow
- *Irrumator-* Bastard
- *Tace, tu non locqui-* shut up, you don’t get to speak.
- *Utinam barbari spatium proprium tuum invadant-* May barbarians invade your personal space
- *Utinam logica falsa tuam philosophiam totam suffodiant-* May faulty logic undermine your entire philosophy
Aerin scowled from where she lay against the wall, watching her sister hang upside down off the bed, face buried in the covers. “Come on, he doesn’t even need his penis. Just a little slice.”


Grumbling, she blew out a puff of air and muttered, “Fine.”

“Ugh.” Flipping over to her back, the Inquisitor stared at her ceiling. “I hate this part. Just waiting. Nothing else to do until our scouts find Coryfish.”

“Let’s go get drunk then. Find Sera and Hawke, and cause some mischief. It’ll be good for morale. Or some shit.”

"That sounds like a horrible idea."

"I think it's brilliant. Up we go!”

Giggling, Aerin dragged her unwilling sister down the stairs, rushing her past the nobility that were always milling about the main hall, and across the bustling courtyard into the tavern. “What you got that’s good, Cabot?”

The surly dwarf shrugged, plunking a dusty bottle on the pitted countertop. “Got this in yesterday. Says Dragon Piss. Smells like it too.” Leaning over to take a whiff, Aerin recoiled in disgust.

“Kaffas, it smells vile. It’s perfect. Here, Elle, drink this.”

“What, no, I- gah!” Holding the bottle to her lips, Aerin held the Herald’s nose as she tipped the burning liquid back, forcing her to swallow. Spluttering, face already turning red, Ellana gagged. “Aerin, what the hell?!”

“Hey, gimme that,” Sera hopped down the stairs, Hawke bouncing behind her as both women took a sip. “Maker’s friggin’ ballsack, what the bloody piss is this shite?”

“Dragon Piss!” Aerin laughed, taking her own deep pull. “Oh, fuck. It’s horrible.” As the rest of the tavern watched in amusement, the four women slowly worked their way through the bottle, collapsing on the dirty floor in a heap of giggles and burps when it was finally empty.

“Lessgo get that eggy git,” Sera slurred.

Pumping her fist into the air, Aerin toppled over with a triumphant, “Yesssh!” Fenris shook his head he watched them pile out of the building, stumbling and tittering the all the while, the Iron Bull chuckling from beside him.

“I feel sorry for everyone in this keep tonight.”

“I better tag along to make sure they don’t fall off the battlements or set the keep on fire,” the elf sighed.
Anders snorted. “Good luck with that.”

First, they snuck into Solas’ solar, as quiet as a herd of stampeding dragons, pouring a liberal amount of ink in his tea. Immensely pleased with themselves and their intelligence, the girls stumbled down into the kitchens. “Ooh, cookies!” Hawke grinned.

“Oh oh oh! This is perfect,” Aerin took out six bowls, filled one with baking soda, wearing another as a hat as she mixed up a thick white paste, slathering it over the cookies. “Icing! Let’s leave these in Josie’s office.”

“Yessss,” Seraa grabbed an empty wine bottle, dunking it inside of a pot filled with beets soaking in water. “Red water! Looks close enough to wine. New vint for the ‘Vint!” She cackled, pleased at her pun.

Falling up the stairs to the library, they set the bottle down in the altus’ usual spot. “What’s this?” Hawke eyed the pile of pristine Sword and the Shield books sitting on a nearby table. “Ohhhh, I know what to do with these. Grab a few.” Giggling, they snuck up to Vivienne’s loft, crumpling the pages to make it appear well read and dropping some water on the cover to give the appearance of tears, leaving it on her divan. “Cullen would loooove one too, I’m sure.”

Creeping down across the battlements, completely ignoring the still copious amounts of people milling about who were staring at them, or the silent elf who was on their heels, they pulled open the door to the Commander’s office. “He’s not here,” Ellana loudly whispered. Grinning, she left a dog eared copy of the torrid romance on his desk while Aerin and Sera took the liberty of rearranging his books, destroying his well catalogued and organized display.

“Haven’t we already done this before?”

“Who cares? Still good.”

“Who’s down there?” A low baritone called from above the office.

“Run!” Hawke shrieked, dragging them outside.

“Apoloogies, Commander,” Fenris smirked as a curly blonde head popped into the trap door above. Sighing, he slid down the ladder, eyeing his now disarrayed office in horror. “Sera and Hawke, I take it?”

“And Aerin and Ellana. Plus a bottle of something called Dragon’s Piss.” Groaning, Cullen thunked his head against the rungs of the ladder.

“Maker’s breath.”

Still shrieking and squealing, the girls sprinted back into the tavern, collapsing across an empty table in hysterical laughter, calling for more alcohol from the gruff bartender.

“Warm, happy, full of heart and home, friends, there is meaning to the endless void here, with family. The pain is but a whisper now.”

“Who you reading, kid?” Varric smiled fondly at the women, Aerin and Hawke now on the ground, trying to wrestle each other to the rest of mens’ delight.

“All of them,” Cole replied. “This is home now.”
Aerin awoke to a plaidweave calf across her head, a rough cacophony of snores jarring her from slumber. Grimacing, she smacked her lips, tasting turpentine and rotting flesh on her tongue.

“Am I dead? I’m dead, aren’t I.” Groans muttered their agreement, as Ellana slowly pushed herself upright, wincing at the sunlight streaming in through the bay window. “I didn’t even make it back to my room.”

“I did,” Sera mumbled from her spot atop Aerin. “Pillow’s really lumpy.”

“Get off then,” the ruby haired elf shoved at the leg still draped over her. “I feel like nug shit. Gods, I need a bath. And new clothes. Maybe just burn these. The hell did we do?”

“Don’t remember,” Hawke yawned. “Last thing I recall we were taking shots in the tavern.”

“Maybe that’s all we did then?” Ellana suggested hopefully. Lurching to their feet, Aerin and Ellana and Hawke stumbled down the stairs and out of the tavern, only to meet with raucous applause and cheers and whistles. All three instantly paled. “Oh, Creators. What did we do?”

“You did nothing,” the Iron Bull and Cassandra walked up, the Qunari beaming with giddiness and the Seeker trying to appear disgruntled. “Aerin and Hawke, on the other hand…”

Groaning, Aerin buried her face in her hands as Hawke blinked at the mercenary. “What did we do?”

“What didn’t you do,” the wry tone of Fenris called out. “You don’t remember wrestling with Aerin? Or challenging her to spar? Naked? Outside?”

“Oh sweet Andraste,” the Champion muttered. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Nice show last night, ladies,” Rylen winked.

Dorian sauntered up to them, draping himself casually around Bull. “It was a rather lovely sight. You might want to wash carefully, however. The female body has so many… crevasses.” Cullen stood not far behind him, a blond eyebrow raised as he smirked at Aerin.

“You-“ she pointed at the Commander.

“I? I did nothing. Unlike some, who decided to throw my office into complete chaos last night.”

“Why did no one stop us?” Hawke sighed.

Anders sighed. “We tried. But Aerin kept shouting strange things, like ‘yippee-ki-yay motherfucker’ and kept insisting you killed her father, and ‘prepare to die’ while you resorted to just snorting like a charging druffalo.” Michael fell into hysterical chuckles behind the elf at the memory.

“You also told Hawke her mother was a hamster and her father smelt of elderberries,” the Fade walker grinned. “It was excellent.”

“I need a bath. And tea. Lots of tea.” Ignoring the rest of the catcalls, Aerin sprinted the rest away to her room, throwing herself on her bed, beyond the point of mortification. I’m never going to be able to show my face again.

It was two hours later that she finally emerged, trying to keep to the shadows of Skyhold, sneaking
down to grab some food from the kitchens, only to crash into a metal wall. “Kaffas!”

“Oh, pardon, I did not see you there.”

“That’s the point,” she grumbled, not willing to meet his smirk. “Can I pass?”

“How do you feel?” Cullen smiled down at her, remembering the enthusiastic display from last night. Surprisingly, he felt no pang of sorrow or jealousy at the exhibition. Just unbridled amusement. That was a side of her he had never seen before. She had been so much more light-hearted last night compared to the last few taxing months.

“I’m still hoping the ground swallows me whole.”

Chuckling, he reached out to brush a lock of hair back, suddenly freezing at his overly familiar behavior. “I—”

“It’s okay, Cullen,” her lips twitched into a small smile. “Creators, what you must think of me now.”

“I think you needed that. So did the Inquisitor. And probably Hawke. Not Sera. Definitely not Sera.” Giggling, she shrugged, shyly looking down at her feet.

“Cullen, I—” Gasping, she fell against him as a loud explosion ricocheted through the fortress, screams echoing through the stone halls. Staring in terror at each other, Cullen grabbed her wrist, hauling her up the stairs to the entrance of the hall. “The Breach. It’s been reopened.” The swirling vortex of Fade green and shattered stone violently expanded in the sky to the south, shockwaves of energy rippling out to meet them. She could feel the tear clawing at the Veil, increasing with every pulse of the Fade. “It’s going to swallow the world if we don’t stop it.”

“Corypheus must have ripped the Veil open again! He’s been spotted at Haven.” Leliana rushed to join them, Ellana and Josephine close behind.

“This is it.” The Inquisitor straightened, staring at the Breach, her own emerald eyes glittering with the strength and steel borne of the months of battles and heartache and victories.

“Our armies and allies are still on the way back from the Wilds. We have no one to send with you,” Cullen bit his lip, frustration lacing his tone.

“I’ll have my companions. They’re all the backup I need. Right, sis?”

“Right,” Aerin nodded. “We picked a bad day for a hangover, huh? Let’s go get saddled up.” She turned to run to her room for her armor and supplies, when a heavy gauntlet caught her arm.

“Aerin…” Flashing him a quick, reassuring smile, she leaned up, pressing a chaste kiss to his lips.

“Be back before you know it, Cullen.” Unable to shake the dread from his chest, he merely nodded, voice catching in his throat as he watched her run off, Hawke and Fenris standing beside him, the same worry etched in their own features.

“Maker, please let her come back home.”

***

Silence. No birds, no fighting, no talking, no crashing rocks. It was all just… gone. Struggling to open her eyes, Aerin wheezed, forcing herself back to awareness. The sky was empty, dark above
her head. There was no dragon. No ancient darkspawn magister. No swirling vortex of doom. They had done it. Corypheus was dead. The Breach was sealed, this time for good.

“Roll call,” a familiar voice groaned from somewhere to her left.

“Unhh.” Aerin.

“Balls.” Blackwall.

“I am well.” Cassandra.

“I am unharmed, as well.” Vivienne.

“Piss sticks.” Sera.

“Alive, soaring, we did it, overwhelming-”

“Oh do shut up, Cole.” Dorian.

“Here, boss.” Bull.

“Shit.” Varric.

“Morrigan? Oh, shit.” Aerin pushed herself gingerly to her feet, wincing as she reached for the Fade.

“You’re exhausted, you need to rest,” Dorian murmured.

“I’m the only one with even a little mana left. I just need enough to keep her stable. Come on, you stupid witch. Don’t you dare die on me.”

“Such… rousing sentiment, truly,” the mage muttered hoarsely. Sighing in relief, Aerin sat back on her heels.

“Guys. We did it. Ellana? What’s wrong?” Craning her neck back, she saw her sister, slowly walking toward her, face anguished, voice numbed. She should be happy, laughing, celebrating. What happened? Oh shit. “Where’s Solas?”

“He’s gone…” At Cassandra’s gasp, she shook her head. “No, not like that. He… left. I don’t know where. He left me.” Sera pulled her into a bear hug.

“Hey, now. No time for tears, yeah? Coryfuck is dead. Egghead is a prick. You got a whole keep of littles and nobs waiting to get smashed in your honor. Let’s go, Quizzy.”

Sniffing, Ellana nodded, managing a tiny smile for her friend. “Right. Let’s go home.”

***

Michael smiled, watching the inhabitants of Skyhold finally let go, free of the months of terror they had lived under. There was shouting, drinking, lots of kissing, and even some more… lewd activity, which Cassandra and Josephine emphatically put an end to. He was glad for all of them, and pissed. Pissed that Solas, who had promised to help him find a way home, was just gone. No ‘hey man, sorry, but I gotta leave’. Just up and left. Sighing, he leaned back in his chair, staring into his mug of ale.

“Shouldn’t you be celebrating as well?”
“You’re one to talk, Commander.” The men grinned at each, both of their gazes drifting to a certain ruby haired elf, dancing with the Champion of Kirkwall in a pantomime of a waltz across the main hall. “You know, right? About Aerin?” Cullen nodded. “She has no interest in going back. I, on the other hand…” he groaned. “This isn’t where I belong. I don’t really do anything here. I mean, I can build a basic bridge but my skills don’t translate well here since I’m working with unfamiliar materials. Once the Inquisition ends, I have nowhere to go. I don’t know how to survive here on my own. I miss my home. My family, my friends, my job. Solas promised he would look into a way to return me. And now he’s gone.”

Pursing his lips, Cullen rested his head on his hands, leaning into the table. “Leliana has scouts looking for him. I have a feeling he’ll pop back up one day. Maker’s breath, what is that fool woman doing now?” Glancing over across the hall, Michael laughed, watching the Iron Bull launch Aerin through the air at Rylen and Blackwall, the elf slamming into the men with a screech, bowling them over in a cursing heap. The Commander shook his head as the ambassador rushed over to the scene, flapping her arms at the group, outraged at their behavior.

“You guys trying to work it out?”

“I… I am not sure. I believe she is leaving for Orlais soon, if all goes well during the ritual. When is it planned for again?”

“Supposed to be tomorrow, but that depends on how hungover we all are,” Michael grinned. “So she’s really going off to be a noble, huh. It won’t be the same here without her.”

“No, it won’t.” Forlorn amber eyes watched the woman as she laughed and joked, toasting his men to their victory, trying to climb up Fenris’ back to perch on his shoulders, much to the elf’s chagrin. “She really is something.”

Brushing herself off after Fenris shoved her off and she tumbled to the floor, while apologizing drunkenly to her Antivan friend, Aerin caught Cullen’s eyes and smiled. Hollering at everyone, she dragged them all over to where the two men sat in solitude, crowding the table and jostling each other for seats. Sera ended up sitting on the Iron Bull’s shoulders, Hawke across her lover’s lap, while everyone else got a chair to themselves. “So what’s next guys?”

“There are still a lot of rifts,” the Commander answered mildly. “There is still much for the Inquisitor to do.”

“I think I’ll be sticking around a bit,” Varric replied. “Gotta go back to Kirkwall soon, though. Go save Aveline from the city.”

“I’m stickin’ round long as Quizzy needs me,” Sera chirped.

“Me and the boys as well,” the Iron Bull rumbled.

“I could stay, but I fear it would put the Inquisitor in a compromising situation if I did,” Anders sighed. “Plus the Commander still wants to skewer me.” The former Knight-Captain grumbled to himself.

“I need to go back to Tevinter. I believe it’s high time someone started trying to change things around there. May as well be me,” Dorian smiled at Aerin.

“Who knows? It may yet be redeemed under your fashionable care. Vivienne is going back to the White Spire as soon as possible,” Aerin stretched, fingering her mug. “Cole and Cassandra are staying, same as Blackwall. Did you hear? Leliana is being named Divine. How wild is that shit?”
“Not so wild, I hope,” the redheaded bard grinned, sliding in beside her old friend. “It will still be some time before the ceremony. Probably at the end of the year. Andraste guide me. Do you think I could convince them to change the official hat? It does no favors for my complexion.” Laughing, Aerin hugged her.

“Never change, Leli.” Across the room, a small shadow caught her eye. “Hawke, Fen.” Gathering their attention, she jerked her chin, indicating the Dalish woman that was trying to sneak up to her quarters. Saying their goodnights, the trio walked across the hall, creeping up the stairs the room at the top of the tower. “Elle?”

“Oh?” A small head popped through the balcony door. “Do you need something? Please say you don’t. I’m so tired of all the nobles and talking and uggghh.”

“Nope. Just figured you shouldn’t be alone tonight, of all nights.” Grabbing a bottle of mead off her desk, Aerin walked outside, the others settling down against the railing. Minutes passed as the group silently passed the alcohol around, reveling in this moment of silence and peace.

“We did it,” Ellana finally murmured.

“You did it,” Fenris corrected. “Well, mostly you. None of this would have been possible without you. All of Thedas will sing praises in your name, of the Dalish elf who saved them all.”

“Creators,” she shivered. “I hope not.” Gazing out across the mountains, her eyes filled with despondency. “Everything is changing now. Everything has already changed. My friends are all leaving me. All of you are leaving.”

“I wish we could stay, Ellana,” Hawke sighed. “But we have to go back to Weisshaupt. I promised Stroud. Something is going on up there. I need to get to the bottom of it.”

“I know.”

“And you know I’m only a dream away, Elle. I’ll visit you every night if you want.”

“So, tonight is the last night for Aerin?” Her bright blue and burnished gold eyes stared vacantly, reflecting the stars above. The last night for Aerin. Everything will change tomorrow. I’m going to be myself, again, permanently. But... a noble. Not myself on the inside. Not who I’ve been, sitting drunk outside on a roof in Antiva with my friends, waiting for the next job. Fighting every day of my life, battle after battle. Who am I supposed to be now? This is all such a mess.

“Hey.” Hawke’s eyes crinkled as she grinned at the elf. “No matter what, you’re always going to be Aerin. You know that right?”

“Yeah,” she mused. “Maybe I do.”

Chapter End Notes

The idea of the girls sneaking through Skyhold, thinking they're being all stealthy, while the rest of the staff and nobles just watch them and Fenris follows them like a mother hen brings me so much joy and giggles.
“Will you stop pacing? You’re making me nervous.”

“Excuse me? I’m making you nervous?” Aerin glared at Dorian, hands on her hips as she halted her circuit around the small chamber. A wooden table was set up in the center, with notes and diagrams spread out on the workbench near the wall. It was almost an eerie, identical replica of the first room, back in Ludus Therion, twenty-one years ago. Except much brighter. And filled with hopeful, clean faces instead of terrified slaves.

“Relax, Aerin. All will be well.”

“Easy for you to say,” she replied, sticking her tongue out at Leliana.

“Sorry we’re late! We got caught by one of the lords on the way down here,” Ellana made a face, pulling Dagna along behind her. “Are we ready?”

Fiona nodded, smiling at the Inquisitor. “I believe so.” From their spots around the table, Hawke, Michael, and Anders echoed their agreement.

“Time to get naked,” Hawke rubbed her hands in anticipation.

“Again,” Anders snickered.

“Shove it, you lot.” Taking a deep breath, she carefully removed her clothes, passing them to Ellana as she disrobed. The wood was rough against her bare skin as she adjusted herself, face down on the table. “Stop staring at my ass, Anders.”

“Can’t help it, love. Now, hush.” Each of the mages took a corner of the table, Dorian at the head.

“Alright, just like we practiced. Open up your mana and… that’s it, steady now. I’ve got Fiona and Anders. Damn apostate making this harder, come on Hawke. There! Michael, slowly, slowly- I said slowly! Maker. This power. It’s like…”

“Falling into the sky,” Fiona gasped, filled with wonder.

“Ready, Aerin?” She grunted in response, not daring to trust her voice. “Alright. Here we go.” The blaze of his magic, amplified by the Grand Enchanter, the Champion of Kirkwall, the spirit healer, and the Fade walker, burned through the room, blinding her and Michael to the glow of the weaves. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, although quite possibly the last thing she would ever see, judging by the pain in her retinas from the light. A cool, buzzing gently laid across her skin, tightening uncomfortably against her already taut body, concentrating in pins and needles along her lower back. Gritting her teeth, she willed herself not to scream as the tingling intensified to a searing agony, vision fading as the magic overwhelmed her.

“Aerin? Aerin! Can you hear me? Maker, she’s still out cold. Anders, can you do anything?”

“I’m trying. I think it was just too much. Aerin, come on darling, wake up.”

Whimpering, she screwed her eyes shut against the painful glare of light. “Someone move those
candles. I think her eyes hurt. Aerin, can you sit up? Here, now.” A warmth suddenly flooded her frayed nerves, soothing away the scorch marks along her veins and the discomfort in her eyes. Blinking in the dim light, she struggled to push herself up, allowing the strong arms to guide her. A soft robe was tucked around her naked body.

“Aer Aer? How do you feel?”

“Sore,” she mumbled. “Did it work?”

“You tell me,” the grin in Fenris’ voice was tangible. Slowly, inch by torturous inch, she tilted her head to glance down. Black hair fell in a straight sheet around her shoulders. Her limbs were a good few inches shorter than they had been. A trembling hand reached up to poke her nose, then her ears. Blunt, short, rounded. It worked. I’m... human again. Her arm wrapped around her back, searching for the rune. Nothing but smooth skin met her touch.

“I’m… me?”

“Maker.” Hawke and Anders stared in open mouth shock at their friend, almost unable to believe it was the same woman. “Hey! We could totally pass as sisters now!”

“No you couldn’t, Hawke. She’s much darker than you. And you look nothing alike,” Fenris rolled his eyes.

“Welcome back, Adrienne,” Leliana wrapped her friend into a warm hug. Ellana practically shoving her spymaster aside to be next. Fiona brushed a few tears away from her eyes as she watched the human embrace her elven sister. Hopping off the table, Aerin approached the dwarf, standing shyly at the back of the group.

“Dagna, you… This would not have possible without you. I owe you everything. And you, Dorian. If either of you ever need anything from me…”

“Just your friendship, my dear,” the altus grinned. “And the promise you won’t let Sera give me any more presents. Please, no more presents.”

Her laugh echoed through the chamber, happy and bright. “Deal. Leli. I guess we have a raven to send? Oh, do I have clothes here?”

***

It was gray outside three days later when Aerin said goodbye to her Kirkwall friends. They were all heading to the coast to catch Isabela’s ship to take Hawke and Fenris to Cumberland, where they would start their journey to the Anderfels, Varric back to Kirkwall, and Anders to Rivain. “I’m going to miss all of you,” she blinked back her tears, arms wrapped firmly around Anders’ torso.

“I’m only a dream away, remember?” he murmured into her hair, placing a kiss against it. “Take care, Lady Couillard.” Smirking, he jumped away when she swung to hit him.

“Ass. Say hi to Aveline for me, Varric. And be nice to me in your book.”

“ Aren’t I always?” he chuckled. “’C’mere, Lightning. I’ll see you again, I know it.” Sniffing, she nodded, turning slowly to face Hawke and Fenris.

“Aer-”

“Don’t,” Aerin answered bitterly, crushing the woman in her arms. “I love you. You’re my family,
do you understand that? Anytime you need me, call out for me. I will come if I have to move the Fade and the Void to do it.”

“I love you too, shit head.” Giggling, they pulled apart, trying to muss each other’s hair up in their typical display of sibling aggression.

“Fen Fen.”

“Aer Aer. Still annoying, you know.”

“You love it.”

“Maybe. I’d never admit it though.” He smirked at her, not even flinching as she punched him.

“Take care of yourself.”

“You, too. Both of you. All of you, dammit.” Silently, tears now freely streaming down her face, she watched them saddle up their horses for the last time, waving as they disappeared through the gates of Skyhold. Breaking away from Ellana, she raced across the courtyard, taking the stair two by two up to the battlements, pressing herself against the railing as she stood there, watching their steeds fade slowly out of sight. The sun was starting to set on the distant horizon, a cool breeze whipping her skirts around her ankle. Stupid skirts. I already miss my breeches. And the weight of my swords. Will I ever get used to this? Being curtsied and bowed to, called ‘my lady’ all the damn time? Creators, I have servants now. A full staff. An entire room full of fancy dresses that I never want to wear. I have... purpose. A future. A life. I suppose it is time to try something new. Alistair would be so pleased. Ali... His wedding should be soon. Leliana said she was pretty enough, but rather docile. I hope she’s nice. And smart. And laughs at his stupid jokes. And teases him just enough to keep him on his toes. I hope she loves him. He deserves no less than everything. Her fingers found the ring around her neck, idly fiddling with it as she stared out over the mountains.

“Copper for your thoughts?”

“If they’re even worth that much.”

“How are you doing?”

She shrugged. “Day by day. I’m leaving for Val Aubrais tomorrow. It’s really happening. Hard to believe. I mean, seriously, me, a lady?” His chuckle was low, the scar on his lip twisting his smile into a smirk.

“Stranger things have happened. Probably. I have yet to see that one topped.”

“Oh, hush you,” she affectionately shoved him, pleased to hear him grunt in return. For several minutes, they stood there, side by side, as if nothing had ever happened.

“Aerin, I- Adrienne, now, I suppose,” she grimaced, “I just wanted to say... I’m sorry. For everything I put you through. All that I made you endure. It was not worthy of me.”

“Cullen. It wasn’t just you. It was me, too. And the lyrium. Just a crazy, perfect storm.” Turning to face him, she laid her hand along his arm, gently squeezing. “No one person is at fault. Except the Tevinter who enslaved me and the Chantry that bound you. We did the best we could.”

“I wish... so much, that we could have worked. I did love you. You believe that, right?” His amber eyes darkened as he studied her face, begging her to believe him. Her heart pounding, she felt herself drown in his stare, unintentionally moving closer into his arms.
“I do. I loved you too, Cullen.” Hesitantly, by degrees, she slowly raised her hand to his stubbled cheek, watching in awe as he closed his eyes and leaned into her caress. He wrapped his fingers into her silky hair and pulled her close, just enough to lay a soft, searching, entreating kiss against her lips, gently moving over her mouth, devouring her essence bit by bit, absorbing it into his own. So much love, so much anguish. Just two lost souls trying to find their missing pieces, someone to love that would help them want to live, instead of merely existing. And they had, for a time. But all things must come to an end, and this was just another one of those things. “Goodbye, Cullen.”

“Farewell, Adrienne.”

***

The carriage rolled smoothly down the paved stone road, picturesque little cottages lining the street, the plush, velvet cushions absorbing most of the vibrations from the ride. Groups of people crowded the avenue, straining to catch a glimpse of their new Marquise. Groaning, she steeled herself, before pushing her curtain open and forcing herself to give the assembled a bright and cheery wave. My people. These are my people now. Nobles, merchants, laborers, humans and elves. What the hell am I going to do?

The little cottages gave way to well-kept stores and restaurants, apartments lining the upper levels, balcony doors thrown open to welcome their new lady. Smiling more freely now, she giggled, watching the children run alongside the carriage, squealing in excitement as their aghast parents and guardians tried to recapture them. Laughing, she waved the adults away. “Excuse me, can we stop here?” she called to her driver, who immediately reined in the horses, jumping down to assist her out. The gathered crowd held their breath as she somewhat gracefully descended to the streets, crouching to meet the children at eye level. “Hello. Have you got something for me?”

One of the little girls shyly approached, handing her a crumpled wildflower as her mother stifled a mortified groan behind her. “My lady, please-”

Aerin smiled, and extended her hand to the child, pointed ears sticking up behind ashy brown curls. “Can you put it in my hair for me? I feel like you would know where it would look the best.” Nodding enthusiastically, chubby fingers gently tucked the stem into her curls, right on top of her head. She patted it to make sure it was secure. “What’s your name, love?”

“Millie.”

“Well, Millie, thank you very much for the flower. It’s quite lovely. Maybe when I have free time, I can come back down and you can show me around? I’m new here and would be dreadfully lost without a knowledgeable guide.” Millie chirped her excitement at the lady, bouncing all the way back to her mother.

“Mamae! Did you hear that?”

“I did, sweetie. My lady,” the elven woman curtsied. “Thank you for being kind.”

“I did, sweetie. My lady,” the elven woman curtsied. “Thank you for being kind.”

“Nonsense,” Aerin shook her head. “I need no gratitude for common manners. I hope I will be seeing you all soon.” Inclining her head, she climbed back into the carriage, waving at the stunned crowd. As they continued up the road, the houses grew in size and ostentation, elaborate manses with well manicured courtyards leading up the hill, to a sprawling estate. She tried not to gape in awe, but it was hard. The house was massive, bigger than the chateaus she remembered from the Emerald Graves, painted a pretty, pale blue. Graceful white columns supported the portico that wrapped around the front of the mansion, an expanse of green from the gardens visible to the far left. Water trickled softly from a carved stone fish’s mouth into a pool set in the center of the drive.
“My lady, welcome home,” a portly man with well worn laugh lines around his eyes and mouth bowed grandly at the bottom of the stairs to the front entrance. “I am the steward of the estate, Arthur Decelle, at your service.”

“Monsieur Decelle, it is a pleasure. I am sorry I missed the Marquis’ funeral. I would have like to thank him one last time in person,” she sighed.

Arthur’s eyes glimmered with faint tears as he cleared his throat. “He spoke very highly of you my lady. He was a good man, the best master any of us could ever have hoped for.”

“It seems I have a lot to live up to then, don’t I?”

“I am sure you will do admirably, my lady. Please, allow me to show you to your new suite, and then I can show you the house and grounds.”

Gratefully accepting his arm, still having some difficulty navigating stairs in her full skirts, she followed in into the open foyer, the clicking of her heels on the marble floor echoing throughout the imposing entrance. “Oh, my. It is absolutely stunning.” The entire atmosphere throughout the mansion was light, airy, and cheerful. The walls were a soft creamy yellow, paintings of tranquil pastoral scenes or valiant battles gracing the walls, silver scones providing ample light that fractured through the crystal chandeliers. It was, in her opinion, even prettier than the Winter Palace. It did feel quite lonely, however. She would just have to remedy that.

“Your room, Lady Couillard. These are Jeannine and Noelle, your maids.” The girls, sisters she thought, bobbed a curtsy, their identical gray eyes and mischievous smiles twinkling. “I assume you will want to freshen up? Very well. I will be in my office, please send one of them down to collect me when you are ready for the tour.” With a sharp bow, he left her in the women’s hands.

“My lady,” they murmured. Sighing, Aerin eyed the two women.

“So it is to be just us in here?” They nodded. “Then please, for Maker’s sake, just call me Adrienne. Lest I lose my mind.” Startled, they slowly looked at each other.

“Adrienne?” Noelle stammered.

“Adrienne. It’s really not that hard,” she smiled encouragingly.

“Ah, if- if you wish, my la- Adrienne.” Jeannine blushed a furious red.

“It’ll get easier,” Aerin laughed. “Now help me out of this dress please? I feel like my ribs might crack.” Giggling to each other, the women eagerly helped their new lady out of the mussed traveling clothes, leaving her in her chemise as they sorted through the expansive selection of dresses that Josephine had sent for her. Pulling a relatively simple dark green taffeta over her, Noelle brushed out her crimped waves, pinning them back into a looser style.

“You truly are beautiful, Lady Adrienne.” Groaning internally at the title, she let it go.

“It helps when you have such talented staff. Thank you. Will someone fetch Arthur for me?” Nodding, Jeannine scampered off, giving Aerin time to inspect her room. It was actually a series of rooms. First, there was a bright, airy solar, the outside wall constructed completely of windows that overlooked the extensive grounds. A neatly trimmed hedge maze lay over there. A large shimmering pond, probably well stocked with fish, was over here. She could barely glimpse the stables at the edge of her view, open fields opening up behind them. Moving into an adjoining room, she discovered a large study, with a secondary door that opened up to the main hall. She marveled at the gorgeous swirling red grain of the wood that made up the desk and shelves, trailing
her fingers over the spines of the leather bound books. Back in the solar, she walked back into her bedroom, a massive Orlesian style sleigh bed constructed from a pale wood, edged in ivory and gold, lay in the center with a richly embroidered duvet covering the mattress. A closet larger than her room at Skyhold was overflowing with an vast array of dresses, heels, boots, riding habits, and Creators bless them, leather leggings and blouses and tunics. An ornate washroom was tucked away, a claw foot copper tub ensconced in a corner. It was all so much for a girl who had spent years sleeping on the ground or a cot, living out of a single leather satchel.

“My lady? Are you ready for the tour?”

“Yes, of course, Monsieur.”

“Please, my lady, Arthur is fine.”

“Then I insist you use my name as well, Arthur.” He grinned, utterly delighted with her relaxed attitude, so similar to his late lord.

“As you wish, Lady Adrienne. Now, how much are you aware of what Lord Reynaud’s business entailed?”

“Silverite mines, correct? And some excellent farmland and fishing.”

“Exactly so. We will only tour the house for today. Tomorrow, I shall accompany you on a ride around the estate. Later this week, we can visit the mines, the coast, and the surrounding countryside.”

“And the town?” she asked hopefully.

“And the town, Lady Adrienne.” He smiled. His lord had chosen a worthy successor. Whether she had the head to run an estate properly was no matter, he was skilled enough at his job. She had a gracious heart, that much he knew. The rest could be learned. “This way, please.”

***

The next several weeks settled into a comfortable routine. She would awaken, take breakfasts with parts of her staff, constantly rotating them so she could have one on one time with each group, making sure they were all satisfied and well cared for. Then, she would spend the rest of her day wherever she was needed most, answering correspondence in her study, introducing herself to the nobility and merchants from town and the surrounding cities, learning the ropes of her new businesses from her steward and overseers, or simply wandering the grounds. She attempted to work in a short sparring session with her guards at least every other day, loathe to lose her skills. Her men were now determined to train harder after she thoroughly trounced them all one night, the lot of them sore and groaning on the ground, their lady grinning with a mixture of triumphant glee and sympathy over their prone bodies. The staff quickly learned that she was approachable and that she wanted them to come to her with their problems, no matter how slight. They, in turn, adored her, the way she took an interest in their daily, mundane lives, no worker too low for her company.

Her favorite days were when she could escape into town. Inevitably, she would find herself in the alienage and the slums, critically assessing the districts for the needed repairs. Arthur had raised an eyebrow at her expressed desire to refurbish the poorer sections of town, placing schools and medical centers within, but readily acquiesced. After all, wasn’t it said she was cousin to the Inquisitor herself, a Dalish elf? Some of the nobility may have turned their nose up at that, but he took it in stride, as it endeared her to the general populace, especially the elves. Yes, his lord had made an excellent choice of heir.
“My lady?” he called as the Marquise swept in the door, removing her riding gloves and hat, passing them to a nearby servant. “A raven arrived for you today.”

“Oh? Thank you, Arthur.” She took the proffered parchment and unrolled it, smiling as she noticed it was from Leliana. Then, she snorted.

“Aerin, there is a ball in Denerim and I wish for you to accompany me. It will be held at the beginning of Kingsmere. I look forward to seeing you again. With love, L.”

Walking into her study, she grabbed a scrap piece of paper and penned a quick response, handing it back to an attendant to send back out.

“Leliana, No. With love, A.”

Two days later, another raven came.

“Adrienne, this is the last favor I am asking you as Leliana before I become Divine. Please? Respectfully yours, L.”

Resorting to guilt trips now, Leli? For shame. Shaking her head, Aerin fastened another note, this time slightly longer than her last response, to the raven.

Leliana, Respectfully, still no. Love, A.”

Two days hence, another bird arrived.

“A- Aedan will be there. He would love to see you. -L.”

And so it went for days, passing messages back and forth, exhausting the spymaster’s poor birds.

“L- Tell him I said hi. Not like either of you would notice me, both of you will be to busy trying to mount each other and defile every surface of the castle anyways. -A.”

“A- Oh hush, we would wait. Please come. Why don’t you wish to see me? Don’t you miss me? -L.”

“Leliana. I would love to see you and Aedan, but I do not under any circumstance want to see Alistair and his new queen. I will probably do or say something obscene and start another civil war. I will see you both later, when you come to Val Royeaux for your coronation. Much love and hugs and shit, A.”

Letting the bird flap off into the night, she yawned and crawled into the soft down comforter on her silk sheets. This, I could definitely get used to. I should check in on Ellana tonight. Maybe Hawke, if I can finally catch her asleep. Does she never rest anymore? I hope she’s okay. Gods, I miss everyone.

An incessant tapping pulled her from the Fade the next day, her sister fading from her mind, the sun barely even touching the horizon. Another bloody raven. Cursing under her breath, Aerin freed the bird of the curled note, tempted to just chuck the thing into the fire. Glaring at the neat handwriting, she froze.

“Oh, Marquise Couillard. How little you know.”

Chapter End Notes
:)
After the bright, green countryside, the sweet scent of the gardens that enveloped her estate, and the painted houses of Val Aubrais, stepping off into the docks of Denerim was quite a shock. *Brown. So, so brown. And the smell of wet dog. Oh, Denerim, never change.* Gracefully, she swept down the gangplank, Noelle and two guards accompanying her. Arthur had wanted her to take more of the men with her, until she wryly reminded him that she was quite capable of caring for herself.

“Bella. Is it truly you?” A familiar Antivan voice called out to her. Whirling around, she squealed. “Zev! Oh, Zevran, I missed you!” Grinning, he held open his arms, catching her as she rushed the elf. Noelle giggled behind her. “Leliana didn’t tell me you’d be here!”

“She wanted to surprise you,” he held her at arm’s length, examining her. “Maker, you get more beautiful every time I see you,” he winked. “I’m so thrilled for you. And who is this lovely creature?”

“Noelle, this is an old friend, Zevran. Watch out for him, he’s a slippery one.” Laughing, he held out the crook of his elbow for her to take.

“You tell such tales, querida. Come, I will show you where we are staying.” The future Divine had taken up residence just off the market square, in a set of Chantry-owned apartments. Aerin would be staying there, with her. Crossing the market, she paused, gazing out over the bustling city. “So much has changed, hmm?”

“Everything. And yet, nothing at all,” she poked him in the ribs, giggling. Knocking at the modest door, a elven serving girl answered.

“The Marquise Couillard,” Noelle announced. A blurry figured raced up the hall, launching itself at the noblewoman.

“Adrienne! Maker, I’m so glad to see you. I know it hasn’t been so long, but I grew used to your company and am suffering sorely without it. Come, I’ll show you to your room. Are you staying, Zev?”

“Mmm,” he hummed. “I will see lovely ladies at the ball tonight. Ciao, for now.” Throwing one last wink at the blushing Noelle, he sauntered out the door.

“Come. I have much to tell you. Did I perchance mention what the ball was for? No? Oh, silly me. It’s to honor the Inquisitor. Ow, Adrienne! That hurt!”

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Alistair subtly tugged on his collar, feeling the soft silk slowly choking the life out of him. *Stupid high neck jackets,* he groused. *Stupid balls. Stupid nobles.* Sighing, he adjusted his kingly smile, standing by the dais as his guests filtered into the large ballroom, hundreds of candles throwing ample light across the vast stone and wood chamber. Nodding politely at yet another bann and his eligible daughter, he spied a once familiar face. “Warden-Commander!” he grinned.
“Your Majesty,” Aedan’s smile matched the king’s in intensity and breadth. His brown haired had
golden streaks now, lightened from the years in the sun from his travels, face more lined, but it
was the same man he had once fought beside.

“Maker, but it’s good to see you,” the men clasped forearms, pulling each other into a friendly bear
hug. “And just in time to save me from an endless parade of simpering, single damsels.” Aedan’s
eyebrows rose.

“I had heard you were engaged? Surely they would have stopped by now.”

“Was engaged,” Alistair sighed. “I found out my betrothed was deeply in love with another, more
minor lord. I couldn’t make her go through with it. I gave her my blessing to marry whom she
pleased, adding to her dowry to appease her father. The only woman in ten years I could see myself
not strangling, and this is how it ends. Have you seen Leliana yet?”

“Chin up, Alistair. Maybe the love of your life is walking through those doors right now.”
Apprehensively, the men swiveled to watch the entrance, just as a potbellied lord waddled through
the door. Snorting, the Warden chuckled as his friend mock fanned himself. “Or not. I haven’t seen
Leli yet, I literally just arrived an hour ago. Came straight here.” A trumpet fanfare silenced the
ballroom.

“Now presenting, Lady Ellana of Clan Lavellan, Inquisitor, Herald of Andraste, vanquisher of
Corypheus!” A slim elf dressed in a flowing pale blue gown embroidered with twisting vines
sedately strolled into the room to raucous applause, smiling at the gathered nobility.

“A far change from the woman I met in Redcliffe,” Alistair mused.

“Inquisitor, it is a honor to welcome you tonight. I trust your journey was well?”

“Quite, Your Majesty.” Ellana leaned over to bow, frowned, awkwardly dipping into a curtsy
instead. Grinning, Aedan took her hand.

“I’ve heard much about you, Inquisitor.” She tilted her head at the man, wondering who he was.

“May I present the Hero of Ferelden, Warden-Commander Aedan Cousland?” Alistair winced as
the elven woman squealed.

“Oh, Aerin told me so much about you! It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Warden.”

“Please, call me Aedan. Did you by chance bring my lover along with you?” Ellana smiled,
pointing to the door, just as a redhead woman gracefully floated in, pale green silks swirling
around her legs. “Leliana,” he breathed. “Pardon me.” Without waiting for their response, the Hero
sprinted across the room, grabbing the future Divine and spun her around in the air, clutching her
tightly as he peppered kisses all over her face. Alistair sighed happily at their reunion.

“It’s a beautiful thing, is it not, Your Majesty?” Ellana murmured, watching them with misty eyes.

“Or lack thereof,” he shrugged. “Didn’t work out. Umm…” he reached up to scratch his head.

“Sooo… Aerin is really gone, then? I read the official report. Poor Cullen.”

Ellana nodded, her lower lips slightly trembling. “Oh, Alistair… Yes. After the final battle. Cullen
and her ended things before that anyways. She decided she was done with Thedas, and set off to
the lands beyond, said she wanted to see the places Aedan saw, find out what’s beyond the edge of
the map. A new start, a new life, trying to find where she belonged. She… took the ring with her,”
she murmured.
His heart dropped down into his stomach, lungs constricting, suddenly having trouble breathing. So she is gone, forever this time. I didn’t even get to say goodbye. No, we said our farewells last time. She has the ring. A piece of me will always be with her at least. Maker, I miss her so much. Closing his eyes against the anguish searing his chest, he could still see her smile, hear her laugh, see the way she glared at him when he was being stupid, smell her sweet lavender and honeysuckle scent. If he really concentrated, he could almost taste her.

“I miss her too, Alistair.” He nodded, unable to speak against the lump that had formed in his throat. How selfish was he, pining over her, when the Herald had lost the only family she had? A sudden hush fell over the crowd. Confused, Alistair craned his neck, trying to get a good view of who it was that had the nobles so enraptured. “Oh!” Ellana gasped. “I, ah, I should go. Over here for now. Pardon me, Your Majesty.” Confused, he watched the Inquisitor trip over her skirts in her attempt to flee. What in Andraste’s name is going on? Then-oh.

A woman, probably in her late 20s, swept into the main hall. Her dark black hair, glossy as a raven’s wing, was artfully piled on her head in a riot of loose curls that gently bounced and swayed as she walked. Her skin was a creamy golden hue, a tightly cinched corset accenting a tiny waist and ample bosom. A relatively simple navy blue silk gown was draped around her, full skirts slashed with cream lace, sweetheart neckline showing off a smooth expanse of skin. A golden chain hung around her neck, the pendant hidden under the dress, and a plain silver mask hid her eyes. From what he could see, she was stunning. And Orlesian. Of course she is.

She was smiling graciously, speaking rapid Orlesian to several nobles who approached her, switching flawlessly to Antivan, chattering away until the Inquisition’s ambassador stole her away with hasty apologies. They were heading for him. His throat went dry. Lifting his glass up to his lips, he took a big gulp. And another. Drained his wine. A passing servant handed him two new glasses of champagne.

“Your Majesty, it is a pleasure to finally meet you in person,” Josephine curtsied.

“Oh- I- Uh, yes, Lady Montilyet, correct? Thank you for helping me clear out the Venatori. Or, er, not you, I suppose it was the Commander. His men. Leliana’s men? And women? Is Rutherford here by the way? Oh, and for aiding in the peace talks with the Empress. It was greatly appreciated by myself and Ferelden. His men. Leliana’s men? And women? Is Rutherford here by the way? Oh, and for aiding in the peace talks with the Empress. It was greatly appreciated by myself and Ferelden. The stranger’s lips twitched in an attempt to hide her smile. Alistair stifled a groan.

“May I introduce the Marquise Adrienne Couillard? Daughter of the late Marquis Reynaud Couillard?”

Oh, I have heard of her. Apparently, she’s the talk of southern Orlais right now, despite the fact that no one has heard of her prior to her father’s demise. Every eligible bachelor in Orlais and Ferelden to the Free Marches is singing songs of her beauty and grace. I see why. “Marquise, I heard of your father’s passing. You have my deepest sympathies.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty is too kind. He was a good man and is very much missed by his people.” Her voice was cultured, Orlesian but… not. He handed her the glass of sparkling wine and took her free hand, raising it to his lips and froze. Her scent. Lavender and honeysuckle. Startled, he looked up into her eyes. Irises of a deep cobalt blue, surrounded by a thin ring of pale gold. It was her eyes, yet they were not.

“Aerin?”

She smiled, her striking eyes crinkling. “I’m afraid His Majesty has me confused with someone.
else.” His brow furrowed. “It’s terribly warm in here, don’t you think? I’ve heard that the gardens here are quite exquisite.” The Marquise looked at him expectantly.

“Oh, yes. Right, gardens. Um. Would you care to see them?” His head spun, images of Aerin overlaying with the human in front of him.

“I would love to, Your Majesty.” He offered his arm and felt her slide her small hand through it. Glancing down, he eyed the chain, curious what was on the end of it. She looked up at him with a bemused smile on her face. With a start, he realized he was staring at her breasts.

“Oh! I-I’m… So sorry, I swear I wasn’t look at your… um, well you know.” A pretty, feminine giggle escaped her. “I was actually looking at your necklace.”

“Oh? Are you a connoisseur of jewelry, sire?”

“It’s… just not typical of the things I see most ladies of your status wearing.”

“Your Majesty, may I tell you a secret?” He nodded eagerly. “I’m a horrible excuse for a lady. My tutors tried, but the lessons never seem to hold. I much preferred swordplay to needlepoint.”

Alistair chuckled. “I never understood the point of all that needlework anyhow. How many lace doilies does one actually need?” They stopped in front of a rosebush, next to a splashing fountain adorned with a griffon. As he watched her, she smiled at the flower, running a finger over the crimson petals. “Would it be… rude of me to ask you to remove your mask?”

“Yes,” she replied simply. He winced. “But I don’t mind. I hate the thing anyways.” Reaching up, she untied the lace that held up her mask. “There, now I can see your handsome face better.” He grinned at that, resisting the urge to giggle like a child. Her eyes were large, long black lashes dusting across her cheek along with a smattering of freckles that were the most adorable thing he had ever seen, with a small, pert nose, and perfect, rosebud pink lips. He itched to know how she tasted. And immediately felt guilty, the vision of a ruby haired elf flashing across his vision. No. I **lost her a long time ago. She’s gone now. Time to move on. She’d want me to be happy anyhow.**

His eyes widened, blushing as he realized he was staring. “Oh, my apologies, no, it’s just… your eyes. Remind me of someone I once knew.”

“A woman?”

“How did you know?”

“Your own eyes are very expressive. And also the way you talk. It would seem you were quite fond of her.”

He paused. “I was. I am.”

“You love her.” Her tone wasn’t accusatory, merely curious, eyes holding no malice.

He smiled. “I always will.”

“She is a lucky woman.”

“It doesn’t matter now. She’s gone and… I have to move on. She’d want me to be happy, I think.”

“I think she would as well.” Sitting down on the bench, Lady Couillard patted the spot next to her.
“Come, sit. Let’s talk of Lady Rosach’s ridiculous hat. Have you seen it?”

“See it? I think it almost took my eye out.” Laughing, the pair stayed outside for hours, completely ignoring the fact that they missed the feast and the rest of the ball, talking until the moons were high in the night sky. The Marquise shivered in the cold air.

“Oh, Maker, where are my manners? Here, let me-” he jumped up and shrugged off his coat. Drawing it around her shoulders, he stepped back a few inches. “There,” he murmured. The sight of her enveloped by his clothing was strangely arousing. She leaned in and sniffed his coat, smirking at him.

“Smells like you,” she remarked. “Cinnamon, and… hmm. No more almond oil, I suppose.” He froze.

“Almond oil? I don’t use almond oil.”

“You used to, for your armor.”

“How did you know that?” he whispered, not daring to hope.

“Same way I know you’re scared of heights. And you’re terrible at cooking over campfires. And you have a scar right here from falling off the barn roof when you were 8. And you’re still wearing your mother’s locket and-” her polished accent roughening into a familiar cadence, she tugged his wrist to her, pushing up his sleeve a bit, “you still have this rune. Even though there’s no darkspawn left for a king to kill.”

“It is you. Aerin.” His heart pounded so hard he briefly thought it would shatter his ribs. With a shaking finger, he gently pulled at the chain around her neck, mind going numb at the sight of the golden mabari. She smiled up at him.

“Hello, Ali.” One second he was staring at her like she was a ghost, the next, his lips were on hers, crushing her body against his, one hand around her waist, the other cupped around the back of her neck. His world imploded, narrowing until all that was left was her lips, her hands, and her body. Running his fingers all over her, he ached to memorize these new curves, the smell and taste remaining the same. Hours, they must have kissed. Maybe days. Time lost all meaning. She was still here, and somehow, human. His Aerin. He wanted to cry, scream, shout. When they finally pulled away, gasping with a straining need for oxygen, her eyes were shining, lips red and swollen, cheeks flushed.

“You are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he whispered. “How?”

“Dorian and Dagna. With the help of Fiona, Hawke, Michael, and Anders. Duke Couillard- I saved his life. He for some reason took a liking to me and adopted me, making me his heir, since he had no children of his own and he detested his next of kin. I inherited his estate when he died three months ago. Since then, I’ve been learning about my new business and city, learning to be a Marquise.. It’s ridiculous. Me. A lady. In charge of an entire city. Did you know I own mines now? And farmland? Cows. I have cows. And chickens!” Nothing could wipe off the smile that was glued onto his face.

"Ellana, she said."

"What she had to. Ears are everywhere, Ali."

“Aerin.”
“Adrienne.” He gave her a look. “What? It’s my name. My real name. Adrienne Jia Iseri. I changed it not long after I got to Thedas. To Aerin.” Alistair was dumbfounded. “Names don’t mean much to me, Ali. I’ve been Jia Iseri, Aerin Lavellan, Seraphina, La Sirena, the Tempest, the Inquisitor’s sister- which is a terrible name- and now Adrienne Couillard.”

“What?”

“Adrienne Theirin. Please.”

Her eyes froze. “Alistair…”

“I’m doing this all wrong, aren’t I?” He grinned sheepishly. “Here.” He kneeled to the ground and took her hand.

“Ali…”

“Hush, I’m proposing. Adrienne Jia Aerin Iseri, will you marry me?”

“Alistair, I-” His face fell. “I want to. Honestly. But we’ve been apart for eleven years. You’ve changed, I’ve changed. Shouldn’t we get to know each other again? As we are now?”

Smiling tenderly up at her, he stood, grabbing her waist and twirled her in the air, spinning her until they were dizzy and he fell into the wet grass, his love landing on top of him. Drawing her to him again, he kissed her over and over until they were both giggling and breathless.

“You didn’t say no,” he informed her when she finally looked up at him with a questioning tilt of her head. “I suppose I can manage the rest. Stay with me in Denerim.”

“Okay.”

“Really? Just like that?” He couldn’t believe it. She was going to stay with him. Maker, he would never let her out of his sight again.

“It would be just plain rude to turn you down again.”

“You just ooze tenderness and romance, don’t you?”

“It’s part of my charm.”

“Yes,” he sighed happily, drawing her to her feet, “It is.”

“Ow, Leliana! They’ve been alone long enough. I want to see my sister!” an imperious voice rang out from the other side of the hedge. Laughing, Alistair watched the tiny Inquisitor stomp across the lawn, the Divine-elect trying desperately to rein her back, the elf lighting up when caught a glimpse of her sister. “Aerin! Owww, Leliana! Adrienne!”

The two girls collided in a swirl of silks, giggling to each other as they embraced. “Leli, you are a sneaky, sneaky Divine. Aedan!” Aerin launched herself at the tall noble behind the former bard, wrapping her arms around him and squeezing hard.

“Maferath’s balls, Aer- Adrienne, I can’t breathe!” Ignoring his pleas for air, she continued to hold him in a vice like grip until she was satisfied. “Look at you, all human and such.”

“Such a warm family reunion,” an Antivan called out, the blonde elf strolling out to meet them.
“Too bad Morrigan left already,” Aerin sighed. “Could go grab the Arishok and find any random drunk dwarf and then it’s like the Blight all over again.”

“Ah, yes, darkspawn, ritual death and dismemberment, eating stale nug and suspicious berries. Those were the days,” Alistair deadpanned. “Maker, it’s good to see you all again.”

“Alistair,” Aedan murmured. “I meant to tell you before, but someone distracted me,” he nudged Leliana, who just gave him a radiant smile. “My quest. I succeeded. I found a cure.”

Everyone stood still, the sounds of the ball and crickets and fountain fading into the background. He didn’t dare breathe. “What?” he rasped.

“A cure. I found a way to remove the taint. It’s in my bags in my chamber. I already took it. Didn’t you realize you can’t sense me anymore?”

Alistair shook his head. “It’s been so long since I was near another Warden, that I didn’t realize, but now that you mention it… I can’t feel you.” Spinning to the woman at his side, he dragged her close for another searing kiss. “We could have more time. A family. We could—” She laid a finger over his lips, eyes dancing up at him.

“One thing at a time, love. Cure first, then the rest.” Nodding, he clutched her tight.

“Tomorrow, Aedan?”

“Tomorrow,” he nodded. Saying goodnight, Zevran and Leliana tossing identical suggestive smirks at the couple, their friends left them one by one.

“See you tomorrow,” Ellana gave her sister a quick squeeze. “Have fuuuuuun!” she called back, giggling.

The stupid grin was back on his face, he knew it. Tilting her head up to look at him, he hesitantly asked, “Stay with me tonight?”

She gave him a mock gasp. “Your Majesty! What about my reputation? What reputable noble would wish to marry someone as wanton as a woman willing to- mmm.” He cut her off, kissing her silly protests away.

“Me. I want to marry you. Forever, and always. Stay with me tonight,” he murmured against her lips.

“Alistair. Of course I will, you daft man.”

Chapter End Notes

Commence all the happy, high pitched squealing.
It took them almost an hour to reach his chambers. They kept pulling each other into each hallway, every secluded corner they passed, unable to go more than twenty seconds without their lips on the other. The ball was still in full swing, guests milling about everywhere, causing Alistair to duck and hide more than a few times. Giggling, she watched him try to slowly creep down an abandoned hall.

“Gods, Ali, how are you still so bad at stealth even when you’re not in armor? I’d have thought you’d have tons of experience hiding from nobles by now,” she teased.

“You’d think,” he chuckled. “Come here you.” Grabbing her yet again, he pressed kisses that grew increasingly hotter along the smooth column of her throat, pausing to lick at the pulse flickering in the hollow of her neck.

She groaned, rubbing herself against his body. “Ali, your room. Hurry,” she pleaded.

His voice was low and hoarse as he answered. “As my lady wishes.” Scooping her up into his arms, he carried the giggling woman into his room, kicking the door shut behind him violently. Slowly, he lowered her to the ground, never taking his lips off of her skin. Fumbling for the pins in her hair, he growled in frustration. “Let it down? Please?” With a sultry smirk, she delicately plucked the ties loose, shaking her hair down in flowing waves. “Maker,” he rasped, “You are so beautiful. Can I say that now? Since this is you?” Her eyes brightened at the memory.

“Yes,” she purred, entwining her limbs around his, “You can.” Standing on her tiptoes, she carefully bit his ear, lining the surrounding shell with the tip of her tongue, shivering at his answering moan. “You are wearing far too many clothes, my love.”

With a smirk of his own, he gently pushed her back, teasing her to distraction as he slowly pulled his jacket off, sliding his shirt out of his pants, revealing the scarred expanse of his now paled skin to her hungry eyes. The years had been kind to him, the rich food and rest filling him in, while his dedication to maintaining his warrior’s skills kept his body firm and toned. Aerin barely kept herself from drooling as he kicked off his trousers, clad only in his smalls. Stalking toward him, Alistair rather felt like a mouse caught in a trap. And he loved it. Loved the way she devoured him with her eyes. Loved the way she raked her nails through his chest hair and across his nipples. Loved the little gasps she made as his sounds of pleasure. Loved the way she loved him. He could feel it in her touch, fingertips running reverently across his skin. She wanted to wait until she was sure he was the same, but he already knew. He wasn’t the same and neither was she, but it didn’t matter. She was the other half of his soul, the piece that made him feel whole and alive. Everything tonight had seemed sharper, more real since the moment she waltzed into his castle. He would give her everything. She already had his heart.
Smiling, he pulled her back, spinning her around to face away from him. Tapping on the row of tiny pearl buttons, he whispered, “May I?” She nodded, trembling under his hands as he brushed the base of her neck, pulling each button free, one by one. Maker, there were so many. “Ah, I should tell you. Over the years, there… have been… well, I got lonely and-”

Spinning around in his arms, she laid a finger across his still swollen lips. “It doesn’t matter, love. You know I have… as well. You’re here and I’m here, and right now, that’s all that matters.” He released a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, jaw hanging open as she stepped out of her dress, revealing the black corset underneath, lacy garters holding up her stockings. “They’re, ah, Orlesian. Leliana gave them to me for tonight. Do you like them?” She bit her lip, suddenly feeling shy.

He swallowed, trying to answer her, but failing to get sound out. Swallowing again, he forced the lump in his throat down and croaked, “Yes. Dear Maker, yes.” He wanted to take his time with her, savor seeing her clad in this skimpy, frilly nonsense outfit, but he wanted her more. Wanted her bare skin against him, her real skin, wanted to lose himself in her scent, in her warmth. Circling her like a predator coming in for the kill, she watched him nervously, slightly fidgeting at the intensity in his eyes. He paused at her back, tugging at her laces. “As much as I want to enjoy this view, love, I want to be inside of you so much more,” he muttered into her ear. Her moan sent an electrical jolt straight to his groin. Ripping her stays off, he shoved the corset off, desperate to see her entire body. She turned to face him. Alistair whimpered, lost.

Grabbing her hips, he lifted her up, feeling her legs wrap around his back as he blindly stumbled to his bed, drawing a light brown nipple into his mouth, sucking and nibbling at the soft flesh. Her fingernails dug into his shoulder as she hissed, thrusting her hips up. Darkly chuckling, he pressed her pelvis down into the soft bed. “Patience, love. I’ll give you what you want yet.” Ignoring the throbbing of his own arousal, he took his time tasting her skin, finding every new freckle and scar, laving his tongue over the new memories, until she was writhing desperately beneath him.

“How you missed the sound of her begging for his touch. More, he needed more. Shifting his body down, he trailed wet kisses down her flat stomach, pausing to nibble at her hip bones, running his hands over the new curves. Taking hold of her smalls, his muscles bulged as he easily ripped them in two, throwing them to the side, wanting to leave her garters on. He moved farther down, ignoring the part of her that was crying for his attention, sucking at the tender skin of her inner thighs. Frustrated, she rolled her hips upward, impatience coloring her voice as she hissed, “Alistair!”

“Yeeeeres?” He looked up at her scrunched up face, feeling his heart clench at the familiar expression. If he thought she was beautiful before, now she was… He could have stared at her for hours. “Did you need something, lover?”

“If you don’taaahhhhhhh,” she gasped as he buried his face between her legs, plunging his tongue straight into her heat. Crying out, her hips bucked up, almost throwing him off. Chucking again, he held her thighs pinned in place as he consumed her, running the flat of his tongue over her slick folds, sucking and biting everywhere except where she needed him. “Please, please,” she was reduced to breathy sighs as he teased her, drawing out the anticipation. Gently, he ran a finger, still rough with callouses, along her slit, slowly sliding it inside, feeling her muscles clench around the single digit. “More!” she demanded.

“So needy,” he groaned, shoving another finger deep inside her as he latched his lips around her swollen clit. She screamed as he fucked her with his hands and mouth, her walls growing tighter around him, body clenching in preparation. “Let go for me, love. Aerin.” It was too much for her. She heard a howling scream, realizing belatedly that it was her. His pale blue eyes stared wide eyed
at her, drinking the sight of her orgasm in, mouth hanging open, her arousal glistening on his lips as he let her ride out her pleasure. Gasping for air, she fell back on the sheets, mind fuzzy as she struggled to regain equilibrium.

“Alistair. That was…”

“Perfect,” he grinned boyishly, beaming with pride at his accomplishment. Giggling breathlessly, she hummed her agreement. Crawling up her body, he settled himself against her, dragging his rock hard length against her dripping center. Moaning, she rose up to meet him, trying to pull him inside. “Eager, are we?”

“Alistair,” she snapped. “It’s been eleven fucking years. If you don’t fuck me now, I will hurt you.”

“I might like that,” he teased, rubbing his swollen head against her opening. Her eyes darkened with lust at that. Unable to control himself any longer, he surged forward, plunging his member deep within her, feeling her muscles clench almost painfully tight around the large intrusion. Her eyes rolled back as she grabbed on to his arms, hissing with the pleasurable burn. Freezing when he was fully hilted inside her, he waited until she relaxed around him and began squirming. Slowly, he slid himself out, wanting her to feel every ridge and vein that was bulging out of his cock, reveling in her slick heat. He continued to torture her with long, steady thrusts, feeling her moans vibrated through her chest, watching her breasts heave with each gasp. Her breasts. He had never imagined anything as perfect as these two, smooth, creamy orbs, bouncing deliciously with each penetration. Groaning, he raised a hand to a nipple, pinching and rolling it between his fingers, delighting in the tensing of her sheath as she keened in his ear.

It was too much and not enough, she thought, feeling her core burn with desire. And he was only fanning the flames, refusing to give her what she wanted, what she needed. But she didn’t care. All she could think about was how perfect this was, how amazing he felt inside of her, his familiar masculine scent enveloping her senses, and how she was home. He was her home. That’s why nowhere else had ever felt right, because he was not with her. Everything made sense now. Her slavery, her recapture, every loss she had ever had, every sleepless night she cried out in the darkness, every heartbreak, every papercut, every little thing that had ever gone wrong- it was all worth it. She would do it all over again if it led her right back her, to him. This man, this glorious, sexy, bumbling, silly man, he was her everything. He always had been. And somehow, they were together. They could stay together. She still didn’t feel worthy of his love, but she was tired of denying the other half of her soul. She would never let him go again. “Alistair.”

“Yes, love?” He smiled down at her, still relishing in the feel of his length slowly torturing her.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” His face turned confused, hips pausing.

“Yes, I’ll marry you.” Alistair froze, unsure whether or not he had just heard correctly.

“What?” he whispered.

Her smile was gently ecstatic. “I want to marry you. Be your wife. Have your babies. Grow old with you, to death do us part and all.” He broke. Grabbing her knees, he surged forward, snapping his hips into hers with a hard thrust.

“Say it again.”
“Alistair! I want to stay by your side. For the rest of my life, for eternity. I want to be yours.” With each sentence, he punctuated her words with a punishing shove, plunging deeper and deeper inside of her. He could see it now. Introducing her to everyone as his wife. Her belly swelling with their baby. A dark haired little girl tugging at his pant leg, holding out her chubby arms for him to pick her up. Holding her hand as they walked through the city, mabari and children frolicking around their feet. Every night, falling asleep with her in his arms. To have, to hold. Forever.

“Mine?” He meant it to be statement, but it came out as a question.

“Yes,” she cried, rising up to meet his hips. “Yours. As you are mine. For the rest of time.”

Growling, he sat up, dragging her hips to rest on the tops of his thighs, pressing a thumb to her pearl. “Yours, forever. Maker, Aerin. Come for me sweetheart, I can’t-” It only took a few more circles against her before her back arched up, muscles strung taut as a bowstring, a wordless scream on her lips, nails digging painfully into his legs. She would leave scars. He didn’t care. With a roar, he let himself go, burying his seed deep within her womb, keeping his cock firmly inside of her until the last pulses died down, and then some. Sighing, complete bliss took over his body, draining the rest of his energy away. Careful not to dislodge himself, he gathered her limp and pliant body to his, flipping them over so she laid on top of him. Her walls idly tightened around his softening member, causing him to twitch. “Are you happy?”

“Are you kidding?” Aerin raised her eyes, almost a midnight blue in the dim light of the single candle, the flickering flame making the pale gold glow that much brighter. “I’m not convinced this isn’t still a dream. For all I know I’m back in the Fade.”

“The Fade? You mean, back in the magrallen? You dreamed of us?” He was stunned. Biting her lip, she nodded, laying her head back against his chest, nuzzling the soft golden hairs there. “I dreamed we had a tiny cottage by the sea. A mabari. You were burning bacon. I was pregnant. It was so perfect. And I knew it wasn’t real, but I would have willingly stayed there the rest of my life if I knew it was really you with me.”

“And here all I dreamed about was Maric,” he mumbled, suddenly ashamed.

“That what was on your mind when we were sucked into the Fade, love. Of course that’s what you dreamed of. Do you think I’d honestly fault you for it?” Sheepishly, he shook his head.

“So you’re really going to stay here?”

“Didn’t I say I would?” Reaching up, she flicked his ear, snorting at the king whined plaintively at her. “Doubting me already, I see. My steward is a capable man. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to learn that he will be permanently in charge and that his lady is becoming queen of a country. Oh, kaffas. I’m going to be queen. What the fuck, Alistair?”

Laughing at her crude tongue, he held her tighter. “Yes. And you’re going to be a magnificent queen.”

“I can’t be queen. I can barely be a marquise. Most days, I can barely be human. I still trip over my own skirts.”

“Well, you’ll have years to practice. Decades, even.” He kissed her hair, lazily combing through the silky strands. “I love your hair. And your freckles. And your breasts. Maker, do I love your breasts. I love you. All of you. Have I told you that today?”

Giggling, she lightly scratched her nails against his arm. “Say it all you want. We have a decade
worth of sweet nothings and kisses to make up for."

“Well in that case,” he gave her a rakish grin, pushing his hips up against hers. Gasping, she felt him start to harden again. “We should take advantage of the Warden stamina one last time before I lose it.” Grinning, she nodded, pushing herself upright, hands braced against her chest. Rolling her hips again, the delicious angle of his shaft within her, rubbing against that one spot just so, wrenching a moan from her lips. She ground against him again, the wave of pleasure against her sensitive flesh just hovering over the exquisite edge of pleasure and pain.

“Yes, we should.”

***

The tiny vial looked so innocent, the murky dark brown liquid swirling sluggishly behind the glass.

“Looks disgusting, I know. Tastes even worse. Still not as bad as darkspawn blood.” Aedan snorted, leaning against the desk in Alistair’s study. The same desk that she had left him at years ago. Maybe she would get him to get a new desk.

“What’s in it?” Aerin peered at the potion.

“Lots of random thing. Main components is the blood of a chimera and a dragon. Chimeras are naturally immune to the blight. Dragon blood gives you strength.”

“I already have that one,” the king muttered wryly.

“Oh, really?” Leliana raised her eyebrow at him.

“Long story. Guess it never hurts to have more, though.” Uncorking the vial, he gagged as the metallic tang of blood mixed with putrid meat and decaying leaves wafted out.

“Oh, Alistair. It’s going to hurt like hell. Worse than the Joining.”

“Lovely,” he sighed. “Well, cheers.” Tilting the vial to his lips, he poured the noxious concoction in his mouth, forcing himself to not vomit it back up. Swallowing, he stuck out his tongue.

“Maker’s ba-” His gut clenched in the worst agony he had ever felt. Unable to even scream, he collapsed to the floor, barely aware of the cool hands that reached for him.

“Leave him be, Aerin. He has to do this.” Frowning, she stepped back, watching the love of her life writhe in torment on the thick rug that covered the floor. Tears flowed from her eyes as he piteously moaned and gasped, hands scrabbling at the soft fibers.

“How long does this last, Aedan?” she begged.

The Warden’s anguished eyes were wide as he gazed down at his friend, “I don’t know. I was alone when I took mine. I passed out from the pain.”

A minute passed. Then two. Three. She was certain something had gone wrong. She was going to lose him, lose him to the hope they might have more time, and instead they would have less. Her mana flickered at her fingertips. She had to do something, make this stop, save him somehow-

He stopped, panting for air, eyes closed, hair laying pressed against his sweaty brow. “Ali?” she murmured, kneeling beside him. Gently, she pushed his hair away from his face. A pale, watery blue eye opened, pupil dilating as it focused on her.
“It’s gone. I don’t hear anything. The Taint. It’s gone.”

Chapter End Notes

Goooooin to the chapel and we're

Gooooonna get maaarried
Has Come Along

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Word of the betrothal of King Alistair Theirin of Ferelden to the Marquise Adrienne Couillard of Val Aubrais spread like wildfire through Thedas. Bards sang of the tale of their immediate love at first sight, how the couple was already hopelessly devoted to each other. It was a fairy tale come to life for the people. Or so they thought. They had no inkling the future queen was once an elf, sister to the Inquisitor, Victorem of Minrathous, and one of the most powerful mages in the world. She didn’t care, of course. All of that was far behind her. She was going to marry the man she loved, finally. All of her friends, her family, would be there. The Divine had declared the mages free. The world was at peace.

For now. There were negatives, as usual. Rumors of an elven uprising, led by Briala, rippled through Thedas. And there was Hawke. Aerin could not find the mage, or Fenris, in the Fade. She feared the worst, especially with the lack of news from Weisshaupt. There were whispers that the Grey Wardens warred within themselves. So where was her best friend? Why had she not called for her? Fear for them both plagued her more than she admitted. And as for the mages, of course there were those who opposed the Divine’s edict. But the former Inquisition spymaster rallied the Chantry, keeping it held together by sheer will and grace.

Sighing, shaking her head to dispel her morose ramblings, she thanked the maid who had just finished pinning her hair. Slipping out into the corridor, Aerin headed down the hall, pleasantly greeting all she passed, making her way to the courtyard. A warm hand slipped around her waist, lips pressing a kiss to her shoulder. “Excited, dear?”

“Positively giddy,” she smiled up at his handsome face. “I feel like it’s been ages since I’ve seen them all. It’s been almost a year since I saw most of my friends.” A lumbering caravan rolled through the gate at that moment, men and women mounted on steeds varying from horses to harts to- who the fuck brought the dracolisk? Cole. Of course. Grinning at the approaching group, Alistair had to physically restrain her from flying down the stairs and tackling the Inquisitor in the company of the assembled nobility. Sparing a quick moment to pout up at him, she waited, hands clasped to her front, the picture of serenity on the outside.

“Inquisitor,” Alistair bowed, “We thank you for attending the celebration of our nuptials.”

Curtseying at his side, Aerin murmured, “You honor us with your presence, Inquisitor. How fared your travels?”

Bowing in return, Ellana solemnly replied, “We thank you most kindly for the invitation. Our trip was unremarkable, to say the least. The best kind of journey.”

“I am sure you will wish to rest and freshen up before supper tonight. The servants will escort you to your room.” Alistair motioned for the attendants to help unload the wagons, a large Qunari directing his men to assist the castle staff.

Ushering his fiancée inside, he bemusedly watch her pace the length of the parlor, over and over again like a caged animal. “Keep that up love, and I’ll have to get a new carpet within the next hour.” She scrunched up her nose and stuck her tongue out at him. Chuckling, he approached the fidgeting woman, pulling in her in close, trying to soothe her agitated spirit.
“They’re taking foreverrrr,” she whined, thumping her forehead against his collarbone. “Ow.”

The door creaked open. Jerking upright, Aerin squealed in glee as the Inquisitor walked in, followed by everyone else. She squeezed Cole, telling him to go pester Alistair, the latter spending the next few minutes trying to inch away from the boy who kept repeating, "Aunshine, rainbows, her smile makes you soar".

Varric hugged her tightly, clapped the king on his back, shook his hand and called him Freckles. The Iron Bull swung her high into the air, commenting that she should let him launch her down the aisle, in honor of old times, to which Alistair stammered, “Excuse me? You did what now? Absolutely not.” His future queen and the massive one-eyed Qunari both pouted.

"Now I’ve seen everything," he thought wryly. Dorian swept her into the biggest hug yet, his voice breaking as he tried to brush it off, patting her on the head as he released her, asking, "Would you mind if I spent a bit of time admiring the monarch's arse? It's quite lovely."

"Not at all," she grinned. "In fact, it would be nice to have someone with whom I could compare the finer points of his assets." Alistair turned red and kept his back to the wall after that. Sera leapt onto Aerin’s back as she turned away from the Tevinter, latching on to the woman like a leech, refusing to disentangle herself from the noble. Cassandra, Blackwall, and Josephine merely shook both the king’s and his betrothed’s hands, congratulating them like sane adults, the women getting a bit misty eyed. It was chaos. She loved it. Turning to scrape the elf off her back, Aerin spotted him toward the back, hand on his neck as he anxiously waited.

“Cullen. You came.”

“Ah, yes,” he blushed, hesitantly meeting her gaze. “The Inquisitor said you wanted everyone there, and she insisted you meant that to include me as well, so… here I am,” he finished lamely. Smiling gently, she laid her hand on his arm.

“I’m glad you’re here. Thank you.” Gazing down at the petite woman, his amber eyes crinkled as he smiled in return.

“Commander,” a low voice called out from behind, a hand sneaking out to wrap around her waist. “Glad you could make it.”

“Your Majesty,” Cullen bowed. “Congratulations, by the way.” Alistair stared at the other man, sizing him up, as the entire room held their breath. Nodding to him, the king stepped forward, grabbing the blond man by the arm, and pulled him into a crushing hug.

“Alistair, please, Cullen. I think we’re far past titles at this point in our acquaintance. Friends?”

The Commander stared in shock at the smiling face of his king. “I- uh, Maker’s breath. If you’re sure, Your Ma- Alistair,” he amended at the other man’s scowl.

“Sure, I’m sure. Past is in the past. Is everyone hungry? Supper will be served soon. I figured you just wanted an intimate meal with everyone, right love? Save all the fancy pomp and circumstance for the reception?”

“Save all the fancy shit for never,” she grumbled, resigned to her fate. She would have greatly preferred a private wedding, outside somewhere, with just her friends and Ellana. But no, she just had to marry the bloody king. Get married in a fucking Chantry. In front of the whole damn country. Parade herself through the streets afterwards. Play nice with the nobles from all over Thedas that would be there. It was enough to drive her mad. Alistair smiled at her. Suddenly, she
forgot why she was pissed. Tucking her hand through his arm, she leaned against him, letting him guide her to the dining room.

“So what’s Michael up to these days?” Cassandra blushed the mention of the man. *Oh. That’s new.*

“He is at the University of Orlais, putting his knowledge as a civil engineer to good use, training to be an engineer here. I expect he shall be a master very shortly,” the Seeker smiled dreamily. Varric nudged Aerin, grinning. Cassandra caught sight of the movement and grunted at the dwarf.

“I’m glad he’s doing well,” Aerin giggled. “What else is new?”

“Apparently you drinking wine is new,” the Iron Bull raised his eyebrow at her.

She held the glass up to the light, watching his reflection distort through the liquid. “White only. The magisters didn’t drink white.” Dorian glared down at his wine, sighing theatrically as he pushed the red away.

“I might as well try it. Every time I drink red now, I have a sinking feeling it’s beet juice.” Sera cackled from her end of the table.

The conversation flowed fast and easy as the night went on, a feeling of warm relaxation and acceptance washing over her, the likes of which she had not felt since the day she left Skyhold. She missed it so much.

“Happy?” Blackwall grinned at her.

“Warm, free, finally the search ends. There is love here, with my friends, and it burns brighter than the sun. How I wish this night could never end.” Blushing, Aerin reached over to pat Cole’s head.

“Thanks, love.”

“Family?” Her eyes watered as she nodded, breath catching in throat.

“Home.”

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The sparkling wine bubbled down her throat, cool liquid plunging in her burning stomach, doing nothing to help soothe her nerves. Her feet carried her in circles around the room, pausing every circuit to stare at the dress. It was a dark red silk that shimmered in the light, cut with a modest square neckline, long fluttering sleeves with golden lace that brushed the backs of her hands. The tightly cinched boned bodice embroidered with dozens of tiny seed pearls flared out just slightly at the hips, the front of the skirt slashed with the same golden lace as the cuffs, trailing out behind her in an elegant train. All the women were currently gathered around the gown, speaking in excited hushed whispers, admiring the seamstress’ work.

Josephine turned to smile at the nervous bride, pulling a box out from her bag. “Here. It’s an Antivan tradition, to wear a gift from your mother. I thought, maybe, a gift from me would suffice?”

Aerin’s eyes filled with tears as she took the parcel from the ambassador. “Oh, Josie, this- I… Thank you.” She took off the lid, gasping in delight at the gold filigree earrings within. “They’re *beautiful.*”

“More gifts for the bride!” Leliana grinned, tossing a pair of garnet encrusted slippers at her
friend's head. “And this as well.” A small package wrapped in silk lay in her hand, a small scrap of parchment tucked inside. Curiosity peaked, Aerin pulled the note free, pulling the layers of fabric aside to reveal an elegant gold link chain, each segment carved to reflect the light, appearing as if it were made of diamonds as sheer as spider silk. Gasping, she turned the necklace over in her hands, marveling at the glimmer.

“What does the note say?” Ellana peeked over her shoulder. The delicate script read: *This was once given to me by a king. I think it is only fitting you should wear it the day you marry his son. He would be thrilled.* Tears welled up in her eyes. Fiona. Her fingers fumbled with the chain around her neck, pulling it free of the ring and threading it on Alistair’s mother’s necklace instead.

“Fasten it for me?” she asked in a rough voice, trying not to cry. As her sister fiddled with the dainty clasp, Cassandra shyly handed her a intricately carved stiletto dagger, while Isabela frowned at her wrist.

Pulling a long, thin golden chain, wound several times around her arm, off, the pirate threw it at Aerin. “Here. Wear it.”

“You don’t have to give me anything, Izzy.”

“Course I don’t. But… Hawke gave me that. Not long after we met. She said she had no use for pretty things like that and gold was more my color than hers. I figured since she’s not here to give you her own gift…” she shrugged. “This can be from both of us.”

A sob finally broke her throat. *Hawke. Where are you, dammit? I need you here today. Fenris was supposed to be the one to walk me down the aisle. You’re supposed to be here now, drinking too much and making fun of my dress. I need you here.*

“Hey,” slender arms wrapped her in a tight hug. “She’s okay. I know she is. We’ll see her again.” Looking up, Aerin nodded to her sister. “Here. This is my gift.” Reaching up for her hair, she pulled out a frayed green ribbon, golden vines creeping down its length. “I know yours got lost when they took you. So I want you to have mine. Here, sit.” Grabbing her ankle, Ellana tied the ribbon in a secure knot, patting her leg as she stood up.

Noelle hesitantly approached her from behind. “My lady? I need to start your hair.”

“Here,” Leliana wetted a cool cloth and dabbed at her swollen, red eyes, a stick of kohl tucked behind her ear. “No more tears today, understood? This is a happy day.”

“So happy tears only?” Merrill asked.

“No. No tears. If you mess up this makeup, I swear, Aerin…” The bride started giggling. “What, pray tell, is so funny?”

“Divine Victoria is doing my makeup.” Leliana sighed, glancing down at the golden sunburst emblazoned on her cream robes.

“Just because I am Divine does not mean I will hesitate to kick your arse if you smudge this eyeliner.” Grinning, Aerin sat perfectly still, allowing her friends to primp and fawn over her, painting her face, curling her hair with hot tongs, and weaving tiny rubies on gold silk through the waves. As soon as they were finished, Merrill stepped forward, tucking an enchanted rosebud into the raven locks.

A knock sounded at the door, blonde head poking in when Josephine called out. “Are we ready, bella?”
This is really happening. I’m marrying Alistair. This is real. Taking a deep, shaky breath, she nodded. “Let’s do this.”

Slowly, taking small, measured steps, Ellana and Leliana keeping her train up, Aerin descended from the upper levels of the chantry, stopping in the foyer. “See you on the other side,” Isabela pressed a kiss to her cheek. “And for fuck’s sake, don’t trip.”

Zevran grinned, tugging on his navy blue and gold doublet, extending the crook of his arm. “You look lovelier than ever. Alistair is a lucky man.” Smiling to herself, she recalled the day she and Alistair had told Arl Eamon that the tattooed, Antivan elf would be the one accompanying down the aisle. The old man's expression had been worth everything.

“He is, isn’t he?” The sweet, dulcet tones of a harp, accompanied by the lilting voices of children singing the chant, floated out from the nave, echoing off the vaulted ceilings. Her heart threatened the strangle her, firmly lodging in her throat, eyes bulging as she realized half of Thedas was in there. Waiting. On her. Oh, creators. “Kaffas.”

Chuckling, he squeezed her hand. “Come, your true love awaits.” Stomping the rising bubble of hysteria firmly into the dirt, she took one step. Then two. Holy fucking balls, there are so many people. They’re all staring at me. Can’t they look somewhere else? Venhedis. I swear, I am never doing this again. Oh. Ali. Her eyes locked on his from the far end of the aisle.

He looked at her, mouth slightly agape in awe, as if she were Andraste herself, descended from the Maker’s side. As if she were the only thing in the world. The crowds and the music fell away. Each slippered step against the crushed petals on the velvet runner was like a loud crack, resounding through her head. This is real, she reminded herself. I love him, and he loves me. And we’re getting married.

Alistair couldn’t wipe the massive grin of his face if he tried. His cheeks already hurt with the strain, but he didn’t care. Everything he had ever dreamed of was finally within his reach. Zevran bowed to the king, smiling as he placed his former partner’s hand into his, creeping away silently to find his seat. Leliana’s voice rang throughout the chamber.

“Love. Love is the Maker’s most perfect gift that He has given to His children. It is only fitting that today, we raise our voices in praise to Him for the celebration of love…”

When did you know that you loved me? his eyes seemed to say.

That night, by the campfire, when I laid on your lap and you told me silly stories of your childhood. You?

That day on the docks at Redcliffe, the first time I heard you laugh. It was hopeless after that.

That long ago?

Even longer.

“Ahem.” The couple sheepishly tore their gaze away from each other, glancing up at the smirking Divine. “King Alistair Theirin? Your vows?”

“Oh, right,” the king stammered, blushing under the weight of the amused glares from the assembled. “I do swear unto the Maker and the Holy Andraste to love you, Adrienne Iseri Couillard, the rest of my days, to honor, cherish, and protect you, holding you above all others, not even death will us part.”
“I do swear unto the Maker and the Holy Andraste to love you, Alistair Lochlan Theirin, the rest of my days, to honor, respect, and… obey you, holding you above all others, to the Void and beyond.”

He snorted at her hesitation, waggling his eyebrows impishly at her. Glaring at him, they both intoned at the same time, “This is my solemn vow, unbreakable before the Maker, his Bride, and Divine.”

Turning to face the dais, Leliana beamed at them, waiting with hands clasped as the Grand Cleric approached, lowering a thin, golden crown onto the new queen’s head.

“Rise, Queen Adrienne. You may kiss your bride, Your Majesty.” Tenderly cupping her face, his rough hands drew in her close enough for him to lay a soft kiss against her lips, pure and chaste, a hint of hunger underlying the innocent gesture. There was no more desperation, no more fear, no more anguish. Just a promise, simple and sweet, to be there for each other for the rest of their days. She smiled up at him.

The faces of her family split into exuberant joy as the couple turned to face the crowd. Fiona beamed at them both, her large eyes welling up with tears. Ellana, Josephine, Merrill, and Cassandra openly sobbed, clutching each other for balance, while Cullen grinned at her with only the tiniest hint of regret in his amber eyes. The Iron Bull whooped loudly over the din, Dorian wincing at his side. Varric was dabbing at his eyes, Aveline gently patting him on his head, Sera bouncing up and down shrieking. Blackwall thumped Cole so firmly on the back, the poor lad flew into the noblewoman’s hat in front of him. Off to the side, Isabela and Zevran stood, smiling their secret smiles. The pirate pointed up. Aerin looked to where she was indicating, catching a glimpse of a familiar apostate, his blonde ponytail catching the sunlight. It was almost perfect. There were three empty spots that were not filled. One for a white haired circle mage who treated her like a daughter. Another for a foul mouthed apostate, who claimed the title of best friend. And another, for a surly elf who knew her better than she knew herself. Fingering the bracelet, Aerin smiled to herself. They were here, on this day, sharing in her happiness. She could feel it.

Nudging his wife’s arm, Alistair glanced down at her. “Everything alright?”

“Everything is perfect.”

The chantry doors flew open with a loud crash, trumpets sounding all around. She gazed out across the town square, eyes wide in fear and apprehension, staring at the joyous crowds. This was her country, now. These were her people. Gods, could she really do this? A warm hand around hers brought her back to the present. Alistair smiled, drawing his queen in close for a deep kiss. The answering roar was euphoric. The people were beyond ecstatic to see that the songs were true, their beloved king was head over heels in love with a woman that by all accounts was every bit as kind and gentle as he. This would be a golden age for Ferelden, they knew it. Their shouts echoed through the capital, so loud, the ships out to sea heard the cheers.

“Long live the king! Long live the queen!”

Chapter End Notes

I may be tearing up as I edit and post this last chapter. Just a short epilogue that will go up in the next few days, after I finishing tweaking it for the 48190583902th time.

I want to thank EVERYONE who has read this, left kudos, or comments. I never really
thought anyone would read this, so the fact so many of y'all did makes me want to cry all over again. There is a sequel I'm in the process of writing, once I figure out what the hell I'm doing with it.

Thank you! <3
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One year later

“Commander! Or not, I suppose, anymore. I’m so glad you made it for the christening. You look… well.” His warm amber eyes crinkled, highlighting the new wrinkles that had recently appeared, the sunlight reflecting off his new gray streak at his temple. But his cheeks were no long sallow and the dark circles under his eyes had virtually disappeared. He look healthy. Whole. Restored to the man he once was, finally free of lyrium.

“I said I would, didn’t I? Is this him?”

“Cullen, meet Evander Duncan Theirin. Evan, this is Cullen.” The baby gurgled happily, waving around his tiny fists. Adrienne smiled fondly down at her son.

“Pleased to meet you, Prince Evander,” the former Commander whispered, gently reaching out a finger that tiny fingers promptly wrapped around. “He’s got quite a grip there.” Glancing up, he smiled at his former lover. “Motherhood suits you.” It was true. She had a happy, serene glow about her that he had never seen before, her eyes no longer haunted.

“It’s strange, me being a mother. So anything new happen since the Exalted Council? I still can’t believe that the Inquisition is truly gone, now. And that Solas is… Fen’Harel,” she muttered. “Although I should have suspected it. There was always something about him I never trusted. Dark times are coming.”

“Let them come,” Cullen shrugged. “We’ll be ready.”

“Queen Adrienne!” Ellana approached the monarch, awkwardly pulling her in for a one armed hug. It stung every time she looked at her little sister’s missing arm. It should not have been her. She did not deserve this fate, Adrienne thought bitterly. “Hello, little nephew,” she cooed.

“Would you like to hold him?”

“I, ah,” the former Inquisitor waved around her stump despondently. “Might be hard.”

Adrienne shrugged. “You can do it. Elle, there isn’t a damn thing in this world or the next that you can’t do if you put your mind to it. Especially something as simple as holding your nephew.”

“It doesn’t feel simple,” she muttered. “Fine. If I drop him, I’m telling him it was Cullen.”

“Hey!”

“Commander! Good to see you!” King Alistair strode up to the group, grinning with exuberant joy.

“Your son is beautiful, Your Majesty.” The king scowled.

“Haven’t we already been through that? None of that, Cullen. Alistair. Aaaalstaiiiiiir. Say it.”

“Alistair,” Cullen grinned. He looked fondly at the couple, blissfully happy at last. They deserve it. If anyone in this world ever deserved a happy ending, it’s these two. A wave loneliness surged within him, but he forced it back down. No, not today. Not here.
“So how’s the clinic coming along?”

His face brightened as he talked about his pet project, profusely thanking the king for his gift of the land. Waving it away, the king and queen listened intently, Ellana giving her nephew back to her sister as she wandered off to mingle, as Cullen talked about the templars, how the younger ones were doing so well weaning off lyrium, his voice growing husky when he mentioned the older ones whose bodies were too tired to resist any longer. It was no small miracle that he himself had survived intact. “We’ve attracted another apothecary, but what we really need is a mage. But there aren’t many mages willing to come live in a town populated entirely by lyrium addled templars,” he sighed. “So we make do.”

“Oh!” Aerin’s eyes widened. “Here, take him.” Plopping her son in the stunned former Commander’s arms, she strode away. Alistair chuckled, watching the other man awkwardly shift the small infant.


“Isn’t he though?” Alistair beamed at his son.

“Cullen! I have someone I want you to meet,” Aerin walked back over to the men, dragging a tall, bewildered woman behind her. She wore pale yellow robes, the color of the winter sun, rich mahogany hair flowing down her back in sleek curls. Bright hazel eyes met his.

“This is a new, dear friend of mine. Evelyn, this is Cullen Rutherford, the former Inquisition’s Commander. Commander, meet Evelyn Trevelyan. She’s a healer and researcher formerly of the Ostwick Circle. Her area of expertise was in lyrium, and she mentioned yesterday that she would be curious to see your clinic, possibly help out.”

“How do you do, Commander?”

“Er. Hello. Please, it’s just Cullen.”

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There exists a place between spaces, where the ancient Elvhen once roamed. It was here, on a floating island, that a human lay, magic bound and gagged, glaring daggers at a man he once called friend.

“I am sorry to do this, Michael.” The man just grunted, straining against the ropes, trying to lash back out, to no avail. Slumping, he watched in horror as the thin blade split his skin, a few crimson droplets of blood oozing from the shallow cut.

Fen’Harel’s, or Solas as he had once been called, eyes glowed an electric blue as he cradled the blood within his magic, holding it against the eluvian in front of him. With a blinding glow, the human’s blood was absorbed in the the mirror, the rippling, opaque surface changing to show a bustling street, what Michael had called ‘cars’ flying down the strange, smooth, black surface. The elf could feel it. There was a Veil there. And more magic than what existed in Thedas. He would leave this world alone, out of respect for Ellana and her sister. Earth on the other hand… It was a dying planet anyways. The world would flourish with the humans out of the way, under the care of the elves. Perhaps Aerin would help him yet? She of all people should want the People to flourish as they once had. He would convince her. Otherwise…

No. It did not bear considering. His power would soon exceed her own.

This would be their new home. There would be no one to stop him.

Chapter End Notes

UPDATE: Sequel has been posted! [here](#).

A one shot of the day Aerin found out she was pregnant can be found [here](#).

Otherwise, we're done here! I am working on the sequel, just hashing out some major plot points before I start posting, hopefully sometime next week. Obviously, it's going to go waaaay off canon. I also have a few other stories I update randomly, a Cullen/OC fic [called From Distant Lands Untold](#) and an Alistair/OC (MGiT) fic that is basically gratuitous filthy smut [here](#). There may or may not be a Cullen/Alistair/OC triangle in that.

Thank you everyone for reading!!! I love you all!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!