Summary

"The potential end of the world really messes with the catering."

The Tale of the Inquisition, told from the perspective of someone who was standing far at the back doing the paperwork and cheering on the actual heroes. Until she suddenly wasn't.

Featuring lots of Cole (the ultimate cinnamon bun), lashings of Bull, and making Solas irritated. With much more yet to come.

Updating twice a week, for the foreseeable future.
First, a general trigger warning for this entire work. It involves a lot of Cole's insights, and sometimes the things people are hurting about are... y'know, all the things you'd think. (I add more specific warnings as I think they are required.) I'm not interested in exploiting terrible experiences, but I didn't want to pretend they don't happen, either. Respect your limits, darlings.

Second, I adore every single one of you who has commented, bookmarked, or kudos'd. This is my one creative outlet, written largely in bed due to Health Bullshit, and you? YOU. Ach, you are all treasured.

Third, massive praise to the existing DA fanfic, the overall quality of which is so high that it astonishes my Destiel-loving sister.

Fourth, speaking of: thank you to my delightful sister, who acted as my beta-reader, despite not playing any of the games.

Fifth, to family and friends: The smut tells you nothing about actual me. Tell yourself this as often as required.
The potential end of the world really messes with the catering.

The Herald and an intimidation of mages marched up the path towards the Temple. We all went to wave and cheer and send good wishes, with no idea what to actually wish for. May your mana lines be strong? Don’t sneeze at the wrong time? Hope your head doesn’t explode?

Most of us went with a vague cheerful “Good luck! Yay!” with a secondary chorus of religiosity, also extremely confused. Chantry types, cheering for mages to use their Maker-forsaken powers? Poor conflicted darlings.

Stop mocking the religion of the group I work for, self.

All the staff trooped into Lady Josephine’s offices and a quandary. Half of us wanted to plan for the glorious We Succeeded, The Breach Is Closed, Huzzah celebration. Half of us wanted to prepare for the terrible We Failed, The Mountain Is Exploded, Maker Watch Over Us disaster. Lady J tried to make both happen, perfectly, which was completely impossible and rather sweet.

I joined the optimists. We talked intently about bunting and tried to pretend we weren’t listening for a boom.

Two looooong hours later the air changed. “Is it good news?” we all asked each other as we rushed outside. “I don’t know. It’s something,” we all answered.

We watched as a massive witchgreen light fwoomed up into the sky, made a brisk right turn, and spewed lace patterns in every direction. No experts around, but we all knew that it had worked. Everyone hugged and pretended they weren’t crying. Party it is, then!

No roast pig because we hadn’t committed early enough. Moral cowardice = no slow cooking, clearly. Honestly, the only big difference to the usual bulk fare was allowing Hardwick one tenweight sack of sugar and telling him to run mad.

He rose to the occasion with APPLE. DUMPLING. PIE. We need to counteract magical catastrophes more often!

You can’t really do extravaganzas on a snowy mountain in the middle of nowhere with an hour’s planning, but we tried. We strung bunting using a few of the linens we’d stockpiled for bandages (that felt metaphoric), broke open seven different variants of intoxicants, and bullied every person with a hint of musical talent into the Ongoing Cheerful Noise Apparatus.

We started by singing the Chant, which was probably unavoidable. I mean, if there ever was a right time for it? Praising the Herald of Andraste as he led the serving-people-with-magic-as-intended mages down from the Temple of Sacred Ashes after literally saving the world? Yeah. I didn’t mind joining in.

But the mages were clearly knackered and the Herald was swaying in a light breeze, so the music selection quickly shifted: less fateful, more fête-ful. (Did I make that joke? Why yes I did.) Quickly we found our groove: varied percussion, zero harmony, lots of enthusiasm and who cared if only half of us knew the words?
At one stage, we were performing at least three different songs. Simultaneously. Fergus the ostler (our acting bandleader) added his own performance, which I would describe as a dynamic tantrum. No-one minded him. The sky was healed.

Other than hydration and apple-dumpling-pie, I took no breaks for the first couple of hours. I wanted to dance, but - and yes, I am aware that this is a perfectly ludicrous thing for a thirty-eight-year-old woman to say - no-one asked me. I just didn’t have the energy to pretend that I didn’t mind cavorting awkwardly. Alone.

Fenedhis I need to get laid some time soon.

Instead I sang, I played the tambourine. I ate more pie, talked with people, and watched amusedly as they started getting slowly hammered. One of the military babies - from the Anders, I think - put her head in my lap and told me about missing home for a bit. (Maudlin babyfaced drunks. I stroked her hair and tried not to condescend.)

I complained about the increasing chill to Smith, who is the only person in camp with a one-word-job-title name that isn’t one of Sister Nightingale’s agents. Smith actually does work in the smithy and rarely talks to anyone. Harritt is certain she used to have a different name that she very much does not want to use anymore.

Anyway, Smith was unusually convivial (aka, tipsy) and also knew much more about the local weather than I do (aka, some) and she agreed that the sudden and dramatically increasing cold was both odd and maybe portentous.


“A fuckton of snow,” Smith said.

“Really? Snow? You sure?”

“Yes.”

And then there were bells. Like, all of the bells.

My body reacted first, fast, like it’d just been waiting for this moment to occur. You coulda told me, traitor body. I picked up Carpenter Tara’s second youngest and we hustled into the chantry to wait panicked and claustrophobic until told what to do.

It was dark and crowded and the smell of ale was a Presence. We were like… I dunno. Not even sheep are that quiet. Maybe… lots of dogs during a thunderstorm. Very drunk tense dogs.

More and more people staggered in, at first just civilians and then wounded soldiers and then non-wounded soldiers and they said there was an army out there, an army we hadn’t seen coming, one that was right here, guys, including “every Templar that wasn’t here already”. We were all gobsmacked. Every piece of news made less and less sense. The Templars were all red monsters? We’d killed the first wave of Templars by deliberately triggering an avalanche? There was a dragon? WHAT?!!

It was every nightmare I’d ever had at once. First normal, then a little weird, then more weird, then surreal, then absolutely terrifying, then more terrifying than that which should not even be logically possible. The booze probably helped - people were numb and passive and obedient. I suddenly wished I’d had the tactical brilliance to be goobered right about now.
The word passed. We were evacuating up some hidden path. *Away* was a good idea. I liked *away*. Haven was getting more ironically named by the second.

I ran to the office. Most of us skidded in and started throwing ledgers and correspondence and contracts into any container we could find. Lydia kicked my ankle - typical - but I don’t think she meant to, for once.

We divvied the parcels; Harden volunteered himself for a big fancy chest thing with scrolled brass handles. “Emma, you can help me with this, right?” Fenedhis, those handles look excruciating. “Of course, sweetheart.” I hate you right now. “Look at them,” he whispered at me. “I mean, neither of us are that fit, but better us than old Sister Trembles, right?”

Sympathy and mockery tangoed in his eyes. He knew what I’d been thinking, and of course he was right. I am a terrible person and also selfish and I need to try harder. Especially tonight. People dying outside and I’m pouting about my poor soft palms, of all things. Shit. *Shit*.

Lady Josephine asked us to be brave. She lead us out into the hall.

Cacophony. Drunk tired confused people, every order shouted louder than the last to get over the din. Children, so many children. I mean, I have the lists. I make the lists. I know how many children we have - twenty-seven, last time I checked. But the high-pitched plaintive noises were so so much truer than the statistics.

I thought of begging Harden. “Please reassure me that we are going to survive this.” I want to pretend that I didn’t for heroic reasons, but honestly, it was just too loud for him to hear me.

We waded into the crowd with our damned scrolled-brass-handled chest. Then we merged, dragged along the riptide of escapees.

Sister Gloriana blessed me while staggering past, arms full of blankets. “Save your breath, lovely,” I grinned. She grinned back. It’s those first days after the Conclave all over again.

A small girl sobbed, “Mama, mama.” Someone stepped on my hem. I found myself muttering *please please please* as we began to climb. I may have been pleading to my muscles as much as anything else.

We were running from an army and a monster and a... *dragon* of all things, and none of us had the faintest idea why any of this bullshit was happening. Nearby, a lieutenant told a sergeant that the Herald had gone out there to, “do what needs to be done.” Whatever *that* meant.

O merciful anyone, please let me survive this. Keep us all safe.

Behind us, down in Haven, I heard a noise. Clearly magical. Could only be described as *fwing*!

Next to me, a boy fell at the noise. Not fell, *dropped*. Instant, a puppet with cut strings. I flicked my chin at Harden and he took my handle. The boy had been supporting a cleric, someone else claimed that job. There was a rumbling under my knees as I knelt. People streamed around us.

I looked in the boy’s wide dazed eyes and said, “Can I help?”

And time... found better things to do. A lot just *happens* in one timeless moment-thing, past and present all commingled.

In this moment are two people. One of them calls himself Cole. He doesn’t remember why.
Emma’s childhood: watching the fishers skin a shark. Salt air on my face, sun on my shoulders. Singing Emma Lath.

Cole wanted to help. Came to help. Did help.

Too late at the gates. But after… kneeling by Grand Chancellor Roderick. Robes mussed, moaning. “The pain, so much of it, I’m drowning in my own guts and there are claws, claws in me is this my punishment? If I had believed would this be happening?”

Then Cole. Cole takes the pain. Mediates muffles mutes, makes space for the words. Saves with a secret shared. Gives us a chance. We might survive this.

Emma’s worst memory: a clay bottle shatters on cobbles. The children scurry. I wince. No riposte to drunken laughter. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.

Cole has two names. The other name is Compassion.


Afterward, Cole helping. Pain unknotted/glasses found/wounds healed/tears wiped/candles lit/hair brushed/terrors banished/words found. Hundreds, thousands of people. Exquisite relief from just the shadow of it.

Emma’s good day: walking down the Street of Spicers, eating a fruit mince pie. Winter is over, I’ve been promoted, and my hair looks really pretty great.

Then... bunnies. Cole loves them, for no reason other than the reasons that all of us love things. He loves splinters and bridges with tall arches and his extraordinary hat.

Emma’s fear: a deafening crack from the far-off Temple. Sergeant Kallis stumbles to the tent flap. The ground rumbles. A ball of green light blows through us and I scream.


Undo, fix the flaw. The gall. Some complicated harmonic magic. It’s small, intimate, but it smells like the ritual from the Conclave. This time it will be as I intend, fool.

Smaller but the same. Shit. First the noise, now the rumbling. Next will come the shockwave. Not as big, but enough to reach us here. Fade in fury, Veil flapping like laundry as the storm rolls in. Spirits scarred and scared and scattered.

Cole, frozen frightened fretting. When time restarts and the shockwave arrives, he is too close. Vulnerable. Because he came to save us, he will be... unmade. I will watch him die.

I see Cole. Cole sees me.

Nothing is hidden, nothing. We see each other’s flaws and failures and fears, the hidden hurt, the unspoken shame. We’re gentle with each other. You tried. You never meant to.

This sweet, sweet heart. Oh, little love.

I’m calm. Confident. No doubt, no reservations. If it wasn’t already the most remarkable day of my life, this feeling of warm brilliant certainty would put it on the noteworthy list.
Yes, I say.

Yes, says Cole.

I have a baling hook in my scapula. It grates as I gasp. Distantly, I hear a massive rumbling.

I... broke the third metacarpal in my left hand. Five times. My feet hurt. My ear aches. I can’t find Joseph. I can’t find Garal. My back hurts. There’s a cut deep on my belly and my guts are threatening to tumble out. My feet are cold. How dare he. My palm is cut. My nose is cold. She’s dead, she can’t be dead. I need to vomit. My feet hurt. Red lyrium and now him? We’re all gonna die. My shoulders ache. My fingers are filthy. My hands are bloody. My hands are cursed. Qu’est-ce que c’est que ce bordel? I forgot my hat. They’re coming for us. He’s dead, what will we do now? My back hurts. I can’t feel my anything. Denerim and the Blight, Denerim on fire. My nose is running. I can’t stop the bleeding. I’m too crowded. My knuckles ache. I forgot my griffin. I can’t speak. Stop fucking trembling. Go back for them.

And more. So, so, so, so much more.

If I wrote it all out I would take five royals worth of paper just to cover the bones of it... but then to get the effect you’d have to hire a mob of criers and get them to shout every word at you. Simultaneously. In seven languages. At the top of their lungs. From less than half an inch away.

I was suddenly in the snow and in my vomit. The chorus of need vanished. My smalls were... honestly, I felt lucky that I’d only pissed myself. And there was an extremely apologetic spirit in my head who promised to not do that again.

Then we climbed a mountain. *Fuck* that was a long day.

Chapter End Notes

1. I've done the common embiggening of the Inquisition staff and geography, including, as you see, giving Josie assistants. Because seriously.
2. Emma is a human, btw. I know she swears in Elvhen a couple of times. It'll make sense.
3. I am so very nervous as I post this.
why do you like mabaris
Because they’re awesome, Cole.
but you haven’t met any. so how do you know?
Oh my. This early in our relationship and already you’re bringing up the tragedy that is my failure to actually meet any mabaris in person? I was promised that when I stepped off the ship into Ferelden they’d be lined up by the hundreds, and nope. It is the great disappointment of my life.
no it isn’t
That’s a joke, honey.
oh
…
why do you want to meet them
Because they love you and protect you and keep you warm and put their head on your lap and beg for treats. But also they understand what you’re saying! You can tell them not to pee on the rug and to hold off on barking and stuff. They’re like… all the great things about dogs, minus the frustrating things about do-
what’s love
What.
people always mean different things when they say it
Oh. What do I think love is?
yes
It’s… ugh. I don’t know if I’ve ever had to articulate it. I don’t agree with a lot of other people’s definitions.
whenever Lieutenant Dolman said love you heard covet
Exactly. Hey, you can, what, hear my memories?
yes
Can you go looking in my memories?
yes
Oh. Have fun, I guess. That’s… maybe gonna be awkward.
why?
Because…

you’re thinking about sex
Yes. For example. Retroactive voyeurism is a terrible idea.

why?
Because my lovers didn’t agree to it, honey.

but I’m not really there

Yessss, but… I have a pretty vivid memory. We thought we were private.

except for -

Except for that time, yes.

but it’s not really them, just your memory of them

True. Still awkward, though.

…

OH SHIT. Am I ever going to get laid again?

I can’t see the future

That’s… I mean, are you always going to, just, be there? Observing?

yes

Aw man. Noooooooooo.

I’ll be very quiet

But, but you’ll still be… accidentally voyeuring, in the present tense. I’ll have to tell them you’re there!

like the ladies in the show with the ruffle dress

Like the… the conjoined twins? I have to tell future lovers that I have an invisible conjoined twin?

yes?

Noooooooooo.

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So you just, what, hear all of the people? All of the time.

not everything. I hear what they need

So… only the bad stuff?
it’s just what they need. is that bad?

Well, they think so. Otherwise they wouldn’t need compassion. Would they?

I don’t know

Have you ever had people who didn’t need any help at all?

how would I know?

Um. You’d look at a person and not... hear anything from them, I guess.

how do I hear them if I can’t hear them?

Good question. Excellent question. No idea.

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it wasn’t your fault

What wasn’t?

he left, but he didn’t leave because of you

Oh. That. Well, he didn’t stay because of me either, now did he?

that was wrong. you were perfect

I… thank you, Cole.

he feels sad about it now

Good.

…

Wait. How do you know that?

I just know

But he’s… somewhere else. Dirthamen only knows where.

he knows where he is

Okay, sure. But how do you know?

I just know

Wow. That’s… both astonishing and totally creepy at the same time.

people say that a lot

So, do you know about everyone? Or just the people I have some sort of connection to? Or are you connected to my hurt?

yes
Which?

all of them. but I can only hear the hurt

So... do you know where he is? Geographically?

no. I just know he’s sad

Woah.

…

So the clerics and philosophers were right. We really are all connected.

yes

And when need is involved, you can… hear those connections? A bit.

hurt has threads, pluck them and listen to the sounds

Wow. Wow. You just blew my mind.

did that help?

Maybe. Probably. Not sure yet. Get back to me on that.

did it -

Later. Get back to me about it later.

oh. okay

***

Do you hear them? Is “hear” the right word?

it’s the least wrong word

***


it’s not mine

Of course it is, Cole. Mi cuerpo es tu cuerpo, and all.

is it?

It is now, honey. Since your body…

…

What did happen to your body?

it’s here. but it’s different

You’re here, but… not corporeal?
yes. you have good words

Cheers. So can you move our hand?

no

So you’re in this body, but not of this body?

not unless I push

Which would be… bad?

you wouldn’t like it

Is… is that possession?

yes

Okay. Right. Hmm.

…

Cole-love, you have permission to possess me under the following circumstances: one, if I am dead. Two, if I am unconscious and we are in danger. Three, if I would tell you to but I can’t, which honestly I don’t know how to plan for but I trust you here and I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t do it unless it was very important. Weird shit happens, after all. And four, if we agree it’s a good idea.

thank you

You are welcome. Which was my point.

also you wanted to scratch that bit you can’t reach on your back

That too.

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Do you triage?

?

I mean, there are right now hundreds of people around us, and all of them need something. So do you decide which one to help first? Is there a system?

??

‘Cause I’m sure there are efficiencies to be developed here. Looking at this logically. Fix the root cause of a problem, seems like a good idea.

?????

that isn’t how I am

So… no system. You just... help.

yes
Do you want me to suggest ways to improve, or should I just keep my mouth shut? My mental mouth. In my mind. I’m shutting up now.

you think I could help more people

Yes, honey.

by thinking about things

Well, yeah. I mean, you can spend all day bandaging bloody knees… or you can go shift the rock that everyone keeps tripping over.

what does that do?

Stops the next person from tripping over and hurting their knee? And all the people after that?

oh

ohh

!!!!!!!!!

you’re very clever

Thank you, honey.

can I still bandage the knees?

Of cou-

…

…

How?

a figure-eight so their leg can still bend

No, I mean… you said you can’t move our hands without possessing me. I mean, I am all for knee-bandaging, but is that me? Or you? Or what? How does that work?

…

Fire and mercy. I ate you. Did I eat you?

no

You’re a passenger now. And you can’t do… anything? Move or act or talk?

I can talk to you

But what about everyone else? What about your purpose? How do you be Compassion as a voice in my head?

did I stop being me? I still feel like me

No, honey. Of course you’re still you. But… you can’t leave.
yes
And you can’t move without forcing me to do it.

yes
So if we want to help… I have to be the one to actually do it, don’t I?

yes? yes.

Flaming fucking fire and mercy fucking mild!

bandages aren’t hard, you know how

I… sure. Sure. Bandages I can do. It’s all the other stuff I…

breathe

… I can talk to people sure, but not like that, not when it matters, and…

breathe

… what would I do about her? I’m no hero, I can’t do confrontations, I’ve never been able to…

BREATHE

… oh. Oh shit, oh no, oh Maker…

mercy

Right. Mercy. Blaspheme and you’re out on your ear, missy, this is a Bann’s house not a fishing dock and you must learn how not to…

mercy. swear by something you believe in

O mercy

breathe

Ohhh, mercy. Mercyyyyyy.

…

I’m so sorry Cole. You’ve chosen the wrong hideout. There’s no way… I, I can’t help the hopeless heal the hurt. I can’t be your proxy.

yes you can. I saw

You must be joking. You should have gone with Sister Gloriana. Or Lady Josephine. Void, Sister Nightingale! Anyone but me.

you were the best choice

Cowshit! Sorry.

it’s okay
I mean, the most proximate, sure. The least likely to reject you based on religious scruples, possibly. But… the best? No. Not a chance. No. I am the opposite of a hero, of a, a helper. How can you see everything but not see that?

love looks longing, yearns to heal. help.

That doesn’t matter, Cole! What’s the point of wanting to help if you never fucking do it?

you can

No. I’m pretty sure my life has proven the exact fucking opposite, actually.

I know you can help

No. No. I wish you were right, but you aren’t.

yes

No.

yes

NO.

ye-

I FUCKING SAID NO AND I MEANT NO PLEASE PLEASE JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP, COLE

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The rest of the walk was in head-throbbing, guilty silence while I called myself names.

Chapter End Notes

Writing Cole dialogue is my favourite thing.
I was obscenely weary.

The obvious part was the aching everything and the poor shoe decisions and the whole ear situation. How can you hurt so much when you’re this frozen, ears?

Worse by far was the sinking and gnawing in my gut. Cole is again imprisoned, unable to help. It’s so sweet that he thinks I’m going to become his Compassion Sidekick. Thinks I can. Of course I want to, of course I want to help. Who wouldn’t want to make people’s lives better? (Lots of people. Grr. But forget that for now.)

But wanting won’t make it so.

I remembered the flood of needs. Some I can do, sure. Bandages and finding lost toys and blankets and maybe a few needed hugs? (Well, I can’t find the toy because I’m pretty sure it’s buried under twenty feet of fuck-you, but all the rest.)

Physical stuff is easy. Impersonal stuff.

I can even deal with grief. I’m warm and soft and I have been able to shut up well enough to let someone get it out when they need to. I have two shoulders and don’t mind if snot gets on them.

But terror? Worse. Rage. I can’t deal with rage. Nope. I freeze like a nug in the wagon’s path as soon as someone raises their voice even a little. Even if it’s not directed at me. Even if I don’t know anyone involved.

I remembered the fury, the betrayal, the righteous uproar in hundreds of the minds currently surrounding mine and I flinched just at the memory. I can’t deal with that. I am going to fail Cole. My stomach didn’t like the idea.

what if you don’t

I startled at the first thought from Cole since I’d snapped at him, not my finest moment.

it’s okay. you were scared

This sweet little cinnamon bun. How could I ever treat him so?

I apologise. It was still wrong, especially when all you were trying to do was help. I promise I’ll try to never do it again.

do you love me?

Buh… pardon?

you called me Cole-love. before

Sweet mental voice. Tentative. I had to smile.
Did you like it when I did?

yes

Now I felt it. A small precious feeling. I’m treasured? he wondered. Now this I can do.

Of course I love you, honey.

what does it feel like?

My love? Here. Here is yours.

I sent the full force of my affection. Warm sun and hugs and fixing his hair and freesias and absolute approval. I adored at Cole.

oh

Do you like that too?

yes

This is something of an understatement. I grinned.

I’m glad, I don’t think I could endure a nodding acquaintanceship with the person who is literally in my head.

your love is warm

I… thank you, Cole-love.

I’m welcome

Yeah you are.

We snuggled a moment, together. Must have been a sight, motionless with my head tipped to one smile and a massive soppy grin on my face. I had less than zero fucks to give on that score.

Is there a word for the moment when you realise that you’ve probably just been manipulated, but in the kindest way possible and solely for your own good?

Ah.

You think that this is what I can do to help. Love people.

you’re very good at it

There’s still going to be some people I can’t help, honey.

but there’s lots of people we can

Inarguable logic. Flawless, I let it percolate as we were herded into a nook designated Out Of Our Way, Civilian. I searched for Lady Josephine. Instead I found Harden.

“Hey sweetheart, sorry about leaving you with that chest.” I sounded mostly sincere.

He pretended to be pissed, but amusement broke through. “To be honest, it was easier to carry without those handles anyways.” We laughed together. “What happened to the skinny kid?”
“I… I saved his life, I think.”

“Really? Well done, hero.” He accompanied the rest of our attempts to find Lady J with an improvised flourish of trumpets. Occasionally, he’d bellow, “Make way! Make way for the great hero Emma! Huzzah and halloo!” I shook my head but said nothing. I was fully aware that any attempts to shush him would only make him louder.

We found Lady Josephine pretending her crate was a salon chaise. She’d tried to neaten her hair. When Harden and I arrived she brightened, then laughed when we made matching, ridiculously over-ornate courtesies. Did I think of it or did he? I wondered. Did it even matter?

he did then you did then he did

Really? That’s sweet.

With our arrival three of her eight staff were unaccounted for. Oh. The three who weren’t here… they hadn’t joined us for the evacuation either. No wonder Lady J was distraught. (Most wouldn’t be able to see it, but the only thing every member of the ambassadorial/seneschal staff shares is a fanatical devotion to our boss.)

She needed us. Physical, mental, emotional and spiritual exhaustion be damned! Our reward was a sincere, “I don’t know what I would do without you all. Thank you.”

Determined to punish me for my good deeds, Fate partnered me with Lydia. Ugh, Lydia. We were sent to make a list of all civilians in the third between the funny rock and the tall horse with the ankle fur.

“You look terrible,” she commented as we dug for ink and parchment and pen nibs. “If only you’d taken my advice and gotten more fit! I mean, if you aren’t able to keep up, I’m sure the Ambassador would understand. She and I work so closely together, it’s like I can read her mind.”

She could read yours but it would barely make a pamphlet, I fumed reflexively.

Does Lydia have some deep and terrible wound that is forcing her to act like this?

no. she’s just mean

I knew it!

We manoeuvred through the throng. Her venom was still impressively aimed, but it didn’t have anywhere near the impact I was accustomed to.

Are you shielding me from her, honey?

no

Then why do I feel so… protected?

I knew the answer as soon as I asked. Because Cole was here and had my back. Would always have my back.

I felt stunned. Awed. Comprehensively unworthy and wordless with gratitude. Mercy, I have the perfect ally. One who intimately knows all my flaws, yet accepts me. Someone who will never, ever betray me. *Etunash’in’arlise, I will never feel lonely again.*

I do not deserve this.
But I want to. *Need* to.

What can I do, give, be? *How can I become worthy?* I asked myself as we threaded through an endless sea of shoulders.

Simple. There’s really only one answer: Compassion Sidekick. Act as Cole’s hands and words and will, help him to help the hurting. It’s the only gift that will come close to repaying him, to undoing what I…

you don’t have to give anything

Don’t fib, honey. You know I need to.

yes. but you don’t *have* to

I know you aren’t requiring it of me, Cole-love. This is something I am demanding of myself.

I planted my feet. I will utterly bollocks this up, I know it with certainty. I can’t be Cole. I giggle inside at a sudden mental image of me with the dragon-hilted dagger and, oh mercy, that *hat*…

This will end badly, and I can’t even hope to be the only casualty. Fenedhis, I’m terrified. But I’m going to *try*. I have to. I’m in.

If nothing else, the decision made Cole happy. So that’s good.

Chapter End Notes

Translation notes:
Etunash’ín’arlise - shit in the campfire

Does the indent for Cole/Emma exchanges make sense? It seemed the least annoying formatting choice.
We stood on an outcropping shaped like an accusatory finger; I named people while Lydia scribed. Am I the only one in the office who can identify all the Inquisition civilians? Actually, that’s possible. Most of them are focused on the fancy duchessy side, because apparently knowing who cleans out the privy is terribly plebeian, darling.

I mean, I’m sure Sister Nightingale knows who everyone is. She probably interrogated all of them personally.

Lydia… Lydia-d as we worked. I let the spite roll over me like a duck in water. How do ducks do that anyway? Is it a quality of their feathers? Do they secrete some kind of oil? Is that why it’s called duckcloth? Do they use actual ducks? Poor duckies!

I paused.

Cole-love, can we make our head less fuzzy?

yes

Ooh, great. How?

sleep

I chuckled for a long helpless time and Lydia said whatever. Once done, I tried to mentally add up the number of names we’d collected then multiply it by three to get an estimate of how many of us had survived but nope. Nope. Far too tired for such advanced calculus as that.

We returned with the list and Lady J told us that everything else could wait until after we’d gotten some sleep. Sleep. Yes. That sounds pleasant. I like sleep.

I crawled under a wagon between Harden and Circe and…

… mere moments later I fell victim to Circe’s wicked pointy elf elbows. Elfbows? I was still tired enough to involuntarily make terrible portmanteaux, so…

How long were we asleep?

you saw the Fade twice

What about you?

Cole was confused.

Do you sleep, Cole-love?

before I knew. but not now

What did you do, then?

waited
I hope that wasn’t boring, honey.

no

Well... *good*, I guess.

I got up and navigated toward the privy, giving massive kudos to the Commander and his troops, who had put together a functional camp in less than two hours. In a rapidly building snowstorm! So the privy was a hole with some desperately straining canvas sails. So it was cold and the chance of someone’s arse being displayed to the world was not zero. Still a good job, I decided.

Waiting in line, using the person behind me as a windbreak, I heard: “... no sign of him. Yet. But he might be-”

“There’s no chance he survived that second avalanche. None. The Herald is *dead*, Jarl. We need to start accepting it. Once-”

Is he dead?

who

The Herald.

who’s that

The... The *Herald*. Elf, bronzey skin, vallaslin of Mythal on his face? Green glowing hand that can close rifts? You -

I searched my memory of Cole’s memories. Not very efficient, but y’know. I don’t know how to get into his the way he can access mine. I’m shamefully glad.

- you met him at the gate. Told him about the Elder One guy.

he’s hard to hear. it’s all green

Try, honey. Is he alive?

Cole quieted, listened. Both shrank and grew. Spread us across rocks, around trees, under snow. Entwined with the wind, flicked every swirling snowflake. Ten thousand thousand sensations, and we were all of them, untouched by our touching. It was eye-of-the-storm serene as we moved through.

Then, suddenly, we were immersed in a long creative torrent of Elvhen cursing. I’m shamefully rusty, but you always remember the obscenities, and there were... whoo, a *lot* of them. And vicious! If I had used a single one, Hah’ren Lestalin would have dragged me by the ear from the aravels all the way home to demand my mouth get washed out with soap. My inner six-year-old got the giggles.

Interesting to know he has a temper under all those smiles. Awesome to know he’s alive. But where is he?

- it’s all green. can’t see can’t hear

I can hear that fine

not inside
We’re hearing him cuss out loud? Not hearing him think?

yes

Cole. Honey. Where are we hearing him from?

where he is

I breathed deeply. It would be wrong to get impatient. Tempting, but wrong.

Show me, Cole-love. Put me in it.

wait a minute

Why?

in case you pee again

Oh. Oh. Right. I had actually managed to forget how I pissed myself earlier. And puked. But mostly, I would like to avoid getting more urine on the clothes I was weari- I’m still wearing the same clothes!

I made a long disgusted groan. The dwarf woman in front of me - military support staff? I didn’t recognise her - gave me a worried look and let me jump in front of her in the queue. I thanked her.

Once my turn, I ensconced myself and tried not to breathe through my nose. Feet dug in (I do not want to fall into this hole), hands gripped the rickety plank edge. I looked exactly like someone who was trying not to vomit. Right. Because I was someone who was trying not to vomit.

I covered my mouth, took a few deep breaths, and nodded.

Ready, honey.

are you?

No. I was not ready for what happened next.

I’d love to be able to articulate what it was like, triangulating the Herald’s location through available sense memories. I was a rabbit and a couple of birds and a wolf, I think. I wish I could describe it.

But how? There simply aren’t any words that can encompass what it was like to be something that doesn’t use words. I felt a string of sensations like sudden awareness of threat over shoulder and disturbance of pack wrongness. That isn’t even close to it, just an attempt to sketch the outlines.

It wasn’t unpleasant. Everything was intense and very simple. If I’d just been experiencing it I would have enjoyed it, I think.

But trying to add functions like navigating to it was agonising. Like juggling boulders with my brain.

Eventually I caught enough glimpses of mountain edges and felt the direction of the wind and - best of all - saw the Herald trudging in the face of the briefly-uncovered moon, muttering blasphemies on the genitals of all the Creators.

And then I was aware that I was collapsed on the icy floor of the jakes, my head out of the flap, one foot dangling over the accumulated filth below. I saw four faces worrying above me which relaxed when I started to moan. Then I threw up. Mostly bile.
An old soldier (female, human, brandishing an impressively oft-broken nose) briskly pulled up my smalls and organised three sets of arms to carry me to the infirmary.

“No,” I told them. “Please don’t. I’m fine, I’m fine, I have important things to get done.”

They ignored me completely. I was gently dumped on a pallet and Broke-nose informed on me to a ludicrously young-looking human mage with bloodstains on his robes.

Cole worried in the background. Mostly about me, although I think being surrounded by this many people who needed so much help was also getting his attention.

I tried to get up and was firmly pushed back onto the pallet by… Jonah!

Thank fuck for that.

“Look. Jonah. It’s me, Emma. Hey, how are you?” I babbled. I tried to get up. He looked at me sympathetically and kept me pinned very effectively with only one arm. “Don’t get up, idiot,” he said, kindly.


“There’s nothing that can’t wait a bit while we check you over.”

“There is! There is.”

“Like what.” I’d seen him use this on patients before, how many did we see back then? Let them talk, he’d said. It makes them feel better and it probably won’t make their wounds worse. And how many of that endless butcher line said things like, “I have to go back,” and “They need me,” and, “No, it’s really important,” to us?

So many. Too many.

I couldn’t hedge or he’d ignore me. Truth or nothing. Tell a nonsensical story that could - how have I not considered this - get us executed as an abomination, or… say nothing.

Surely it would be fine, right? I mean, he’s only walking up a long steep slope in a snowstorm with a limp and one arm dragging? He only powered a massive magical ritual, fought a dragon, then survived an avalanche. The odds are pretty good that he won’t, y’know, collapse in the snow and die of hypothermia. Right. Right?

Par les testicules froissés du Créateur.

“Jonah.” I made clear eye contact and enunciated perfectly despite the dry taste of puke in my mouth. “I know where the Herald is. He’s alive, and I know where he is.”

My clarity made an impact. He blinked, for one moment convinced. Then he shook his head. “Didja learn that in the jakes?”

Well, yes, actually, but that is besides the point. I tsked impatiently. “The scout’s path. South-south-east. He’s walking, but he’s tired. Going to start up the mountain soon.” I grabbed Jonah’s shirtfront. “Please, Jonah. Decide I’m febrile if you want. Keep me here as long as you need to, I won’t argue. But first, order someone to check the fucking path.”

A long silent moment. He searched my face, looking for all the signs that I wasn’t in my right mind. All he saw was absolute conviction.

He stepped out to one of the runners. “Tell the Commander that one of my patients wants us to check the sou’-sou’-east scout’s path. Tell him that he should send someone right now.” The runner saluted
and left. I relaxed a bit.

you did the right thing

Let’s hope we don’t suffer for it, honey.

Jonah gave me a long searching look. Oh mercy, have I killed us both? Stay quiet, stay hidden, don’t get seen, they kill abominations and that is what we are, right? Why was I daft enough to say anything? I readied myself for the inevitable questions like they were bear traps. Move fast enough and maybe our ankle won’t get shattered.

Jonah leaned in and whispered in my ear. “I’m guessing you don’t want to tell anyone how you know that.”

Oh, this man. This splendid man. I exhaled loudly. “You’re an excellent guesser.”

“Your secret’s safe with me. Healer’s oath.”

I nudged his shoulder. “I owe you one.”

“Nah,” he said. “Now we’re even.” We smiled at each other and he got back to work.

*That was too close. We shouldn’t do that again.*

Duty done, I let them medicine at me. Since I was awake and upright and my bowels were on the correct side of my skin, I was immediately demoted to a low priority. I wasn’t allowed to leave or sleep or anything useful like that, so I asked for some soup. It was terrible and I loved every spoonful.

Then I rolled a blanket and wedged it under the knees of the woman in the next pallet, who was complaining about how much it ached to lie on her back. I filled a waterskin. First myself (careful to keep the nozzle away from my lips) and then anyone else who needed a drink.

I ran out of helpful tasks very quickly. This wasn’t the battlefield chaos after the Conclave, where they were desperate enough to find me useful. I don’t know how many mages are trained in basic apothecary work, but the answer seemed to be *literally all of them.* Between the mages and the clergy, this makeshift infirmary was superlative.

Cole-love, anything you want specifically to do? ’Cos otherwise I’ll just write letters for the injured or something.

*Roderick*

The Chancellor? Where is he?

Cole indicated thereness and I said, “Jonah, I’m not going far. They’ll be able to find me when it’s my turn.”

He looked at me narrowly, nodded agreement.

Grand Chancellor Roderick had privacy. Cushions and painkillers. He’d been *made comfortable.* They might as well have put up a sign saying Yes, Not Gonna Make It.

There was a small stool, just barely room to sit down next to his cot. I wiggled uncomfortably on it.

Now what?
Okay. Sure. Talk to the comatose man I have cordially disliked for the entire three months of our acquaintance. If I’m going to fuck this up, it might as well be with a dying guy, right?

That was not a worthy thought, self.

I adjusted Roderick’s blanket. That was the right way to address him, now. Fancy hat and robes were gone, trappings of a faith that he’d enforced but… what was it Cole had said?

“If I had believed would this be happening?”

Ah. I felt a sudden sympathy for this relentless petty arsehole. Years spent in the vicious internal politics of the Chantry, having to pretend to a faith he no longer had. Grasping for meaning leads to grasping for power and then what is the point of it all, really?

yes. now say that out loud

Ugh. Fine.

“Hello, Roderick. My name’s Emma. One of Lady Montilyet’s staff. We’ve met, you likely don’t remember.”

He didn’t stir.


“It’s funny, isn’t it? I’ve never had religion, and I get the feeling that you lost yours somewhere. I’m sure that a lot of people are finding new faith now and I guess that makes sense.”

I took Roderick’s cold hand.

“It’s good if you found yours again. But it’s fine if you didn’t? I dunno. You’re dying and I’m afraid I’ll be joining you, maybe soon. Do we even know where that dragon is?”

I shook my head. Focus. What needs saying?

“I remember once, I was… in my early twenties, I think. Old enough to know a few things, but still young enough to have no grasp of my ignorance. You know?”

He did not respond.

“I spent a solid month feeling terrible about how my breasts looked in my second-best working gown. Just the most ridiculous thing.”

His hand twitched. Maybe nothing.

“How many equally stupid things have I spent my energy on? My time? My precious life? Too many, of course. This, why this, how could I have possibly thought this mattered? You know?”

His face remained still, but Cole sent me a grimace.

“I don’t believe in the Maker. I don’t know if you do either. If He exists, for sure he’ll forgive your mistakes. Your sins. It’s in the Chant.
“And if He doesn’t exist, if this is all there is… Well. Once you called me a petty functionary and a heretic to boot. That was unpleasant enough that I remember it. You took the shine out of that day.”

I leaned in a bit. Softened.

“We’re all connected. I’m pretty sure about that, at least. So on behalf of every person you have ever wronged, as teensy as that insult all the way up to whatever the worst thing is you’ve ever done?

“It’s okay,” I told him. “We all forgive you.”

If he reacted, I missed it.

    good

  Is that what he needed?

    it’s enough

Well, neat. Now what?

“I don’t have much that’s useful.”

Outside, a small commotion.

“But I can stay here and hold your hand. If you want.”

No sign from Roderick, but Cole said Yes for him.

We sat, hand in hand. Waiting.

I pondered the comatose man.

    Did you help him hear me, honey? What am I saying. Of course you did, because he is doped to the gills and there is no chance he would have heard a word I said otherwise.

    yes

    Why can’t you do that with everyone, Cole-love?

    he’s from before

    Because you’ve already helped him?

    we’re connected

Makes as much sense as anything, I guess.

We waited.

Soon after, the Herald was carried past, everyone fussing over him. Good.

We waited.

Roderick grew clammy. I sponged his forehead, moistened his lips, shook out my arms, cracked my neck, took his hand again.

We waited.
Roderick’s breathing started hitching; loud, ragged. An assistant said, “Are you Emma? It’s your turn with the healer.”

“Come back later. He won’t be long.”

It was clearly true. They left.

We waited.

The Commander and Seeker Pentaghast walked out, relief in every line. Even better.

We waited.

Roderick died.

I wanted to make some appropriate dramatic gesture, but couldn’t think of one. His eyes were closed and he looked peaceful enough. I left and told Jonah.

He thanked me and a voice behind me said, “Right. Your turn.”

I made a wobbly volte-face to see an elf woman in mage robes, stern with the typical I Am A Healer And You Are My Current Problem To Fix demeanor.

She felt… familiar, but I don’t think we’d ever met.

because she’s a spirit healer

Sudden panic.

WHAT? Malédiction! What if she recognises us?!?

but you haven’t met her

As an abomination, Cole. What if she senses what we are? How do we make sure she doesn’t?

Cole has no opinions on contingency planning.

Running was a stupid option. Panicking was also a sub-optimal stratagem. But if I can’t panic, what approach should I actually use? What what reduce suspicion, stop her from seeing what she shouldn’t?

Ah. Absolutely Bloody Exhausted. The rôle I was born to play.

I stopped ignoring, denying, delaying and downplaying all the consequences of the last day. I had been terrified, over and over. I had experienced a vision with a non-mortal person. I had been (voluntarily, but still) invaded by said person. I’d experienced the hurts and needs of about six hundred people, simultaneously. I’d pissed myself. Thrown up, twice. Climbed a mountain path in a snowstorm. Slept for less than two hours. I’d been a rabbit, for fuck’s sake.

My performance was pretty compelling.

I was checked over, given warm water to wash in (thank you), clean robes (oh yes thank you) and a quiet place to sleep (thankyouthankyouthankyou).

And down I went.
One of the many tiny pleasures from writing this is coming up with in-universe explanations for things like why Cole never says anything much about the Herald.

Translations:
Par les testicules froissés du Créateur. - By the Maker's wrinkled testes. Also possibly By the Maker's offended testes? LANGUAGE IS FUN.
Awake. Grumpy at the complaints coming in from every muscle. Bad tastes in my mouth. But…

Morning, honey.

hello!

That’s still awesome. I gave Cole a mental hug and ughed my way out of the bedroll.

I ate a bowlful of Totally Adequate Nourishment then drank two skins full of water at Cole’s advice. The camp was sore and stiff and often cranky, but much more camp-like than it had been. I threaded through endless new tents to find the Ambassador.

She looked cleaner but judging from the squint as she read a report I doubted she’d slept. Lady Josephine, you need to take better care of yourself.

I yawned. “Morning, my lady!”

She smiled dutifully but also warmly. This is a skill she has. “Emma. I hear you sat with the Grand Chancellor in his final hours. That was well done.”

She knew I didn’t much like him - who did? - so she was praising my diplomacy as much as my good deed. I accepted her compliment.

She continued, “The Commander is taking care of all supplies until we… for the moment. And we will not be able to send many missives from here, I should say. Thus, for the moment you are free. Please, rest. Recuperate after the ordeals of yesterday.”

I replied that we should all rest, certainly. She took the hint but not the advice. I brought her some tea, instead.

I wandered outside the camp, which was still cold but marginally less cruddy now the wind had died down.

Cole-love, let’s get sidekicking.

okay?

Clearly, you can’t just show me every person who needs help.

it hurt you. I didn’t want to hurt you

I can’t say I much liked it either, honey. But also, falling over and vomiting in the snow every time I want to help sounds… inefficient.

yes?

Cole has no grasp of the idea of efficiency. Makes sense, I guess; it’s a very mortal-person concept. I doubt there’s a Spirit Of Optimisation.
there’s Striving

Oh? That’s delightful.
you’d like them

Probably.

I’m straying from the point. How can Cole inform me about needs without drowning me in them?

Wait. He’d done it before.

Roderick. You told me he accepted the offer to hold his hand. That my words were enough. You didn’t show me, you just… told me. No headaches or pee or getting to learn more about what a gut wound really feels like. Just words.

it hurt less

Exactly! It didn’t hurt me at all. I mean, except in the normal empathetic sense.

can we do that again?

Let’s find out!

Marching the camp perimeter in an enclosed bowl is the definition of a make-work job, I would assume. But judging by the number of soldiers who were doing it my opinion was not shared by the command structure.

The… the red Templar army is dead, right?

I needed a distraction from that line of thought. I eyed off the closest soldier, human, rubbing his hands compulsively. Rivaini, by his colouring. No wonder he was cold.

Okay. Can you feel what he needs and then just… report it to me?

I’ll try

Cole felt nervous but determined. At first, there was almost nothing - whispers from a distant room. Something? Then one overwhelming blare from the itchy tip of a nose that wasn’t mine, instantly squashed.

Fiercely concentrating and absentely (but sincerely) apologetic, Cole wrestled it further. He focused so hard it hurt him a little. I was about to tell him to stop, when he rattled out, monotone:

Raoul is tired and his ears and nose and hands are very cold. He has heard that the Herald died in the night. He isn’t sure what the Maker wants from him. He is-

Cole. Cole! You don’t have to report like you’re my lieutenant. Say it like you’d say it, love.

his hands are cold his heart is cold he asks is this what you want from me, Maker? I am your servant but so heavy that every touch burns, dare I doubt? do I fail You if I question Your will? she burned screaming in the red and I do not hear your Voice in the dark-

Got it, honey. Stop now.

Both Cole and I took a moment. I petted him and told him he’d done a good job, an excellent job.
Praise is easier when both parties know you’re sincere. That shouldn’t be as much of a surprise as it was.

We watched Raoul march and ruminate for a few minutes. I could see it, now. He wasn’t just cold, he was lost. His eyes turned again and again away from the perimeter toward the camp. I would have bet ten royals he was looking toward the healer’s tents to see if there was news.

Poor lad.

Okay, so how do we help him? Do I just take my best guess or do you have ideas?

what would you do?

Anyone else, I would call that question a test, but Cole was genuinely curious.

First, a scarf. Then… the Herald is alive, right?

I can’t hear him

Can you hear the green?

yes

So… he’s alive?

I can’t hear him

Argh. Stop trying to force Cole to make logical inferences, self.

If we can hear the green, then does that mean he’s probably alive?

his hand is

Fair. Good point. Get the scarf, confirm that the entire Herald is still alive. Then talk to Raoul. That’s what I’d do.

okay

What would you do, Cole-love?

not that. but that’s good.

I was going to press the point, but I realised that it probably doesn’t matter what Cole would have done. I’m the one who needs to act, therefore my plan is the best plan and Cole’s would be a distraction.

Let Operation: Fetch The Scarf commence! This should be easy enough, right?

Wait. I forgot about Threnn. Ah, fucksticks.

There are no end of overlaps between her duties as the Quartermaster and mine in the Seneschal’s sphere. Thus, we’ve had hundreds of tiny disagreements about bedding and servants and socks. (On the day before the mass of Redcliffe mages arrived, we had a record-breaking fifty-three.) She’s surly and brusque, but since I have no particular opinions about Ferelden’s military heroes, we’ve gotten by.
Still. Any confrontation, no matter how small, gives me the queasies. I don’t want to get into an argument about a scarf, but I’m almost guaranteed one.

*It’s fine, it’s fine, it’s worth it,* I reminded myself. I could feel the spit in my mouth.

no-one cares

Hey!

not about you. he was a great leader and he saved two regiments at the Dane and no-one cares

About Loghain? So she feels, what? Lonely?

every face turns away, refuses to see. sole soul honouring the saviour

Oh. That sucks.

I pondered as I located her tent. Unsurprisingly, with the military taking sole control of logistics, Threnn was hammered: barking orders at three of her deputies while writing on parchment stiffened by a dented breastplate.

“What.” Ah, my turn. Skip formalities, get to the point.

“One of your soldiers, Raoul Something? He’s on guard duty and he needs a scarf.”

Her gaze turned steely. “Most of our supplies are buried under an avalanche *we started* and you want me to dig up a scarf somehow? I don’t do miracles.”

“It probably wasn’t our finest moment, militarily,” I granted. Aaaaand here it comes.

“Loghain could have found a better way. Would have.” Two nearby soldiers bristled. She generally tries harder than this, but she’s tired.

I replied mildly, “I believe you. Pity he wasn’t there.”

Threnn glared at me with the paranoia of someone who has been mocked and corrected and baited far too many times. I met her eyes and none of her suspicions.

She grunted. “Over there. In the chest. Probably get one for yourself, none of you Marchers are any good in the cold.”

“Thank you, Threnn.”

She ignored me and went back to work.

I left with two scarves and the uncomfortable feeling that I had just cheated someone. Maybe myself.

***

Finding out about the Herald was the simple part. The flaps on his tent had been drawn back, presumably so no-one would have to answer the breathless *But is he okay? Like… really okay?* question one more frickin’ time. He was talking softly to one of the healers, smile back in place.

So now Raoul. Right. Okay.

don’t make it hard
Am I overthinking this? Don’t bother answering that.

It’s not a thing. Just doing a good deed for a fellow member of the Inquisition. That’s all. Walk over there and give that man a scarf. Easy as pie.

“Well, my face is a liar then.” We both laughed together. Just a little, but it helped.

I looked him in the eyes. I had no clever plan on how to suddenly begin, let alone complete, a complex discussion about faith and doubt and the Maker’s will. So I just looked him square in the face and forgot about being self-conscious and thought at him, It’s going to be okay. You’re a good person. You’ll figure it out. I have faith in you.

Another long moment, this one not awkward. It was… genuine. Nothing magical in the supernatural sense. Just two people being a teensy bit vulnerable together.

And then I patted his arm, we smiled, and I left.

*Let’s do another,* I told Cole.

Chapter End Notes

Cole wants you to be adequately hydrated.
Cole and I had been practicing and we’d succeeding most notably in giving me the kind of headache Marta got when she read fine print.

No, that’s not fair. We could now reliably use the reporting method where Cole narrated someone’s need. Very rarely I needed a clarification when he was especially poetic.

Most important lesson: I am surrounded by truly astonishing liars.

I watched a dwarf who I had met, one of the body-servants of a minor Tevinter lordling who had been in Haven to finagle a border dispute. What was the servant’s name… Narvia? Yes, that was it. He tromped past, eating a chicken wing. He looked mildly bored.

Inside, he was bereft.

So many people wore calm faces over broken hearts. Cheerful banter over terror. Politeness over utter devastation. I have no idea how so many have learned so well to hide so much, but mercy it made my heart hurt.

I felt tears well up and reflexively I hid them.

Why did I do that? I’m not afraid of crying.

tears a dagger, indiscriminate, don’t scratch the scab

Oh.

We’re all being brave for each other.

won’t be a burden, carry it alone

Stuffing our pain into an overfull coinpurse with no pickpocket to relieve us of our riches. I rolled my eyes at myself. (Is metaphor contagious? I may have received a lethal dose by now.)

In an hour I helped military staff, two cooks and a group of distressed pilgrims. All small needs so Cole and I could practice: mostly dispensing a sympathetic ear, a cup of willow-bark tea or a reassurance.

An hour later we’d done yeoman’s work and nearly two dozen people were feeling a bit brighter, but the overall mood around us was worse. Bleak and cold as the wind, dark as the tents. Neither Cole nor I had any solutions. I took a break and a cup of the willow-bark tea for myself.

I was failing to convince myself to begin again when Cole perked up.

---

I went as directed. The advisers were arguing.

I stopped, gobsmacked.
Sister Nightingale, bickering? *Lady Josephine bickering?* This is more unlikely than the whole undead magister thing. Is it some clever scheme to help the Commander and the Seeker vent some pressure? Or a stratagem to draw out traitors in the camp? Blood mages? Am I hallucinating? I must be, surely.

you're not looking

Where?

The song began.

Keep in mind, I’ve spent more than twenty years in the service of a signally devout Bann and now this new Inquisition. Half my life spent constantly making the right responses while feeling different ones, and I grant… it’s made me a little snarky. Okay, a lot snarky. Okay, sometimes I am downright obnoxious in the privacy of my own head. It’s a reaction to the unending pressure to conform.

Even then, I have always loved The Dawn Will Come. It’s the least hymn-y of the hymns, that helps. It's also a song of determination and optimism, and the melody is thrilling, and yeah. I enjoy the song under ordinary circumstances.

Under *these* circumstances…

I was six years old and I held all my pocket money in my hands and looked up at Danyla and begged, “Please, will you teach me that song?” When asked why, with all the sincerity of my wee earnest little heart, I said, “That was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard.”

In counterpoint, an extra melody line, Cole shared the litany of six hundred hearts putting their burdens down.

All of us breathed out in unison. We wept and were made strong. We were one, hurt but whole. Harmonious.

And then everyone started kneeling and spoilt the whole thing.

*Typical.*

Chapter End Notes

Consistent chapter length? What's that?
In The Mind Of The Dread Wolf Fen’Harel

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

<translated from the Elvhen>

I require fresh air after that performance. Mother Giselle’s skills in manipulating the mood of a group are adequate but cloying.

The pieces have been set in motion. Five days travel, and I will have broken yet another of my fine vows.

“I will not come here again.”

“You may not will it, and yet do so,” she replied. Once more she is correct and I am a fool. Would that I could congrat-

WHAT IS THAT.

No, I have imagined it. I am fatigued, listening to wishes. It cannot be.

It comes again. A distorted echo, not correct but… close. Familiar. I hide and strain to hear.

Exasperation mingled with elation. Warmth sent to another. Weariness and fear.

Where is this coming from?

I veil myself and hunt.

My quarry is impossible. A short plump shem with not a hint of strength to her? Either I am mistaken, or I have finally given up and gone mad.

She stretches out her limbs and I hear the satisfaction ring from her. It is muddy, a chord in a minor key.

And yet. And yet.

Who is this creature and how can I hear her? Simply take her away for questioning, likely no-one will miss her. Maze her mind, she cannot resist. I must know how she is doing this, I must.

Patience. Of late I have marred too much with haste.

I follow and listen. Some shem calls her Emma. I grin to myself. Mine. It is a propitious name.

Does she bear the blood of the People, to be named in our tongue? No, it is obvious that she does not. It is a name used by others.

I watch her mingle. How many of these creatures does she know? She addresses many by name. Ah. The Nightingale, she must be one of her agents. Her dissembling is truly brilliant, she would be a favoured asset.

But one mentions Leliana and I hear her sudden shock of fear. More, I see it painted clearly across her face. She is no spy, and terrified of the spymaster.
Who is this woman?

I mark her soul. I will hunt her further in her dreams.

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Careful and cautious, I set the trap with the lightest of touches. I am close enough to observe, but not to be observed.

She finds herself strapped to a chair in a cold black place. The Nightingale prowls around her. The scene instantly shifts to a table and chairs with the added scent of iron. She has been interrogated by Leliana before.

She speaks in an Ostwick accent, with acceptable vocabulary. She makes a nervous joke. I have broken a thousand like her.

She makes no attempt to bluff or dissemble. She babbles. When the babble fails, she throws herself on the mercy of her captor. That is a small target, but her only chance.

“Please, I didn’t mean to hurt anyone, I didn’t hurt anyone, haven’t, won’t, I swear!”

Her mental projection of Leliana is formidable. It never blinks. It never speaks. It just stares, and that is enough.

She tells her story to the unblinking eyes. I listen, fascinated.

A mundane and an embodied spirit bond on this side of the Veil? The circumstances are likely not unique, but they are close enough to it.

It would be sensible to kill her now.

There are already so many variables in this game and I have underestimated a number of the players - I have still yet to determine how Corypheus survived the blast.

Compassion is a gentle spirit and unlikely to cause difficulties, but this shem? Who knows what trouble she can create?

It would be sensible to kill her now.

“I have a better idea,” says a voice at my shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn’t fail to address the wolf in the room, right?

This is likely the only chapter from this perspective, or indeed from any POV but Emma’s. It was a lot of fun to write.
The next day we left, heading… north. I think. The Herald seemed to know where.

I yawned constantly. Did I have a nightmare last night? I asked Cole but he was very quiet. Working on something, I suspect.

I spent the first few hours enjoying the crunch and the movement and the walking. Just being present and generally grateful to be alive. Popular sentiment. We hummed as we went; occasionally a few of us would sing a verse of The Dawn Will Come.

I caught myself tallying the good deeds I had completed. Stop that, self! This isn’t one of those stalls at the Grand Tourney where you can win a prize by knocking down enough coconuts. We will help as many people as we do.

Lady Evelyn, glaring fiercely at paperwork. Marta chides her. “You can help no-one if you do not sleep, my lady. And dance. And bathe, occasionally.”

As always, Marta’s advice is solid. Sleep, dance, bathe, and-

the gift! I know what gift to give you

What’s the occasion, honey? It’s not my nameday for months.

because I’m not lonely anymore

A sudden memory of Cole in the dungeons of the Spire, desperately craving contact. He treasures having me as much as I do him. Sweetest of hearts.

You don’t have to either, you know.

it’s a gift. like people do

You’re people, Cole. You always have been, even when you were… confused.

He didn't entirely believe me, but he appreciated the thought.

may I?

Give me a gift? If it brings you pleasure, honey, of course you may.

I wrestled with myself but curiosity won. Okay, curiosity with a side of wariness.

Can I know what it is?

a lover

I choked on nothing and had to cough. Every time I thought I’d gotten it under control I remembered and whoops, there I went again. Someone thumped my back and asked me if I was okay in a heavy Nevarran accent.
I am not okay. No. My sweet passenger has just offered to find me - hiccups. I have hiccups now. Am I giggling? Yes. I am also giggling uncontrollably.

I will never be lonely again, plus I am unlikely to be bored. Oh my.

Oh Cole-love, thank you, but that’s not a good idea.

but you miss it. hands slide on skin, but too small, too familiar. gripping my hips, there, there, oh yes there

Yes. True. But who would, honey?

you’re not flawed! white hairs and warmness. curves to caress. you’re very beautiful

I stopped in the sunlight to blink a few tears away.

I didn’t know how much I needed to hear those words delivered with such devastating sincerity. I took a long moment and let them just seep in.

It’s not that. Okay, it’s partly that.

the ruffles

Yes, honey.

then don’t tell them

Cole. No. That would be wrong.

why?

And now I’m teaching moral relativism to a spirit. This is novel.

Imagine I had a potential lover and I suspected he wouldn’t say yes if he knew about you and I.

if you don’t tell him then he can’t choose

Exactly.

Cole pondered for a long time.

you take away his choice

Yes. I don’t want to do that.

so tell him

Sure, honey. Find me a man who meets all the usual potential-lover criteria plus we’re sure he won’t freak out and get us executed when he finds out we’re an abomination. Then we’ll talk.

okay

Fenedhis, he’s serious. Of course he is, this is Cole. What did I just let myself in for?

Maybe some excellent sex? Let’s stay optimistic. And change the subject. Quickly. I wonder whether Lady Josephine needs some help?
Coincidentally, she did. We had left behind the most recent pay lists and started rebuilding them from the older ones.

This time I was awake enough to do the math.

One hundred and sixty-eight workers. Bakers and carpenters and whitesmiths and scribes, porters and servants and cooks.

The old list had one hundred and sixty-eight names.

The new list had one hundred and twenty-three.

Fenedhis.

“My lady,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

She didn’t bother pretending to misunderstand. Instead she deflected me with words about pride and sacrifice and brave promises it would never happen again while the list fluttered in her hand.

Cole-love, I don’t think she’ll let me help her. Pas devant les domestiques. Who does she need?

her mother

Antiva’s a bit far, honey. Anyone closer?

Leliana

Oh Void no. Nope. I’m not going anywhere near that woman. Not even for the boss. Not unless there is literally no alternative.

she likes the Herald

Does he like her?

it’s green

I took that as a positive maybe. Hmm. Sister Nightingale, a woman who can smell deception from three cities away, and me with a hidden agenda I don’t want her looking into too closely…

…or the Herald, a mysterious elf who never stops smiling, someone I’ve never been formally introduced to, who will likely regard me with complete disinterest.

It’s good to meet new people, I decided.

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The Herald wasn’t hard to find, far ahead of us as I’d guessed. He was leaning against an old upright squarish rock that might possibly be an ancient milestone.

He was chatting with the Commander, or maybe strategising was the right word. (Flirting? Politely arguing? He was so hard to read without Cole’s help.) Other than delivering a report to the War Room, this was the closest I’d been to either.

Mercy, they’re handsome. We should put it on posters: “Join the Inquisition, our leaders are
improbably attractive.”

The Commander turned and barked “Report,” before his gaze reached me. Then he looked mildly embarrassed. “Apologies, serah. I thought you were someone else. Are you searching for me?”

“No, Commander. Well, maybe? You might have some advice.” Smooth. “It’s about the Ambassador.”

Both men turned and properly looked at me. Gulp. Just hand this over and get out quickly before they really notice you.

“We just finished our casualty list. She… needs someone to talk to about it, messeres.”

“How many,” said Ser Cullen.

“Forty-five, Commander.” His gaze turned inward. In stark contrast to the Herald, he is an open book.

I said crisply, “One hundred and twenty-three.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If you’re going to blame yourself for those who died, Ser Cullen, you need to blame yourself for those of us who didn’t.”

The Herald laughed. “She has you there.” To me: “Why are you coming to us?”

“Lady Josephine is delightfully old-fashioned.”

“So?”

“She was raised to believe it’s not done to unburden oneself before the help.” I said. “She needs to talk, but she’d be much more comfortable with someone of her own station.”

“Then why not Leliana? She’s known Josie much longer than either of us.”

“To be honest, Your Worship? Sister Nightingale terrifies me.” They both laughed.

Ser Cullen said, “I am quite well armoured. If you like, I can speak to Sister Leliana about the Ambassador.” The scar on his lip does amazing things to his smile.

“You’re a brave man, messere. I wish you well.” I gave him brisk salute, to more laughter.

The Commander said he might as well do it now and I turned to follow him back to the others when the Herald said, “You’re depriving me of my company. Do stay. If nothing else, I’d love to hear the tale of why you’re so afraid of our spymaster.”

GULP.

Chapter End Notes

Never get into a Secret Santa with Cole.
Word Nerdery
Pas devant les domestiques. - Not in front of the help.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I wanted to make my excuses and leave. Void, I was willing to gather up my skirts and simply run for the treeline. Don’t stand out, don’t draw attention. He seems pleasant, but-

That was kind of odd, now that I thought about it. He’s not just usually pleasant and smiling, he always is. Every awed story I’ve heard: he’s so polite, so interested. He asked me questions and he never took offence! He’s…

Oh fuck me sideways. He’s the Good Kind Of Elf.

Look at his boots - not footwraps - and his armour. The standard archer’s longbow. His fletchings are made from local feathers. Give his equipment to any scout and it would suit. Everything is designed to blend, and not just in the forests.

Almost everything. I looked up past his ever-present smile to his hair. It’s amazing, shaven at the sides and piled in braids and gathered hanks and plaits on top. There are wooden beads and carved bone. His hair is riotous, vibrant, and gives not a shit what you think.

I wager ten royals that it’s his only permitted defiance. Well, other than cussing when no-one can hear him.

I remembered the first half-year when I started my apprenticeship. One letter a month, constantly surrounded by people who smelled wrong, moved wrong. Every face was indefinably threatening: I was exhausted from constantly being on watch. I missed my home. I missed my bed. I missed my familiarity with every object and vista and person and sound. I’d been clamouring to go, but now I understood why they called it homesickness.

Then I remembered how much I did to fit in. Because I knew my life depended on it.

No. Stop sympathising. Make your excuses and get out of here, dammit.

Instead I looked into his blue eyes and said, “My name’s Emma, Your Worship. D’you know, I don’t know yours?”

He replied, “Vanadirthavean,” with the smallest hint of here-it-comes face.

Wait. Wait. Oh, this is better than I’d hoped. I hummed a few lines of the song to myself, made sure I had the right one. “Oh, that’s... nice,” I replied. His face didn’t change but I guarantee there was contempt under it.

“Funny, isn’t it. I was at one of the retainer’s camps during the Conclave, volunteered in the infirmary while we awaited word of my mistress. Whew! was that ever frantic. We were so busy for those first days that I missed all the good gossip. By the time I resurfaced, everyone was calling you the Herald.”

He stayed silent. Waited. “Your name isn’t even on the paperwork. Lady Josephine only ever uses your clan name. At first, I wondered if she was protecting you. But honestly, I’m starting to wonder if she even knows it.”
His mouth started to twitch in probably-genuine amusement.

I tilted my head to one side. “So is there any particular reason you’re named Magpie?”

*Bullseye.* He bridled, he was so surprised. Don’t grin smugly, I told myself, that spoils the effect. (I’m pretty sure I couldn’t hold off *all* the smirk.)

His brows narrowed. “You speak Elvhen.”

“No, Your Worship,” I said with my best totally-harmless-person expression. “I’ve never been more than conversant, and I’ve likely forgotten more than I knew. But I’d claim that I sometimes sing Elvhen.”

I cleared my throat, squashed my self-consciousness, and sang the relevant part. Translated it would read: “Thief and artist, always on the wing, Magpie comes to steal your jewels,” but it’s better in the original.

Is it weird that I thought his look of befuddlement was much more charming than his usual practiced smile? At least this one was likely genuine.

Ah, there it went. Adieu.

He looked at the crowd, still far off yet. “How do you know that song? I can’t see you raised among the aravels,” he said.

“You have a terrible choice, Your Worship. I can only tell one tale at a time. I can tell you *that,* or I can tell you the roots of my completely justified phobia of Sister Nightingale.” I shrugged. “I’m sure it’s the most overwhelming decision you’ve ever had to make. I’ll wait.”

A long pause, just enough for me to think that I had misread him disastrously. Have I become so dependant on Cole so quickly? Should I leave? I should just leave.

Then the Herald smiled. This time it looked sincerely amused. “Please, use my name. Since you know how to actually pronounce it.”

“Thank you, Vanadirthavean.” It literally means… chatter-beak? Silly-speak-mouth? Given the endless flow of pleasantries, it’s a good name for him. “What’s your choice?”

He deliberated. “You know something about the People.” I nodded. “And you’re from… Ostwick?” I nodded again. “Is it possible we’ve ever met?”

“I doubt it. I accompanied the Bann on a tour of the wineries your people were working at once, but I was far at the back of the retinue and I wasn’t able to socialise.”

“Too busy working?”

I sighed. “It made the guards nervous. I’d traded some perfectly decent favours to be included and then if I talked to anyone they’d steer me back into the group.” I rolled my eyes. “The people seemed lovely, though.”


I grinned at his high-handed tone.

Void, now I have to tell this story and actually make it interesting. Here goes nothing.
“I was born in a village, teensy place between the eastern curl of the Vimmarks and the ocean. I increased the population to two hundred and six people.

“We were fishers, farmers and tanners, in that order. But most of our income came from the tanners. Leathers, calfskin, buckskin, even sharkskin.”

“Sharkskin? Who uses that?”

“It’s mostly used in gloves favoured by rope haulers and second-story men.” He showed no reaction as I told that old chestnut. Maybe he doesn’t know what that is. Maybe he just thought it wasn’t funny.

I continued, “The biggest buyer of the leathers and skins—”

“- was Clan Elvalaslin.” It was easy to figure out given the geography.

“Yup. Twice a year they’d stay for at least a week, carefully checking over the materials and making bargains. It was all very polite in that awkward stand-offy manner that happens when a deal is very important to both parties and neither wants to be the one to screw it up.”

He said, “Important to the village because it was how they made their money. But Clan Elvalaslin is famed for their leatherworkers. Surely they could find skins anywhere during their travels?”

“Dry-scraped, dressed, stretched and smoked exactly as they preferred?” I scoffed. “Not a chance. Once a halla died and they chose our best tanner to preserve the skin.”

“I see. Please, continue.” He was taking the piss a tiny amount, I suspected. I was increasingly confident that he takes the piss out of a lot of people and they never even know.

I narrowed my eyes but continued. “The kids of course don’t care about commerce. The Dalish children had new songs and stories and games, so we all played together in the aravels.”

“How idyllic,” he commented. “All playing in harmony.”

Most people probably only hear the superficial meaning in his words. I registered at least two more levels. Memory whispered: He must have fallen and hit his head.

I shuddered. Back on topic.

“We were too young for subtext, too,” I said drily. He chuckled. “Sometimes there was some tension, but most of it was about sharing toys and whether Nilana was actually tagged out.”

“Is that how you learned the language?”

“Some of it. You pick up a lot by exposure. Mostly the swears, granted.” He actually laughed at that. “For the rest…”

I left a silent moment while I thought. “Have you ever heard that the clan has a sulenathe?”

“A singer that talented? No.”

“She’s worthy of the title. I heard her when I was nearly six. I immediately mugged my sister, took all our carefully-saved-for-buying-books pocket money, and begged her for lessons.”

“Did you succeed?”
I smiled at the memory. “Better than I dreamed. Every time they visited, she’d teach me another song or two. And I haunted the aravels hoping to pick up others. I’d do chores, play with the babies… Void, I’d hide behind things when my parents came to take me home.

“The clan prefers to speak Elvhen amongst themselves, ‘specially when strangers are around. By the time I was, oh, fourteen or so it was pretty obvious I understood a lot of it, but as long as I didn’t actually speak any that was accepted.”

He mused. “Not many learn our tongue so easily, even if they spend time around us.”

Was that a compliment? I think it was. “I had a few advantages.” He raised an eyebrow. “My mother was the village teacher, her strongest subject was languages. I was already bilingual. Plus, I was really bored.”

“But you claim you aren’t conversant.”

I looked away at the slowly advancing crowd. “When I went to Ostwick for my apprenticeship I…” Deep sigh, jaw tight. “It was a fishing merchant, they’re a rough lot. I let them hound it out of me. I’d be shunned every time I let a phrase slip until only a handful remained.”

When I looked back at him I could tell he knew the process. Had not just seen it, but lived it. His wounds were infinitely more extensive, but they throbbed in the same ways. “What did you manage to keep?”

“The swears, mostly. A few phrases. And the songs. I still treasure the songs.”

We stood awhile in silence. Thoughtfully, sincerely, he said, “I’d like to hear them sometime.”

“I’m a shadow on water compared to my teacher. But if you’d like, I will.”

“Thank you, Emma.”

“‘Ma neral, Vanadirthavean.”

“I still want to hear the other story.”

“Aww, c’mon!”

Chapter End Notes

Word Nerdery:
Vanadirthavean - magpie
Elvalaslin - steel
Sulenathe - super-awesome singer
‘Ma neral - my pleasure
The (Completely Justified) Phobia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Obediently, I dug into my memory for the tale of why I was terrified of Sister Leliana.

###

When I volunteered to help the healers, Sergeant-At-Arms Bodrick had asked a dozen penetrating questions about my knowledge and experience, and summed it up beautifully: “You know enough to not be a hindrance, but not enough to be a help.”

He sent me to two other volunteers: Jonah and Sister Gloriana. Jonah had lost his left arm a year ago and was still adjusting, but he remained smart, experienced, and tough under pressure. Sister Gloriana was the devout yet non-judgemental kind of cleric I enjoy, and had recently celebrated the delivery of the third generation of infant in the teensy chantry she belonged to.


I had no problem with this, but I spent hours internally complaining about the mud. Potters don’t have material this clay-ey to work with! How does it set so damn quickly? And so hard? Is it demon mud? Is this mud evil? It felt like I’d spent years of my life scrubbing fruitlessly at the stuff.

So a couple days after the Breach was closed, I took advantage of a lull. I marched up to the first person I saw holding a hammer and said, “Hey, can you fix the awning over the door to the infirmary?”

“What? Why?”

“The awning sags so there’s a constant puddle, and people are going in and out all day, and yeah. So much mud. Less time scrubbing means more time to look after the wounded.”

Tara (carpenter’s assistant) agreed that was indeed a problem, but not one she had the power to fix. She sent me to her boss.

Her boss (Parry) also agreed, but needed two U-brackets and some bolts made before he could fix it. He shrugged as if to say: so that’s never gonna happen.

“Where do I get those?” I asked. He did a double-take and told me that Harritt could make them, if he could be convinced.

“Where’s he?”

“In the forge.” Duh.

“Where’s that?” I asked.

He pointed and washed his hands of me and all stupid fools who weren’t born knowing where the forge was. As I walked away I mentally composed a brilliant set-down about how I’d been up to my elbows in viscera, not sightseeing. So there.

Harritt said he’d be happy to help, but he needed first-grade charcoal. Go see Threnn, over near the
chantry.
Threnn, less graciously, agreed that was a useful task, but she couldn’t do it without seasoned cordwood. See the merchants.

The merchants were absolutely no help, so I escalated to the sergeant-at-arms. He marched off righteously and within six hours the awning had been fixed. (Clearly, chicanery was involved. Either someone coughed up some charcoal or some pre-made ironmongery or something.) I was just pleased it was done.

Until the next morning, when two agents arrived and marched me down into a dungeon. “Sister Nightingale wants to talk to you,” they said.

My sudden bowel-loosening terror was in no guise lessened by the woman herself. She was quite pretty, but otherwise she was exactly what you’d expect from a mistress of spies: cold, cynical, and calculating.

“Sit, Emma. I apologise that we have not yet received confirmation about Lady Evelyn. My men are searching.” Theoretically, that was a comforting statement, but mostly I translated it to I know everything about you. Also I have a lot of men at my disposal.

“I - I - is there something I can do?” Please let it not involve words like dislocate, or flense.

“I hear that you solved a problem yesterday. I’d like to hear the story directly from you.”

“Oh, of, of course.” I told the tale, stammering the entire time. When I started repeating myself, she raised a hand and cut me off.

“Am I in trouble?” I asked. “I didn’t mean to do anything wrong.”

“Tell me, where were you born?” I told her.

“How long have you worked for the Bann?” I told her.

“Why were you brought to the Conclave?” I told her.

She asked me question after question. Most seemed irrelevant until much later when I realised that she was testing the veracity of my answers by asking for confirmatory details.

My mouth was dry and my hands were trembling. I felt very small and naked in this dark underground room and I realised just how easily I could be Disappeared. Would they tell my family that I died bravely?

Eventually she sat back, satisfied. This is it, I thought. I’m going to be buried in a shallow grave somewhere on the mountain.

“Emma,” she said. “Have you ever considered working for the Inquisition?”

###

Vanadirthavean laughed for a solid minute at the end of that. “I had pretty much the same job offer, except at swordpoint.”

“Really? What happened?”

He told me the tale and I listened, fascinated. There were rumours, but the real thing was better.
By this time the crowd had nearly caught up and we both realised we had to Get Back To It.

He leaned in. (And down. I am short.) “Thank you, Emma.”

“What for?”

“Treating me like a real person instead of a walking reliquary,” he said in a low voice.

“My pleasure, Magpie. Any time.” I winked. Cole and I walked back, proud of our good work.

***

I was tired and fulfilled after that conversation.

I was very thirsty after that conversation.

I was insufficiently wary after that conversation.

So when I joined the staff I distantly accepted a mug of tea and drank it in one long swig, before Cole could say anything about it.

And then I looked up into Lydia’s smirking face.

*Fenedhis.*

Chapter End Notes

Never put Leliana in charge of HR.
“Feel better after that?” cooed Lydia. “You looked so parched after talking with the Herald. Such a long time you two talked! I am so curious what he had to say to you.”

Is my stomach gurgling?

“And the Commander! I didn’t know you had ever spoken with Ser Cullen, but you certainly seemed on good terms.”

Maybe I’m just hungry. Sure, that could be it. Please let that be it.

“It’s lucky Lady Josephine has people to fill in when you disappear. She was so distressed, earlier. I’m glad she could rely on Sister Leliana and I.”

That is not hunger.

As I stumbled toward the bushes I heard, “Oh dear. It looks like Emma has been rather overdoing it, lately. She needs to learn how not to over-reach, I think.”

Fuck you, Lydia.

I got my robe and smalls out of the way and then horribleness happened. Attempting to hollow myself out from both ends was bad enough, but doing so in knee-high snow while being constantly aware that there was a moving stream of potential audience only yards away? That was inspired.

My head throbbed in rhythm with my guts and my recriminations. This is what happens when you’re careless. This is what happens when you don’t stay hidden. This is what happens when you get seen. This is what happens when you step out of the crowd. This is what happens when you take too much attention. This is what happens when you reach too far.

By the end I had acquired a guard, lurking within polite distance to help me rejoin the camp when I was done. I helped her sort out her marital woes on the walk, so that was something.

Sorry

What for, honey? You didn’t do it.

I was busy

You’ve been distracted all day. Are you okay, love?

Will be

Are you going to tell me what’s going on?

It’s hard. I’m helping. Please don’t make me tell

Alright. Love you, Cole.

He went back to… whatever he was doing.
I tottered into the camp and the sympathetic gaze of Harden and Circe. Neither dared to say anything, but they didn’t need to.

I cautiously ate some soup and tried to stay out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

Fuck you, Lydia.
The Next Day, On The Road Again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

We’d been on the march - or meander or exodus or whatever the correct term is - for only three hours when we were halted. I didn’t even ask for an explanation. I just flopped over into a snowbank and listened to the chorus of relief from my still-wobbly legs. Ahh.

Then I got curious. (And cold.) Rumour had it that there’d been a massive rockslide up ahead and a group of mages and sappers were forming a civil engineering team to do something explosive about it. “Make camp,” they said. “We’ll be here awhile.”

But I don’t wanna go back to the others. Lydia will be there. Noooooo. I’d call in sick if I thought that wasn’t exactly what that bitch wanted.

spine

Huh?

make it straight. less than that. yes. you are a good person and you aren’t alone

Yes. Okay. I can do this. We can do this. I don’t wanna. But I will.

The staff dug into our own avalanche, this one composed of paperwork. We’d made a dent when a runner arrived with a sack of letters. We knew one of the scout groups was due, but we’d all been hoping not quite so soon. There was a general groan at the amount of correspondence. Even Lady J looked mildly intimidated.

“Emma?” said Circe. “This one’s for you.” She held up a wrapped parcel.

For me?

I’m not proud to say it, but I took the parcel and hid in the jakes to open it. Fucking Lydia.

===

Emma,

This just arrived. I thought you might get more from it than I did.

V

===

Utterly intrigued, I unwrapped the parcel and found…

Oh. Wow.

It was a hand-lettered copy of the Chant, exquisitely illuminated and bound.

And it was written in Elvhen.

There are no dictionaries of Elvhen, no codices. But if the translation was of a quality with the rest of
this nauseatingly sycophantic work (and I would bet it was) then all I need is a reference copy of the Chant in Orlesian or Kingspeak - not exactly a difficult object to find in these parts - and I would have everything I needed to relearn at least as much as I once knew.

What a brilliantly thoughtful gift. I must -

“Hey. Hey. Ye cannae shit all day!”

Ah. Yes. I rewrapped my gift and left the privy. Luckily the book was demi-quarto size and fit in my purse.

Cole-love!

she won’t get near it. I promise

Thank you, honey.

I snuck a piece of parchment and wrote a reply.

===

Magpie,

Your book is missing the Canticle of Shartan, but I’ll find some use for it, I suppose.

Nuvas ema ir’enastela.

Emma

===

I smiled as I gave it to the messenger.

One double-fistful of mail later, Lady Josephine left for a War Council meeting and gave us a break. I went for a walk around camp, planning to stretch my legs and maybe read my new book.

head pounds gut twists this is gonna be a bad one I can tell

The source was a dwarven sergeant over near the dropoff. Standing too upright and her colour terrible under her Duster tattoos.

Which one is it?

Cue a feeling of herznjilkusspun, which is a word I just invented to describe the feeling of Cole riffling through my memories like a card catalogue. He emerged triumphant.

migraine

Do I remember the potion?

it’s bluish

“Hey, Sergeant. Don’t mind me, but you look-”

“I look like none of your business,” she replied.

you’re loud. don’t make me talk, I’ll be fine as long as I just stand here
I softened my voice. “It’s just… I have a friend of mine who gets terrible migraines. You have that look. Please, may I help?”

She eyed me wearily. Lucky I’m short, so she didn’t have to crane to do it.

too tired to argue it’s coming fast now

“How about this,” I near-whispered. “I’m just gonna help unless you tell me not to. If I were you, I’d want some of the healer’s potion, someone to take over my duties, and somewhere very dark and quiet to lay down. Yeah?”

She gave a long slow blink that I took as a nod. “Will you let me help you?” She sighed. “Thank you. Be back soon.”

I hailed a runner and sent them to the healers, then jumped in front of the first set of epaulets I found.

Mistake.

Ser Hildren was two hundred pounds of moral flaws shoved into a hundred pounds of shiny armour. I’d heard her name being muttered by the elven servants in relation to terms like slaver and bully and absolute shitheel. I should definitely find someone else, right-


I froze. “Uhhh… uhhh…” C’mon, the sarge needs you. “I… there’s a… one of your… sergeants?” I could feel my breath in my collarbones as I tried to remember how to assemble sounds into meaning. “She… she’s… sick? Needs a… a… umm, thing where you replace her? Ser?”

“Who.”

I don’t know her name, dammit! I squeaked, “Dwarva? Sergeant?” Instantly, Ser Hildren’s face went from menacing to blazing fury and she stalked over toward the dropoff. I stood motionless for three to four aeons before I was able to follow.

“You lazy, degenerate, fucking piece of cockgobbling trash!” she was bellowing at the sergeant. “Sending some civilian to cover for you, you gobshite? What, not enough hours to go smuggling in? You shitweasel, how dare-”

At this point three things happened. First, Ser Horrible’s voice reached its peak thunder. Second, a healer arrived with a flask of potion.

And third, the sergeant puked all over the templar’s feet. The sergeant then moaned in pain and collapsed, semi-conscious. Ser Horrible yelled but was calmly shoved out of the way by the healer and had to vent her fury on her boots.


I did nothing.

The moaning sergeant was carried away. The templar glared past me and hit me with her armoured shoulder.

And I just stood there in disbelief at how much worse I had just made… everything. I stared at the puddle of vomit like it was an accusation.

I told you, Cole.
Even my mental voice was weary.

I know you’ve been giving me all the easy tasks, building up my confidence. I know you hoped that I could manage one racist fuck, one small confrontation.

yes but-

But nothing, honey. You were wrong. It’s the least fun I-told-you-so ever. The sergeant is going to get more grief. Ser Horrible is likely saving a dose of shit for me, too. I can’t. I just can’t.

Cole tried to argue with me a few more times, then gave it up as a bad job and tried to comfort me instead.

I stared at the puke until it stopped steaming. It took longer than I would have thought.

Chapter End Notes

Word Nerdery:

Nuvas ema i’enastela - May you have great blessings, aka Thank you VERY MUCH
herznjilkusspun - the feeling of Cole riffling through your memories like a card catalogue
Go this way, Cole told me urgently.

Next day, and we were following the remnants of a road. Elvhen? But no, they didn’t make roads. Was it the Avvar or the Alamarri here, or another one of the tribes? Did Tevinter come this far? I’ve never studied Ferelden history and geography except as a sideline to other researches.

I didn’t really care about the road. I was still in a dull funk, willing to be lead toward something possibly less puke-stained than my last day or so had been. Perhaps it’s a priest with a spare copy of the Chant?

Better: a friendly face.

“Chandler!” He looked up and his face brightened to match mine. “Hey, c’mere!” My arms wrapped around most of him (those shoulders) and I gave him the usual squeeze.

...don’t let go I need this I need this

I held on. I needed it too.

Historically, within a minute of a long hug I start thinking, “Is this too long? Do they want to leave? Did I miss the signals? Are they just being polite? Is my breath okay? Can anyone even smell your breath from here?” And on and on, until I am not enjoying the embrace at all.

Thanks to Cole, I knew the answers. I’m still grateful, I swear.

Chandler and I hugged in the snow while people maneuvered around us. I could feel his unnaturally even breathing, like he was trying to enjoy this as much as possible while not relaxing one inch. Spies probably learn how to do that.

Honey, is there anything else I should be doing?

...no

I held him. A wagon driver spat near our feet and I don’t think Chandler even noticed. His back muscles thrummed under my arms. I held him closer and more gently, softening into him. I throttled the urge to pat him or murmur or do anything else. My world was one very charismatic man who was holding on like he was drowning.

At length, he gave one long shuddering sigh and let go. His eyes were unfocused.

Until now, every word out of that mouth up had been a Declamation, a line from the lead actor delivered with absolute and unshakeable certainty. For the first time, he was subdued.

“Thanks.” Then the performance was back on and he smirked, “Of course, you should be thanking me. People pay good money for the right to touch any of this.” He gestured from glorious blond thatch down to strong trim calves.

I was tempted to play the game. He wanted me to, and he really is very compelling. It would be so easy to make an arch reply, start the usual banter going.
Instead, I said softly, “Any time, sweetheart. Are you okay?”

“I am better than okay! Why, look upon all of this.”

Mercy, this man can preen. Will… crumbling… under… charisma…

like Six, the bosun. you feel like coming home, lass

What? I’ve missed something here.

face lights up, she’s happy to see me. how long has it been since anyone was?

That made no sense. This man talks with everyone. Flirts with jokes with banter with us all,
interchangeably. We all light up when we see him. Why would I be any different?

Ah, of course. The Day of the Chicken.

###

It’s five days after the explosion. Six? Last night had been my first chance to get a full night’s rest
and so of course I’d slept like a flea on a hot griddle. All the colours are too bright and every sound
feels ten degrees off.

I’m trying to find space to write another empty update to Bann Trevelyan when a templar grabs me.
“Stand here, he’s coming.”

“Who’s coming?”

He doesn’t bother replying. Other people being crowded in answer. It’s the Herald, the one who
closed the Breach. He’s awake, he’s coming.

The only sounds are fidgeting and the snapping of banners in the breeze. Everything is reverentially
hushed.

And then a chicken loses her shit.

She’s wandered out into the cleared space and her tiny brain cannot handle all this tension. Feathers
flying, wings flapping and an endless din of bah-gawk! and behrrk!

I stumble away behind a woodpile, hand over mouth. Once it’s safe I proceed to whoop hysterically.
The awed silence and then… the chicken! The more I laugh the funnier it gets.

Next to me a male voice gasps, “Their horrified faces!” I reply, “Bwarrk!” and that is the last
cohesive thing we manage.

This stranger and I laugh until our faces hurt. We laugh until we’re huddled fetal on the canvas. We
laugh until it actively pains us to laugh and that is so hilarious we laugh some more. We laugh until
we start coughing.

My face is beet red. He wipes his thoroughly, tries to fix his hair. For a long time we catch our
breath.

“Chandler,” he says, extending his hand.

“Emma.” I dip a seated curtsy.
“Ba-gawk,” he replies solemnly.

And then we laugh some more.

###

I smiled at the memory of it. That was the first time since the explosion that I’d put everything aside and just been present. For a precious moment I’d forgotten about demons and burns and my probably-dead mistress.

Perhaps Chandler had put more aside than just the current stress. How many people have seen him wipe snot out of his mustache lately?

Not many, I suspect. Perhaps just one.

When I brightened, it wasn’t just The Performance I was glad to see arriving. It was also the man who giggled helplessly until he started snorting. That wasn’t much, just one unselfconscious moment... but it was a piece of the person under the agent. He had so few pieces of the real person left.

That felt true. Cole confirmed it.

And now he needs something. Not just a hug, surely.

    someone to miss him

    He doesn’t have family? Friends?

    no. just the audience

    Oh, mercy.

Chapter End Notes

    I sincerely hope some of you think of this on your next playthrough.

    Ba-gawk!
I racked my brain to figure out how I could possibly help Chandler. Note: trying to do this in front of a professional observer is a stupid idea.

“Look at that brain of yours, whirling away. I wonder what you are thinking of,” he said. His eyes very sharp.

I took the easy way out. “I was remembering the Day of the Chicken.”

“A piece of surrealist comedy of that calibre deserves such a title.”

“It does. You know what you deserve?” He looked wary. “Another hug.”

Smooth job, self!

It worked. This time the hug didn’t start fraught, just pleasant. We both relaxed. He smells amazing.

Then he stiffened and pulled away.

What did I do?

just another hungry mouth biting there are no pieces of me left and yet the sharks come I am hollow bones feeding and unfed

Oh. SHIT.

I grabbed Chandler’s sleeve and dragged us to the side of the path. Tensely he accepted it, correctly assessing that I was no real threat. He arranged himself against a tree and watched me sardonically.

In my best sultry voice, I said, “I have terrible news for you, darling.” He quirked an eyebrow.

“I mean, you’re attractive, and desirable? Oh, you’re very desirable.” I moved a smidgen closer and made my voice smokier. “But I have this strange kink where all my lovers need to actually desire me back.”

I moved back again and pouted. “So you and I is never going to happen. I know it’s heart-breaking, but you need to accept it and move on.”

He blinked a few times. I could see him replaying the words I’d said. “You,” he said with a rapidly growing smile, “are much better at reading people than I thought you were.”

I am now, yes.

“And you’re… not angry that I don’t want to have sex with you.”

“Nope.”

“Not disappointed.”

“Oh gorgeous,” I purred. “Don’t go that far.” He laughed. “Look, if you were interested I would say
yes in seven different languages, but since you aren’t why in fire’s mercy would I want to?”

“Many do.” That’s a long sad tale told in only two words.

“Oh lovely, I’m sorry.” I didn’t even think before hugging him this time. It was fierce, furious. *I’ll hunt down every one of those people and kick ‘em in the junk, I swore. Hurt my Chandler, how dare they?*

My fury quickly churned into hopeless sorrow. Why would anyone ever hurt this showy charming man? Why did they think that was in any way acceptable behaviour? *Why are people so terrible all the time?*

I started to tremble. Without breaking the embrace he picked me up and swirled us around the tree, out of sight. How many others are walking around with stories like his? There’s too much pain and I am drowning, drowning.

“Hey, what are you two up to?” demanded a guard.

Like a magician’s tarot card, the Performance appeared. “I am comforting this woman, serah. You will note that she is weeping.”

“Yeah, well, get back on the path. You’ll get left behind soon.”

“Away with you, minion,” said Chandler and turned back to me. I was soggy and red and very self-conscious. “You look dreadful,” he said gently.

“I can’t find my handkerchief.”

He laughed and produced one from a hidden pocket; I blew my nose with absolutely no attempt at finesse. Before, he would have mocked me. This time, he stroked my arm.

“Well, precious. You are much more perceptive than I thought you were.”

“Ooh, praise from the spy. I shall write it in my journal, which I just realised is back in… *dammit. I shall obtain a new journal just for this occasion!*

He nudged my shoulder. “Shh, I’m being nice to you. I don’t remember the last time someone cried on my behalf.”

“Well, I like you, Chandler.” I said simply. We let that sit awhile.

he likes you too. it’s a pity

Were you playing match-maker, honey?

… no?

Cole really needs to stop trying to lie to me.

Chandler and I sat down in companionable silence until I stopped sniffling and feeling awkward. Eventually my arse started to complain about the snow and tree roots, but we were having a nice moment so I ignored it.

“I’m curious, precious: how did you know that the Herald was coming up the mountain by the scout’s path?”
His tone was so light and conversational that it took a moment. Once I got it my reaction must have been vivid because Chandler sighed. “There are four archers in the trees, dear,” he continued in the same conversational tone. “Please don’t do anything foolish. I would grieve if they shot you in the eye socket.”

He stood up, faced me. (Probably not in a way that blocked the archers, I thought absently.) I watched him, glanced at my clenched fist. “You may keep the handkerchief, sweetheart. I greatly fear you’re going to need it.” His smile was very sad.

I tried to smile back. “If I survive, do come see me, Chandler. I’ll probably need another hug, too.” Big fat tears started rolling down my face. I’m probably going to die today. Le Créateur aie pitié, it’s beautiful here in the trees.

“I wonder if hug is a euphemism for chance to stab you.”

I shook my head, freeing more tears. “I want you to be well and happy, love.” I was sincere. He winced like I’d shoved a splinter under his skin.

Two more arrived, each carrying a nightmare.

   Oh no. That’s a black bag. We’re getting-
   no. not again. never again. never aga-

The bag was cinched over my head. A reedy thin voice started reading the words that accompanied Cole’s worst memory.

   just a parasite
   Cole my love. I know. I know. But it’s different.
   wanting what he can’t have
   It’s you and me and the Litany doesn’t work on us, honey. Listen!
   Rhys? Rhys? I’m sorry I didn’t know
   COLE!

I hurled my love at him again as our hands were bound.

   Cole-love, listen to me, please. It’s okay, it’s going to be okay.
   hurt you I didn’t want
   I know, honey. I know. I love you.

I was weeping hard in my hood, shoulders shaking. We were being dragged away from the camp, toward… whatever was coming.

Cole and I embraced as we were arm-barred to a stop.

   Emma?
Yes, Cole-love?

dthis isn’t what I thought would happen

At least I got one last giggle in before the end, I thought, as hands came to grab us.

Chapter End Notes

I seriously want to do a radio serial voice. "What will happen to our heroic duo? Find out next episode on... IN TWAIN!"

Word Nerdery:
Le Créateur aie pitié - Maker have mercy
In Limbo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was dark, I could tell that much easily. Wood under us that shifted at times - a wagon’s floor, I
decided. Sound traveled oddly through the cloth but I could dimly hear two sets of breathing. One
was very close.

And absolutely nothing was happening to us. I’d been stripped of my belt, thrown inside, locked in,
and then just… ignored.

For now. I suppose that a mountainside is a bad place to perform an interrogation. The irons would
cool too quickly, I thought giddily. So we’re being kept here until we arrive at wherever the fuck it is
we’re going.

Solid logic. Keep it up.

Thus, we have at least a couple of days to prepare.

   for what?

   Being interrogated, honey. If we give the right answers then maybe we’ll survive.

   what are the right answers?

   Ones that prove we’re not a threat. Better, that we could be an asset. Sister Nightingale wouldn’t
   kill us if we’re useful. I hope.

   make amends

   We don’t need to make amends for anything, honey. We haven’t done anything wrong. But if it
   works, then yes.

   hide in honesty, safe in secrets

That was a yes. Good, we have a plan.

Now, how do we actually do it?

***

The body next to mine smelled like old sweat and bad choices.

   What’s his name?

   Gereon Alexius

   The Magister? We are in fancy company. This is good. We’ve never met, all I know is gossip.
He… stole the mages, forced them into indentured servitude? And kicked the Arl out of his castle,
which was a sleep-destroying diplomatic nightmare. Plus I hear he was messing with some horrible
magic I don’t understand and there was a cult. To Corypheus, I assume. Is that right?

   yes
Okay, now to things I don’t already know. Hmm. Why’d he do it?

which?

Join the cult, for starters.

The Elder One controls the Blight, it does not control him. he can save your precious Felix. he alone can.

He was trying to save someone? His… what, his son?

I should have been there, I should have been there. Livia was never any good at combat magics

Oh. That’s tragic.

both of them turned against me, my son and my boy. neither will ever forgive me.

Who?

Dorian. a prism for my brilliance. we were whole together

Dorian? Like the Tevinter altus who joined us?

house Pavus, most recently of Minrathous

Oh. Wow, both of them turned against him? That’s a pretty solid vote of disapproval right there. Where’s Felix? Is he still alive?

light too bright, but the scent of the sea soothes my stomach. soon, Cumberland, then home. one last time.

Oh, no. I took a momentary pride in my capacity for empathy while tied and hooded and sincerely afraid for my life. Stop that, more important things to focus on.

Okay, good. Great, in fact. We can read a lot just by being near someone. Is that enough?

I thought about it for awhile, practiced our sales pitch.

No. We need more.

How quietly can you answer me, Cole?

why?

Because I can only have one conversation at a time. We’ll be much more useful if you can feed me information belowground, like…

whisper to the statues, it’s a fun game

Quieter than that, love. Like intuition.

Cole searched for more context and I got that herznjlkusspun feeling again.

knowing without knowing the knowing?

Yes. Don’t hear it, just understand.
Cole got very quiet.

you don’t want to hear me?

Honey, no. I love talking with you. This is just for when we’re helping. Remember how the first time was like shouting?

you peed

I did! It was a pee of overwhelm. And then we learned how you could just tell me about needs.

I should have told you more

I thought about Chandler, and didn’t disagree.

Right. So when I talk to someone, try to help… do I ask myself questions when I do? I think I do. wonder, wondering, wandering, which way works?

Precisely. So what if you knew the answer? You could tell me.

but quiet?

Yes! So quiet that I don’t even pay attention to the question or the answer. I just know the things I need to, when I need them.

intuition

Yeah. That would be so useful that even Sister Nightingale would think twice. Three times, even.

like Chandler. he heard your eyes

Yeah.

he still likes you

I know, Cole-love. I know.

Gereon was an easy target because he was very close, and his regret was very loud. Over and over I asked Cole questions: what’s his worst memory? How’s his body feeling after being cooped up? Why did Dorian leave him?

Cole worked very diligently to make his answers as quiet as possible. Eventually the exhaustion and the scared and the bound hands and the continuing inability to scratch my nose got too loud to ignore and I tried to sleep.

*We are bound in the back of a wagon on our way to die horribly and be buried in an unmarked grave.*

I tossed and turned and kicked Gereon - sorry - and lay tense for awhile before my body’s demands took over.

*Do they decapitate abominations?*

I sniffled a few times and stubbornly tried again.

*I hope Ash and Jenn don’t get in trouble when they try to find out what happened...*
Cole sang to me.

He chose one of the lullabies I’d learned from Clan Elvalaslin, a sweet bit of nonsense I sang to my youngest sister a time or twelve. His mental voice was small and pure. He sang over and over, like I was a colicky baby and he was an endlessly patient mother.

I wept into my hood for awhile and then at last I drifted off.

***

wake up
Mweh?

wake up, they’re here

Whozle?

they won’t hurt us if we don’t struggle

Suddenly all awake. My hood was being untied - when did this become my hood? Probably about the time when I put an awful lot of snot into it - and my hands unbound. I moaned at the pins and needles.

The hood was yanked off, along with a non-zero amount of hair. It was barely light. Two guards, both armed. One professionally blank, the other leering. Don’t be alone with this one, not ever.

That insight. Was that you, honey?

no. you’ve seen his type before

This is true. But I haven’t been the target befo- I took a deep horrified breath. Oh mercy fuck.

he won’t touch you. I promise

You’ll possess me if you have to.

yes

Good.

We haven’t tried it, haven’t needed to, wanted to. But I know he can. Will. Cole will protect me.

wrench his jaw down and across. he’ll never eat steak again

It’s weird that’s the most comforting thing I’ve ever heard.

Right. Okay. Fuck that guy. I straightened my shoulders. I was still panting, but I looked him in the eye.

“This way,” the other guard said. “Don’t make trouble, we won’t have to hurt you.” I nodded and went as directed, trying to get circulation back in my hands. I was marched behind a bush. Two faces stared at me and waited.

Oh, now this is just awkward. No chance they’d give me privacy though, I could tell. I reefed down my smalls, squatted and let the inevitable happen. The bad one grinned as I did that full-bladder
shudder.

Gardener

Is he? Has he?

he likes to scare, never steps over

Leliana would have his balls.

small hurts while thinking of big hurts

Unpleasant. But we can endure that.

I love you

I love you too, Cole.

First time he’s said it, while I’m crapping in the snow. Why am I not surprised?

When done and as cleaned up as I could manage, I was directed back. Gardener stayed too close behind my shoulder, moved deliberately too often in my periphery.

Every time I was about to tense, Cole told me another method he could use to make Gardener scream. Snap his finger backward. Crush his kneecap. Tear off his ear.

This should not be so comforting!

soft, go soft

Angry at my lack of reaction, Gardener reached out to push me. We could have evaded but that would make him angrier, so instead we went soft and flopped over onto the snow. He closed in, unsatisfied.

Wide-eyed, I threw an appeal at the other guard.

“Knock it off, Gardener,” he said, grudgingly.

“What, I was just getting her ready.”

“Having some fun, you mean.”

“Is it a crime to enjoy your job?”

*It is the way you do it.*

“Just leave it off. Get her up.”

No chance I’d let him touch me. I scrambled up to my feet. Other Guard threw me a waterskin and a cloth bag that smelt of bread. Oh, that’s good news. He gestured at the wagon and I climbed back in.

Inside I got to see Gereon for the first time. He looked… very old. I sat in the corner, nearer him than the third guard, holding my precious rations.

“Get up, geezer,” Gardener said, and grabbed his arm. Hard. With no sign that he was more than biologically alive, Gereon was pulled out of the wagon.
I looked at the other guard. “Messere?” He looked at me with no interest. “Is this my daily ration?” He gave a brief nod. “Thank you.” His mouth gave a tiny reflexive smile. Professional, but still polite. Lovely.

I carefully ate a third of my loaf and realised to my dismay that I’d drunk more than a third of the water with it. (It was a very dry loaf!) “Messere?” He looked again. “Can I get more water if I run out?” He shook his head. “I see. Thank you.”

Professional. Good manners. Set to guard a magister and an abomination. Ah, he must be a templar.

Ser Farstad

I already need to pee again. This won’t go well.

Gereon and his rations were shoved back into the wagon. He slumped back in the same spot and was immediately unmoving. Pretty sure Ser Farstad would frown on me stealing some of my fellow prisoner’s water, but the selfish part of me kept it in mind. Better to… steal his terrible memories instead? It sounds wrong when I say it like that.

I settled in and back to practice.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, commenters and kudos-ers. You are giving me so many warm fuzzies.
Three long days spent trying to forget about how much I needed to pee. One ever-growing bruise on my hip from the jouncing of the wagon. The only indicator of time was the shift changes as Ser Farstad was replaced by Ser Lysette then Ser Pauline and then Ser Farstad again. Riding in the dark, with endless silence from the templars and Gereon.

I wouldn’t say I enjoyed avoiding Gardener twice a day, but it did add a bit of spice. Okay, Cole’s endless recital of threats was probably the real entertainment there.

Endless dark and silence with a side of threat. Alone I would have driven myself into a frenzy, confessed to anything, just to talk.

Luckily I had Cole and a lot of homework to occupy us.

Now as the wagon was hauled upward, we knew it was time for the test.

***

Bag over my head again. Underfoot… stone? Where are we?

   keep. Skyhold

   Keep? Like a castle?

   Tarasyl'an Te'las, place where the sky was kept. broke the dreams to stop the old dreams from waking

   What, honey?

   nothing

Cole could feel people all around us. The walls must be very tall. Gereon was hustled away through one door, and weirdly I missed him once he was gone. We’ve never spoken, but we were close.

I was manoeuvred through a different door. Down, down, down. Stairs with still-crisp edges - this place was beautifully made. Doors clanged shut behind us, a quick right turn, then one very final bang.

“Take off your hood,” ordered Ser Pauline. I was in a cell, no surprises there. A new pallet, thin but I’m not going to complain. A bucket. One cell next to me, two across a wide corridor. All empty but mine. A thick wooden door further along blocked the sound of water falling.

“May… may I wash myself?” I stank.

“If you behave, you’ll be given wash water and clean clothes. Your interrogator will decide when you have earned them.”

My…? Gulp.

We knew this was coming, I reminded myself. We’re as ready as we can be. It’s… that’s just a big word. Interrogator. Interrogateur, not any better there, Antivan is pretty much the same. Percontator, a bit less scary in Ancient Tevene. Don’t know it in Elvhen, wish I had my Chant here. That’s a funny thing to be wishing, right? Ironic.
breathe

Easy for you to say, love.

He has learned not to respond to things like that. He just hummed the lullaby again until I felt sheepish and complied.

Would it be Sister Nightingale herself? Not likely, especially if they have some way of determining I’m an abomination.

Do they?

only the bad kind

Is there a name for the good kind?

they don’t have one. spiritibus familiaris. era'elgar.

Spirit dreamer? It’ll do, I guess. Friend of spirits is also good, and for the record I know that you’re just trying to distract me, thank you, it is working.

you remember more than you think

Flatterer.

Not likely Sister Nightingale. One of her agents, then? Please don’t be Chandler, that would be really awkward. Gardener? Mercy. Does she have a dedicated torturer don’t answer that.

I started taking deep breaths again before Cole had to remind me. Ser Pauline stared, uninterested. She’d had a lot of practice, she could have competed professionally. In the… Templar Games. The One Hundred Yard Flat-Eyed Glare event. Lots of tiny pennants.

From up the stairs came a series of big metal noises. The doors. I wished I could see out, see who was coming down the final flight. Fuck me, I’m scared.

Whoever it was, they sounded big. I closed my eyes, tried to stop trembling. The big feet noises stopped. Okay, it’s time. One sidelong glance.

Who… who in the Void? Why is there a Qunari here?
In An Underground Cell

Hands on the bars, eyes downcast, breathing regular.

Name? He has... a lot of them, I suppose that’s common for spies - wait. The Iron Bull? Isn’t the name of the leader of the merc company we hired a couple weeks back? The big Qunari. Vashoth? Which is he? Later.

Good, Cole, we’re doing good.

two blinks is longer than before

I know. He’s more complicated. We’re still on track.

What does he fear losing? Interesting. Why did Sister Nightingale send a still-active Qunari spy to question us? Oh, that’s brilliant. If I’m the real deal all the secrets I uncover are his, not hers. Fenedhis she’s smart.

Greatest shame? Oh. Oh.

unclench your jaw

Right. Thanks, honey.

Monster status? Better than expected. Wow. He’s a... really good person, away from the job. And inside the job, as often as he can. Admirable.

Current needs? Yes, yes, well, tragic, but yes, oh dear, right.

Does he know?

no

Yikes.

are we supposed to like him? I like him

Me too.

Maybe too much. Fuck a shit he’s attractive. Maybe that’s just fear-arousal. Yeah. Sure. Took six blinks, longer than our practice, but he’s much more complicated. We know enough. I think. I hope.

I looked up, and up some more. One eye stared down at me with glittering intensity. Fenedhis, he really is attracti - focus.

I smiled and said, “Hello, The Iron Bull. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He lunged toward the bars and locked his hands over mine. My body jumped, but my mind didn’t. It’s a test, he won’t hurt me, his hands are very warm and I am officially ignoring all missives from my nethers as of now.
My lack of fear was interesting to him. Immediately he abandoned five of the strategies he’d prepared based on what he knew about me. Cole and I hadn’t bothered with much strategising since we didn’t know who’d be grilling us. Good thing too, not even my wildest hypothesising would’ve encompassed this.

He gave a satisfied nod, dragged up a crate and got comfy. Posture relaxed, hands loose and held in front. In control. Am I supposed to be put at ease or made more nervous? Both, I think. I don’t understand why that works, but after all I’m no spy.

“You’re no spy,” said The Iron Bull. I squeaked. He grinned. “So what are you?”

“Nervous?”

“Yeah, not as much as you oughta be.” Ser Pauline tensed. He flicked his head. “She’s thinking you’ve got some demon crap up your sleeve. She right?”

“No.” I made five different vowels in a two-letter word. He noticed. “Nah, but you got something up there. A trump card.”

Don’t bother lying. “One trick. But a good one.”

He picked up my inflection, as I knew he would. “Not good as in clever. Good as in not-evil. Yeah?” I nodded.

He stared at me, silently. “You hoping I’ll send her away?”

I thought about it. “It’d make it easier for us to talk. But I think you’d be more comfortable with her here, unless… Ser Pauline, you know the Litany of Adralla, right?”

She narrowed her eyes but nodded. “The Iron Bull, you should ask Ser Pauline what that is. And get her to teach it to you.” They both went into a far cell to confer. I didn’t bother listening in.

Be calm, love.

I don’t like it. but I understand

You always understand. Love you, Cole.

why do you want to climb him like a tree?

Not now, honey.

The Iron Bull returned, fully wary now. “Yeah, why do I want to know that? Help me get it.”

“You know I can’t hurt you physically - even if there weren’t some extremely sturdy bars between us you’d win a fight, every time.” He graciously accepted the point.

“It’s… demons you worry about. Fucking with your mind, getting in your thoughts.” His face went unreadable, but I wasn’t using his face to read him. “The Litany protects you from that - honestly, I don’t know why Templars don’t get it tattooed on the back of their hand. Anyone can use it, it’s a crime they haven’t made it better known.”

Predictably, Ser Pauline bristled. “It’s true, messere, and you know it. Maybe they’re afraid someone with an excellent grasp of magical theory and a much shakier grasp of morals could find a way to counteract it.” Yeah, that’s the answer. “Anyway. Regular recitations of those words and you can be confident I’m not messing with you. They’re in Tevene, which is maybe awkward. Sorry.”
I could see the moment when The Iron Bull realised I was commandeering the conversation. Brace, prepare for rams and boarding parties.

He said mildly, “Ser Pauline? Un moment, s’il vous plaît.” His accent was charming, raw and bumptious. He was showing it deliberately. They argued for a bit but he won, of course. Doors slammed behind her as she was let out by the guard with the beard.

He got comfy again and said, “We’ve never met.” I nodded. “And you’re a terrible liar.” I agreed. “But you’re acting like we’re old buddies. That makes no sense.”

He cracked his massive knuckles. “And that makes me nervous.” Two yards away, sitting down, he still loomed. Now is a bad time to remember that thing with the Fog Warrior. I hiccupped.

Suddenly, he was relaxed. Friendly and genial and I am in so far over my head here. I started to laugh. “I get it, The Iron Bull. You’re in charge. I am tiny, and you are brilliant, and I have no chance of playing you.”

“Are you trying to?”

“No? A little? Yes?”

“You’re afraid.”

“Terrified, yeah.” I dropped my bravado. It wasn’t very good, anyway. “Something weird happened to me and it’s not bad, but this is the Inquisition. They’re not exactly easy-going when it comes to magical weirdness, you ask the Herald.”

“You get a glowy thing too?”

I giggled involuntarily. “Yes, actually.”

It’s time. At least he’s a good man.

“There was some backlash at Haven, during the big showdown between the Elder One and the Herald. A spirit of Compassion was there, helping. His name was Cole. I saved his life.”

I can’t make eye contact. If he kills us, he’ll make it quick. “I gave him shelter from the magical crap, let him… hide out.” C’mon, say it. “In me. In my body. He’s not possessing me, he’s just… here.” Has he moved?

“That’s how I knew where Vanadirthavean was. Cole told me.” I looked up. He hadn’t moved an inch. “We haven’t hurt anyone. We wouldn’t. Ever. Cole is made of compassion. All he wants is to help, and I’ve been… acting as his proxy now he doesn’t have a body to act with. Fetching blankets, binding wounds, telling people what they needed to hear. Helping.”

One tear rolled down my face. “Oh, I can hear how scary and wrong you find this, I know. I’m sorry. We’re not a demon but we look pretty fucking similar and now I’m telling you how you feel… say the words if it helps. They won’t work on us, but it might make you feel better.”

The Iron Bull unfurled himself to full scary.

“You’re an abomination.” He was controlling himself tightly, moving slowly toward us.

I swiped away some more tears. “I’m not a mage, he’s not a demon, and he’s not possessing me, so no. That’s what they’ll call us anyway.”
He stepped closer. “And then what happens?”

“They’ll kill us, of course.”

“Then why’d you help all those people? You knew it could get you here.”

“I was tempted not to. Fenedhis, was I ever.” I looked up. “Knowing I could help and not doing it, that would be punishment enough. But you know the worst part?”

“What?”

“Cole would forgive me. Cole would understand.”

He thought about that. Decided. “Only one thing to do then.” He cracked his neck.

“What’s… that?”

“I’m gonna help.”

Chapter End Notes

Yay, Bull!
‘Seven hours of unrelenting interrogation’ is a new definition of ‘help’ that I was not previously aware of.

The Iron Bull made me tell him about everything from the fwing! to the hood. In merciless detail. And I did, of course I did. The only part I held back was names - a version of the healer’s oath that he decided to accept. (Probably because he could figure out who everyone was if he needed to.)

I also had to explain, multiple times, the difference between demons and spirits. By this time, our interactions were getting... The Iron Bull was encouraging me to get sassy at him because it made me feel less powerless, and I was going along because it made him feel less overbearing. This may be the first recorded event of repartée being used as a mutual kindness.

“Demons are just one flavour of spirit. According to Cole they’re not even the most common -”

“You looked around lately? It’s all fucking demons.”

“That’s the rifts. They… suck, literally. Spirits on the other side get…” I hummed in thought. “Imagine being picked up by your ankle and pulled through a keyhole. Backward. That’s what going through a rift is like.”

The Iron Bull winced appreciatively. “So they come out the other side all fucked up?”

"All that’s left is agony and a sincere desire to punish anything that might be responsible. They used to be different, before.” Didn’t we all.

“But your… thing is on this side. So he’s gotta be a demon, right?”

“Nope, there are other ways to get through. Ever read The Tale of the Champion? Justice was a spirit who was accidentally sent through the Veil.”

“Yeah, that’s not exactly a big endorsement for spirit friends.”

I sighed in agreement. “That went wrong. Sometimes it goes wrong. But it’s almost never the spirit’s fault when it does.”

“Shit. Wait. This kinda thing happens a lot?”

“Not a lot. But some. You -

we could tell him about Old Woman

I think we ought to keep that up our sleeve. For now.

“- usually see it in mages, of course. We only worked because the Veil was damp tissue paper at the time.”

“Did he just talk to you then?”

“Yes. Did I do a face?”
“You did about five of them.”

“You did about five of them.”

“Huh. Noted. Where the Void was I?”

“Demons bad. Rifts suck.”

“Right. So unless sucked through a rift, most spirits are not demons. In fact -” I realised I was lecturing. From inside a prison cell. Hilarious. “- the objectives of most spirits don’t interact with us at all. Even if you travel to the Fade you’re not likely to meet them, ‘cause they’re off doing… their own weird spirit business.

“And then there are the third kind! Spirits with objectives of Love, Curiosity, Hope, Wisdom… Compassion. Most of the time we don’t even know we’ve met them, but we are glad we did.”

A long thoughtful pause. “Why d’you keep saying objectives?”

“Because that is the only thing every spirit definitely has. It’s their… shape, their nature, their raison d’être. Before they have it, they aren’t… anything. Just random noise.”

“So your spirit guy is just… Compassion? That’s all he is?”


“Do… do you want to talk to him?” The Iron Bull jerked backward. “Not possession, just… I can relay his words if you like.”

“Maybe another time.” Cole was a bit put out, he clearly likes The Iron Bull. “So are there two kinds of demons, then?”

I answered that question four more times before he accepted it.

***

“I’m gonna go report to Red, let you sleep.” Finally. “But first, you gotta do one last thing.”

“Sure, beautiful.” I couldn’t stop yawning: he said the s-word. “Whatcha need?”

“You talk about this demon crap -” I glared at him. “- fine, spirit crap, but I gotta have some proof. Tell me something you couldn’t possibly know about me.”

“I can tell you about the eye! It’s a lovely story, you know. Very heroic.”

“Yeah, I do know, so I’ve told a lot of people about it. Krem too.” I was idly speculating how many times that story had gotten him laid when -

“Something no-one knows but me.”

My stomach dropped. “But… but those are all bad stories, The Iron Bull.”

“Yeah. They are.” Cole and I tried very hard to dig up something, anything else. But we could only find one memory that fit.

Fenedhis.

“Promise me something,” I said.

“I won’t take it out on you.” Every word bitten off but sincere.
“Oh, The Iron Bull, I know you wouldn’t. That’s not it. Promise you’ll stay until the end.”

His eye narrowed. “You gonna do something to me?”

“Yes, darling dumbass. You want proof of what a Compassion spirit can do, you’re signing up for the full experience.”

He deliberated a long time.

Is he afraid we’re going to...help him?

pain is bracing. without the bracing, do I fall?

*Oh for fuck’s sake.*

He justified it as mission-critical intel, but I think the curiosity won out. Maybe trust. That would be wonderful.

“Here is a story you’ve never told anyone,” I intoned, soft and with minimal inflection, gaze in the middle distance.

“You stayed in the surf for an hour.” He stiffened, then deliberately relaxed. Be strong. “Stayed until it was dark. Then you went to the tamassrans. One woman, two men, one of them elven, and a banquet of erotic delights.” He’d smirk if it wasn’t this story. I’d laugh, if it wasn’t this story.

“After, you bought a platter. All your favourites. Shared it with Karasaad and Isskari and a couple labourers. She… looked at you with sad eyes as she ate. Then rotgut, a whole bottle. Too fast. You puked up the fancy meal and staggered away.”

I swallowed. “Found yourself back at the beach. Sand cold under you as you sat. You looked out over the waves and wept yourself hoarse. One last fling in case they took everything away, but there was already nothing left. Every pleasure was ashes in your mouth.”

“You watched the sun rise. Then you handed yourself over to the re-educators.”

I looked him in the face, every inch concern and furious kindness.

“Remember Nartha, when he fell to asala-taar. Remember what you said to him as they took him away. ‘Souls get sick, just like wounds. There is nothing to struggle against.’ You saluted every blade.

“Why are you different, heart of the many? They were not at fault, but you were?” His throat moved. “You lasted longer than anyone before or since, and still you cut yourself with judgement that you never applied to the others. Put the knife down, beautiful.”

A massive warm hand closed over mine, briefly. “Sleep well,” he said. And he walked heavily away.

Chapter End Notes

In case this isn't already clear, I really like Bull.
Word Nerdery:
asala-taar: literally soul-sickness. The all-too-common PTSD suffered by Qunari serving in Seheron.
My day began with clean clothes, a bucket of lukewarm water, and two stern impersonal guards to watch me de-grot myself. I could have had the entire armed forces here and I wouldn't have cared.

Damp and full of stew, I wondered idly what happened now. The Iron Bull had laid every verbal trap, made me tell the same facts in a dozen different ways, and was convinced I wasn't lying. Marvellous start. I still felt shitty about how it ended, though.

drank too much, woke clear

Oh. Splendid!

I was tempted to pass the time with another nap, but my hair was wet and even in a secret prison I still have *standards*. I did stretches instead. The guards refused to acknowledge my existence, so I told Cole stories about bunnies and mentally composed letters to my family. Then I mentally tore up the drafts.

I wonder what the staff believe happened to me? Is Lady J worried? Is it terrible that I hope she’s worried?

yes

Well, *fine*.

no. not that. she worries. perhaps this is a misunderstanding. why won’t Leli let me see her?

Gratifying! I mentally wrote letters to Lady Josephine instead. They were still clumsy and awkward in the details, but imaginary parchment is cheap enough.

The door noises began. My first reaction wasn’t terror, it was excitement - friends come to visit! If I was sure it was only The Iron Bull I’d be wagging my tail and starting to bark in circles right about now.

I don’t want to even imagine what this confinement would be like without you, honey.

fascinating, if accurate. I must learn more

A mage, maybe? Probably. They need to check Cole’s bona fides too. But first…

“Good morning, beautiful!”

The Iron Bull laughed. “You’re half right. It’s afternoon."

“How? How are you doing?”

“Etiquette rule: don’t ask personal questions of your captors.” Concern has been registered and deflected, hopefully for another time. “You smell better.”

“And you lecture me about manners? Shame on you, serah.”
He smiled, but underneath there was… uneasiness? He’s worried for us, bless him.

not here. now is safe

“Who’d you bring to quiz me this time?”

“What, you don’t know?”

I grinned. “Well, we could find out, but it seemed more polite not to. Besides, I suspect they want to see how the sausage is made.”

“Yeah, that’s a fucking image.” He gestured to his tagalong and they stepped into view.

Oh! Huh. That’s unexpected. “Hello Messere Solas. It’s a pleasure to meet you again.”

He continued to look intent and grave, but those words surprised him. “Have we met? I don’t recall.”

Keep it light, keep it conversational, surely it’s harder to kill pleasant people, right? “I’m not at all surprised. You were sitting with Messere Tethras when I asked him for his autograph. I suspect that after awhile we all start to blend together.”

He wondered if he was supposed to be offended. “Humans?”

“Fans. But that, too.”

she’s one of those, I see

Noted.

“I did want to thank you, actually. I had a compliment for Messere Tethras, and you were both very courteous in letting me stumble my way through it.”

His brow furrowed. “That I do recall. About his use of simile. It was quite insightful.”

“I’d hope so considering how long I worked on it beforehand.” The Iron Bull laughed. “What? I wanted to make a good impression. And I suspect he rarely receives praise for his craft.”

Now Solas is amused. Ah, an intellectual. My people. “It could be argued that he rarely merits praise.”

“Not at all! His plots are a jumble-bag of contrivance and his characters regularly stray into caricature, but his writing is always vivid, and his narrative flow is exceptional. He - baste, I just realised I’m performing literary criticism while in a hidden subterranean cell.” I shook my head. “I’m reasonably sure that’s not why you’re here.”

“Apparently my task is to watch the sausage get made.”

“Mmm. Forgive me, but it seems odd that you’re the mage sent to assess me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You doubt my credentials, my capability?”

“What? No! I have no idea about that, but why would Sister Nightingale risk one of the inner - wait. Oh. Of course, that makes sense.” I looked at The Iron Bull. He nodded wrly. “She’s still using resources that she finds adequately trustworthy, but not those who hold secrets she needs to protect. That way, anything I accidentally uncover is a benefit, not a liability.”
“Ah. A logical inference. I thought I had been requested for my knowledge of spirits, but that was possibly somewhat naïf.” I shrugged apologetically.

The Iron Bull said, “I’m not hanging around for all the creepy shit. Have fun.”

“Before you go… Cole says that you’re out of luck with the bananas, but Lady Josephine received too much candied pineapple. Save her from it.”

“That’s the kind of creepy weird shit I mean. Later, Emma.” I waved goodbye and banged my wrist on a bar. Ouch.

That left the apostate, the spirit, and the not-quite-abomination alone in a prison.

I’d like to believe this is the start of a hilarious joke?

Chapter End Notes

Word Nerdery:

baste - that's enough

P.S. I also like Solas.
P.P.S. I like EVERYONE.
Interview With An Apostate

Solas stood at a courteous distance. Body neutral, centred, arms behind his back. “Perhaps we should begin with fuller introductions. I am Solas. And you are?”

I smiled. “Hello, I am Emma. And hello from Cole.”

“Greetings, Emma. Greetings, Cole.” He’s polite, but reserved. Almost impersonal. So why does he feel so comfortable?

friend sees a face from afar

“Mercy, you’re an era’elgar!” My face lit up with delight. Solas froze, overwhelmed by my enthusiasm.

Are this many people lonely everywhere, or is it just the Inquisition?

everywhere

Ugh.

“I count spirits among my friends, yes.”

“That’s so exciting! And a relief. I wasn’t sure anyone here would understand… most of the mages are trained to be terrified of us.”

“Luckily for you both, apostates have no such training.”

I beamed at him, helpless not to. He tried to stay neutral and impersonal, but…

underground, I find sunlight

Oh, love. Why is he so lonely? He seems delightful, in a dry acerbic sort of way.

should we find out?

Not yet.

“Luckily for us, indeed. It’s a blessing you’re here.” It was true. Confinement or no, I felt giddy, gleeful. Someone understands. I threw a brisk salute. “I’m ready to serve, oh great magus!”

mustn’t. maintain safe space. all illusion

Oh dear. Affection feels like a threat: keep the warmth, but reduce the intensity.

I said gently, “Clearly imprisonment increases emotional lability. Sorry. Tell us what you want us to do.”

He re-established his habitual distance and stance, but a little less rigidly. I couldn’t stop smiling at him, and didn’t particularly want to, but I made it softer. Sending him running would be counterproductive to our chances of survival.
“Let us establish the rudiments. Emma, you are not a mage.”

“That’s correct.”

“And Cole is a spirit of Compassion?”

“Yes.”

“How did you merge?”

I told the story. His clarifying questions were excellent; what a lovely mind he has.

“If I understand correctly, Cole must constantly filter his awareness from your consciousness to prevent you being overwhelmed. Yes?”

“That’s not how he’d describe it. Would you like to ask him directly?”

“Do you know how to do so?”

“Theoretically, although we haven’t tried it yet. We’re both a bit nervous about it, to be honest.”

“Wise. You are no mage, and it is not possible to be certain about the effect Cole’s full presence would have on you. But it would be useful to hear his perspective, if that is possible.”

“I can repeat his words. They might lose a bit of inflection but they’ll be close to verbatim.”

“Excellent.” His body language became less guarded. He likes my friend more than me, and they haven’t even met yet! Rude. “Cole, do you filter your awareness from Emma?”

“Whisper it in other ears, don’t hurt her with hearing.” That was a very solid Cole impression. Well done, self.

“And when you wish to impart something?”

“Speak in a cupped palm, sounds small and shaped sent slow and serene. She hears what I don’t say.”

Solas seemed to understand the entire thought. This is marvellous. “How does she hear the unspoken, Cole?”

“Her heart hears. Puzzles out pain with patience. Love in the pieces.”

My smile turned inward for a moment.

Oh, Cole-love.

told you so

Solas watched us with… longing, I think. We only get fragments when we’re trying not to read someone.

“According to Emma, you learned how to assess people more deeply during your time in the wagon. Could you explain?”

“Yes.”

I shrugged apologetically; I could have told him that was the response he’d get.
He was unruffled. “Then please, do so.”

“Emma asks, and I search the seen, seeking the substance. Names are named, known and nearby.”

“And if the answer you seek is not in their needs?”

“Then we don’t know. We don’t delve, just sift the sand.”

Solas looked relieved. I have no idea what he was afraid of: can some spirits read minds?

“Cole, thank you for answering my questions -”

“Well. Come and sink I’ll soothe your sorrow.”

That threw him, whatever it was. “Not at this time. Emma, thank you for an excellent rendition.” I bobbed a curtsy, grinning - why do I feel the need to be constantly irreverent around him?

lockpicks through the armour shell

Oh, it’s on.

I wonder if we would have been friends before? Did I just assume we’ll become friends now? Yep, I did. I am stubborn and well-informed and I like Solas. Unless he chases me away with a broom we’re gonna be best friends, eventually.

Luckily for him he had no idea of the campaign of intimacy I was planning and kept it matter-of-fact. “A demonstration is in order, I believe.”

“Does that mean you want us to help you? Like Cole normally does? Or just read you?”

“Tell me more about when you read people.”

I was tempted to give all the justifications for our approach - my approach, really - but Solas has been an apostate for years. I was confident he understood the take-any-advantage mindset better than I did.

“I ask Cole five questions, and he sifts for the answers.”

“How does that sifting work, precisely?”

“Cole just… knows things about people. Their hurts and needs and the threads that bind them to others. Y’know?” He did. “So he just looks through all of those pieces to find the answers. It’s hard and a bit unnatural for him but we decided it was worth it.”

“I see.”

“So first, their name. Then what do they most fear… well, more accurately, it’s a list of the things they fear, in order.”

“Is that different?”

“Of course! A soldier might fear being wounded, and being discharged, and his daughter’s cough getting worse. But the order in which he fears them says a lot about him.”

“Clever.” Thanks!

“Next Cole tells me about their greatest shame. I hate it. It hurts. Good people are the worst.”
“Good people perform worse deeds?”

“It’s… less about deeds and more about perceptions. A true monster would feel no remorse, that’s one of their defining features. Good people feel the impact of their deeds much more deeply, so… the better a person the worse the shame.”

“I had not considered that, but I suspect you’re correct. I can, however, see the utility of the information.”

“Which is why I do it. Then monster status.”

“Which is?”

“A long story, but I would summarise as the worst thing they’ve ever done, plus the worst thing they do consistently.” He nodded. “And last is their current needs.”

“And with that you know someone well?”

“I think so. There are other things I’d love to know, but those five are always available.”

“What would you wish to know?”

“What they love, who they want to be. What they laugh at. Y’know, people stuff. Happy stuff. Under normal circumstances I just want to make friends and be kind to people. Cole just wants to help.”

I smiled ruefully. “Right now, however, we will settle for ‘whatever will save us from a terrible death.’ It’s a pity. Cole and I would have enjoyed meeting The Iron Bull, he’s delightful and also a surprisingly good person.”

Solas passed me a cup of water. I hadn’t even noticed my throat was dry. “Perhaps you will yet be friends.”

“Well, maybe. I’d like that. But it might be hard to get past an introduction that involved ten hours of interrogation and his worst memory. Even if we both understand it was for good reason.”

I drank my water and waited for him to get close enough to reclaim the cup. “And it’s about to happen again, isn’t it.”

He regarded me gravely. “Fortunately this isn’t our first meeting.”

My smile was triumph mixed with delight. Yeah, we’re gonna be besties.

Chapter End Notes

There are plenty of Solas romances to read, but not many friendships for some reason.

UNTIL NOW.
I’d been told to show my working, which set off a momentary blur of calculus nightmares I frankly think I’m too old for. But what that actually meant was relaying Cole’s input first and my interpretation second.

Solas looked really calm, considering he was about to be soul-read. Name.

What the Void is that, Cole?

nothing. nothing

It’s definitely something, but I’ll ignore it.

good

“Cole just whispered to me: Solas, she croons over a cradle. My pride and joy. Hints of fondness and a mild exasperation, like that’s a story you’ve heard one too many times. Your mother?” He nodded.

“Also, one quick flash of a Dalish hunter. Suspicious. Sneering. You’re standing confident, but your stomach’s sinking. ‘You may call me Griffin,’” you tell him. No extra contextualising needed there, although that maybe explains the teensy sneer I saw on you when I mentioned Clan Elvalaslin.”

A look like he’d met a friend in a foreign land. “I had forgotten that occasion until you mentioned it. Fascinating. Cole shares images, words, and emotions?”

“Physical sensations, too. All in small enough doses to be tolerable.”

“Because if the dosage is too large…?”

“I vomit,” I replied sweetly. “And collapse!”

Solas allowed that might present a logistical complication, which is what I said. Bless him. I grimaced pre-apologetically and said, “Fears.”

There it is again!

...no?

Honey, don’t fib.

“I’m sorry, this is very weird,” I said. “But every time Cole gives me an answer, I keep feeling a… a doubling. Like there are two answers but I can only see one of them. Is this a mage thing? No, wait, Gereon didn’t do it. A somniari thing?”

Solas looked perplexed. “I do not believe so. What is Cole’s opinion?”

“He’s being cagey about it. There have been a couple times he hasn’t wanted to share something with me. For my protection, I think.”
“Hmm. It is not causing you discomfort?”

“No.”

“Then I propose we continue. Perhaps the cause will become clearer.”


“How do you know?”

“No idea. I think… Cole automatically translates the imagery into my personal iconography. Lemme check.”

same but frames. why do they matter so?

“That’s a yes. Oh, your necklace is wound around the headstone. That’s how I know. So… yikes, this is where things get awkward.” I paused. All I could see was scientific curiosity.

“Dy… dying alone and being forgotten. That’s your greatest fear.” He continued to regard me with the same level gaze. “Mercy, you’re remarkable, Solas. I hope you know that.”

His brows narrowed. “I would think that is quite a common-”

“The fear probably is. How you look it at, how you look at me while I blithely uncover it? No denial, no avoidance, no punching-the-bars-and-yelling? You have already accepted it and it’s… largely immaterial if someone else finds out. D’you have the faintest idea how rare and amazing that is? Psh.”

He shifted like a galled horse and muttered thanks. Not looking forward to finding out why admiration makes him so nervous, gotta say.

“Should I keep going?” I asked gently. His yes was only 35% bravado.

“Your second fear: a cell. Darker, danker than this one. Metal marching outside. Can’t stop your hands from trembling. The worst isn’t over. The worst has just begun.” I hummed. “Seems simple enough on one level, you are an apostate. But things being worse after you’re captured? There’s something there I don’t understand. I’ll keep that loop open, see if further revelations clarify.”

“Do you have a theory?”

“Always,” I smirked. “Maybe being an era’elgar makes you uniquely vulnerable. Or valuable. Maybe you tortured a dozen Templars to death, I hear they get cranky about that kind of thing. Perhaps you have a terrible phobia of eating porridge. I won’t judge without more information.”

“If that is true, it makes you as rare and valuable as you claim I am.” I curtsied.

Dammit, now back to work. Don’t wanna. “Have you seen enough? There’s only two more fears then things really start getting awkward.”

“You wish to stop?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

He clearly thought I was dense. “Power, Emma.”
“Fuck that noise.” It’s our first obscenity, I should bake something. “I don’t want that kind of power, and even if I did, wouldn’t I prefer it to be, y’know, sneakier? How would I even have power over you if I’m telling you all about it? I… I mean-”

“Stop pacing, Emma.” When did I start doing that? “I did not intend to imply-”

“What? That I’m twirling my mustache and enjoying this? Hearing, seeing, feeling people’s hurts?” I rubbed my face. “Solas, I am trying to be pleasant. Light. Have I accidentally given you the impression that pulling out your pain while standing in a cell is something I am doing for kicks?”

You asshole! I white-knuckled the bars. “I am not a mechanism, Solas. Try not disassembling me for a moment. I am a smart person from a very tiny village who left home to expand their horizons. I have a magical talent that causes others to view me with distrust. I am quite likely to be executed because I chose to help in a crisis. Perhaps you can relate.”

Fury blazed and died in an instant, but underneath was still steel. Already I care too much to allow him to get away with this.

My shoulders and face softened, but I kept my gaze on him. Waited.

Waited some more.

He’s clearly a bit dense at times.

“This is when I apologise.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“I was, perhaps, too quick to judge you.”

I didn’t move.

“And it is possible that I am more apprehensive about having my secrets delved into than I was admitting.”

No movement, me.

“I may have provoked you in order to avoid further delving.”

I was the Avatar of Not Moving.

“That was unworthy of me.”

Doo dee doo, not a muscle.

test, trap, train

Train? Oh really.

I statued for a solid minute. He made another three non-apologies.

So I made a massive and dramatically fake yawn, walked over to my pallet, and laid down. I didn’t even turn my back. I just closed my eyes and pretended to sleep.
He stood in a long awkward silence for a time, nonplussed. Then he left.

Chapter End Notes

Emma Greatly Disapproves.

That doubled-answers thing is weird. Wonder what could possibly be causing it?
That was maybe a stupid thing to do.

  Wanna tell me about that weird doubling thing now, honey?
  
  not ever

  Alright. I’ve decided to trust you. Won’t bring it up again.
  
  safe shining surety, she sees
  
  You’re welcome, love.

We snuggled awhile.

I tried to make an assessment. How useful? How much a threat? What will the reports say, and what will she read into them? Maybe I should have played along. He just reminded me of… me, many years ago. Young Me was that exact species of dick, at times.

Young Me would have been exactly as passive-aggressive as I was, too. All my good habits vanish when I feel vulnerable. Sigh.

  yeah, this is gonna be good

Doors clanged. I stood.

“Hello, beautiful. This is an unexpected pleasure.”

  hello, The Iron Bull!

The Iron Bull swaggered in, tired and a bit drunk and smelling like… physical labour. Damnation, I could sniff him all day.

“Hey, funny thing. I’m drinking in the tavern-”

“This keep has a tavern and an underground prison complex? How big is it?”

“Well, it’s a bunch of maraas-lok under canvas with three volunteer bartenders because Flissa got religion, but still. Tavern. Anyway, it’s been a long day clearing crap out of one of the buildings so I’m at the tavern, when who drops by?”

I shrug. I legitimately have no idea.

“Solas.” What? “He tells me that the asset maybe has a problem.” Ooh, I’m an asset. No, actually, that’s Cole.

  you can be one too

  Thanks, love.

The Iron Bull continued, “‘What problem?’ I ask him.” He started to grin. “‘Me,’ he says.”
“You’re shitting me.”

“I shit you not. Didn’t tell me what happened, but he definitely looked like he was pretending he didn’t fuck something up. This is gonna be good.”

He pulled out his usual crate and got comfy. You darling provocateur, I thought affectionately.

“It wasn’t that exciting, honestly. He was treating me like a clockwork oracle, or a… a puzzle to solve. I called him on it, and he kept on going. Treating me like a non-person, trying to manipulate me. Control me. I shut his nonsense down, and of course I’ve spent the time since over-analysing whether I’m gonna regret it later. Seems like a suboptimal idea to alienate him, under the circumstances.”

“Tell me.” I shared everything non-confidential. He pondered.

“Nah, you did the right thing. You want Red to think you’re an asset, right? Get Solas to treat people better. The Herald’s off again and he took that new guy, Dorian. Only known him two weeks and they already get along better than he does with Solas.”

“So… I succeeded?”

“Too early to tell. But him coming to me’s a good sign.” Seems fair. Good. Great.

“Speaking of… how are you, beautiful?”

“After you and Cole did your thing? Yeah, good. I went and got drunk. Would have found someone to tie me up and beat me for a while, but no-one ‘round here does that. I improvised.”

He was perfectly matter-of-fact. Did he want me to ask?

you should. definitely

“So what did you d-do instead?” I don’t even know why I’m stammering. There’s just… something about him right now.

His hand drifted past his crotch. Not an accidental gesture. “Found a quiet spot. Used to be a smithy, I think. Stroked myself there. Rough.” I froze. I could see it: that hand on that cock, gripping hard. Bellows puffing. His hips starting to move with the rhythm. Why is my chest heaving so much when I can’t breathe?

“A while in, started imagining little hands on my shoulder, cheek against mine. Nipples trailing on my back. ‘That’s it, beautiful,’ in my ear. Came so loud the guards rushed in.”

Ohhh, mercy. Ohhh, he’s not even lying. I’ve had lovers who did less for me in an hour than he just did with a couple dozen well-chosen words.

He gave me the space to enjoy it. I was warm from my knees to my neck and that slow thud started in my groin. Oh, it’s been so long.

I smiled and opened my eyes - when did I close them? - then took a breath and felt the movement in every part of my body. Well, these smalls are a write-off, that’s for sure.

“Thank you, beautiful,” I said. “That was… mmm. Unexpected.”

He smirked. “It’s been a long couple weeks, thought you might like some inspiration when you’re taking the edge off.”
Throb, throb. “Lovely thought. But I don’t even get to pee in privacy, there are always guards.”

His eye watched, observing all, judging nothing. “There’s no guard here now.”

Maker have mercy.

Did he just?

Yes. Oh. He did. He really did.

I tried to re-route some blood back into my brain. “Wah-wah-what about Cole?”

“What about him?”

“He’ll be quiet, buh-but he’s still here. And, and I know that you…”

“Don’t like demons, yeah. But you say he isn’t one. He stays quiet, it’s not a problem.” He was still perfectly ordinary, like we were discussing the best path to the bakery. I couldn’t stop looking at those hands.

“Why.”

He read me and his voice softened. “You worried this is pity? Some kind of Ben-Hassrath trick?” I nodded, sad. “Nothing like that. I just want to hear you moan.”

Maker’s fucking mercy good fucking grief. This is a terrible idea and I do not care even a little bit.

“Please. Oh please yes.”

Chapter End Notes

I just re-read this while I do some tidying up, and I grinned the entire time. I love all these darlings.
“Been a long while, I think.” I grimaced a yes. “But I can tell you know how to ask for what you want.”

Breasts heaving, I stared at him. “Will you give me what I want, or what I need?”

He rumbled a surprised laugh. “It’s weird how well you know me. I’m guessing—” at this point his voice was subterranean and oh gracious fuck it did such things to me “—that what you need would take more time and less bars.”

Vivid images flashed: against a wall, astride a chair, on a bed, over a table… I groaned agreement and his nostrils flared.

He said, “So tell me what you want.”

“You already know, beautiful.”

“Yeah, but I want to hear you say it.”

I said the words in my bestest sultry voice, the one that was less flawless than my second-best one, but much, much sexier. It was breathy and it caught on my teeth and it has never been unappreciated.

“First, The Iron Bull, I want clean water.” I showed him the underside of my wrists, my palms, my fingers. “I want my hands clean before I touch myself. Or you.”

Ah, Mentor, you darling man. Thank you again for all you taught me.

Everything safe, Cole-love?

kindness and keep the bars at bay

Good. And now…

I’ll be quiet, like I promised

I thanked him and turned all my attention to the incredibly arousing man returning with a full bucket.

“There’s no keys, The Iron Bull, and the bucket won’t fit through the meal slot.” I languorously extended my arms through the aforementioned gap. “I want you to wash my hands, please.”

Suds sloshed, scrubbed and scraped off the muck. Then clever calloused fingers explored the dimensions of my fingers, the curve of my palm. Massaged away tensions I didn’t even know I had. I sighed blissfully. “Thank you, beautiful.”

“My pleasure.” Devastating, low and sincere. My toes curled.
“I would love to linger, savour every. Single. Second.” I drew out every sibilant and his jaw clenched. It triggered a matching clench in my quim. “I want to take a long, long time. But we both know we could be interrupted at any time. If I get out of here, I want you for, ohh, hours. Maybe days. I want you to fuck me until I walk bowlegged and I can’t stop grinning. I want to give you everything, except for what I allow you to take.”

He growled appreciatively. “But right now… I’m already so ready it’s a little ridiculous. How much of your arm will fit through the bars?” As I feared, barely past his wrist. Better than nothing. “I want your hands on my breasts, please.”

Instantly, there was a warmth on the side of my ribs and two thumbs rhythmically stroking the sides of my breasts, getting close but never quite reaching my nipples. I whined. My head rolled back.

I reached my much-smaller arms through the bars, to the elbows. “May I touch you, beautiful? I want to.”

“Yeah. I’d like that.” With absolutely zero self-consciousness, he moved to his knees. He was still slightly taller than me, even so.

I ran my hands over his chest. “Scarred and muscular and firm. Just as warm as I thought you’d be. You are so so beautiful.” I touched every part within my range of motion.

“I like it when you call me that.” His appreciation was evident. Except for giving my nipples any stimulation whatsoever, he clearly liked a lot of things.

“Because you know I mean it. Mercy I want you inside me.” That was rewarded with a pinch on my nipples. I moaned again, louder.

Fuck it. I took a step back and threw off my shapeless convict gown. Shoes. Discarded the much-abused smallclothes. For one moment I tensed. He won’t, but if he does…

“Shit, your ass is even better than I imagined,” he said. Even better. Than he… I bit my lip, hard. Sound carries too well up those stairs.


I rested one hand on his massive chest, clenched a bar with the other. Tried to stay upright while my legs lost the directions. Tried to capture every sensation as one calloused finger slowly and rhythmically pumped in and out of me, and one scarred thumb rubbed my pearl at the same deliberate pace. The other hand firmly held my hip.

Warm. Warm. Warm hands on me, warm breath ruffling my hair. But more, so much more. Warm regard. The warmth of arousal. He pleasured himself and imagined me. He wants me. Right now, I can watch the erection tent his breeches. Mine. That’s for me. It’s that simple. He wants me, and oh mercy it feels so so good.

My hand slid down his chest to the bulge beneath. He groaned, growled.

I love this man. It’s the one thing I cannot say. I love this fascinating, scarred, complicated man and if I tell him so he’ll stop flicking his nail along my clitoris and I will die.

Love has a thousand tongues, fool. I palmed his cock, heavy and erect but not yet straining. The fabric of his breeches was coarse; it scratched my palm pleasantly. I mimicked his rhythm, slow and deliberate. From his balls upward until his cock reared under my hand. Then back to the base and again.

“Yeah,” he breathed.

“Just like this?” He nodded. I firmed my hand a little and oh yes, he liked that.

“I’d bite your shoulder if I could,” I babbled. “So you could feel me moan into your skin. Should I continue?”

“Fuck yes. You have a great mouth.”

“I want another finger inside me. I- ohhh, yes, that’s good. How many would I need before I was ready for you?” I weighed him deliberately as I ran my hand up. “Is this enough? One more? Mmm. And your length… I’m pretty sure I could suck you from this side of the bars. I’m tempted to try.”

The other hand moved from my hip to my breast, circling, circling. I keened. Moved my hand until it was holding as much of him as I could manage through the fabric. We rocked together until I started to rut against his hand. “More, I need more.”

“Patience, kitten.” A third massive finger played around my entrance. My head rolled back and I made a high wordless noise. “Let go of me for a bit. You’ll need both hands to stay upright.”

I squeezed the now-very-hard erection one last time then obediently let go and held the bar. Three, three is a lot on a hand that size. I hope he knows what he’s dooo-ooh-

I bit my cheek to muffle my whimper. So full, so full, mercy, yes, oh-

“Yeah, that’s it, kitten. That’s what you want. Take it, take it.”

I took it.

I moaned. I cursed. I wailed.

After an unmeasurable eternity of overwhelming fullness, of almost unbearable pressure, I was relaxing around the girth. I groaned in pleasure.

“Good, kitten. Good. Hot like that, full of my hand. You moan even better than I imagined.” He growled: “Now, I’m gonna hear you scream.”

I couldn’t tell you what exactly he did. The rhythm didn’t seem to change, there just seemed to be more of it. I was howling too intently against my bicep to pay much attention.

Building, building, relentless and unstoppable, a climax inexorably bore down on me. I locked my arms in place; my legs had given up all pretense of usefullness.

Muffled, I begged. “Oh, oh yes please, mon cher, puh-puh-lease I need it oh yes so close I’m so close how are you so oh. Oh. OH!”

I came so hard I saw stars in foreign galaxies. My legs would have given way entirely except for the considerable fulcrum provided by The Iron Bull’s hand.
The Iron Bull gentled me through one long aftershock and slowly withdrew. Red marks painted his forearms. Personally, I’d bitten the flesh of my bicep so hard it left impressions. I panted like I’d just run a foot-race and grinned like the surprise winner.

He held up his very damp hand; I shuddered just on reflex.

“May I?”

“Of course.”

He licked his hand clean. Slowly. Thoughtfully. I stood naked at the bars and memorised every bit of it.

“Et toi?”

“What about me?”

“Is there anything you want?” I asked, big-eyed and flushed. Please say yes. As soon as I remember how my limbs work I’ll be ready to deliver.

“Yeah, I want plenty. But the dinner shift will be here in about a minute and a half.”

“What?!!” I lunged toward my breast-band and my robe as The Iron Bull bellowed laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I did writing it. *fans self briskly*

I’m pretty proud of it, for my first smut.
Familiar metal noises from up the stairs. C’mon, fingers, please please stop trembling, we can’t be naked when they get here.

I had a sudden inspiration. Threw my robe over my head, bunched my underclothes in one fist, and went to the corner. By the time the guard arrived I was peeing in the bucket, red sweaty face toward the wall.

Hey, Cole. You okay, love?

His response had me biting the insides of my cheeks to keep my laughter silent. Hopefully the guard would take my shaking for some sort of ague? Mercy, my hair’s probably a mess.

Behind me I could hear The Iron Bull, genial and relaxed. You fucker. He was convincing the guard to bring down an extra meal for him. “Yeah, I’ll be here a while,” he said. You are forgiven, darling heart.

Clang, clang. I turned around to find a bowl of pease porridge, a hunk of rye bread, a mug of water, and one grinning Ben-Hassrath. “What was so funny?” he asked.

I giggled. “I checked in on Cole. He’s… cascading down the rapids of epiphany right now. One rising series of ‘ohh’ noises.” I laughed louder. “My little heart. He does want to thank you.”

The Iron Bull looked wary. “For what?”

“Raw or translated?”

“Shit, I’m curious. Raw.”

“Langorous, lovely, belovéd. Sated and secured. She gives more when she takes.”

“Assuming that actually means what I think it does… you’re welcome.”

I winked. “By the way… kitten?!?” I wrinkled my nose. “Really?”

“Yeah! You’re soft and you purr and shit. It’s great!”

“It also means I’m completely harmless!”

“Yeah, well, you are.”

“Nuh-uh!”

“Yeah. You are.” I glared at him and he just laughed. “See? You’re cute! Even your glare is cute.”

Pouting wouldn’t help my case, so I gave up and ate my dinner. About as tasty as you’d expect mush to be, but I persevered. (Optimistically, I hoped I’d need the strength.)

About halfway through, the guard returned with another pease porridge and rye bread, but this time with a mug of ale. “Tapster’s compliments, serah.”
“Nice!” said The Iron Bull.

I finished my plate and the the guard left with it. I asked cheerfully, “So how many of the bartenders fancy you?”

“One of them is definitely interested,” he replied with equal cheer. “For the rest? Not sure yet. Been working my way through the laundry-maids first.”

“Laundry maids? Why?”

“Chapped hands. Adds a nice friction.” Huh, I would never have thought of that.

I watched him start in on his bread. “I’m seventeen,” I said, deliberately.

“Shit. Dinner and a show? Today is a good day.”

I smiled, lowered my eyes. “I’ve had one lover, a terrible adolescent fumble that left me with questions like Did we do it right? and Why do people enjoy this?” He groaned sympathetically. “I know. Miserable.

“The Merchant’s Guild rep has arrived for the regular contract negotiations. Nephew of the deshyr, or something. I’m told to bring in tea, keep him company while my boss fetches the old ledgers.

“He’s… exactly what you’d expect. Fancy braided beard with runic clasps. Signet ring. Strands of grey in his hair. Big bluff hands. ‘Sit down, keep me company?’ I sit, pour tea, company manners ready. I’m expecting ten minutes of polite nothing.

“Instead, he charms me. Slowly. Deliberately. Intensely. He asks me questions, listens closely, responds thoughtfully. He gives me his full. And undivided. Attention.

“I’ve never experienced anything remotely like it. I am a deepfish in the torchlight, dazed and giddy and gasping.”

The Iron Bull had vanished his food and was now watching with an unmoving intensity of his own. I shifted my thighs a little.

“I feel self-conscious, but never unsafe. Then he says it.” I drew out the moment until The Iron Bull fidgeted, just a tiny amount. “He says, ‘Two more meetings here, then I will have seventeen hours to spend until I get back in the carriage. I want to spend that time showing you a variety of sexual pleasure.’

“My breath stops. Possibly I stammer. ‘If you want me to, join me at the side door in two candles.’ I stumble out, flushed to the eyebrows.”

“Damn.”

“Absolutely. I am full of sensations I have no words for. I am dizzy and my mind’s whirling. My body says Yessss and my mind says This is how girls like us get murdered. Annabel finds me - she’s older, a surrogate aunt. I trust her.

“She says, ‘Did he proposition you?’ I nod and she says, ‘You gotta say yes.’

“I say What and she tells me that he…” I laughed, throatily. “I hear that he likes inexperienced girls. Nowadays, I would say she’s hinting a… little more broadly, gender-wise. Either way, he’s been a rite of passage for a number of my colleagues.” I mimicked Annabel’s high-pitched voice. “‘Jandah
decided she wasn’t ready for sex yet and so they talked about ornamental carp all night. Seriously. Go.’

“I can’t argue with that. I meet him at the southern door.” I stopped talking, lost in memory. I shifted my thighs again. I hummed, stroked my neck absently.

The Iron Bull’s lips had gotten dry for some reason. He drank the entire mug in one swift pull and cracked his neck. “I want to hear what happens next.”

“Mmm. Next we have tea with his landlady.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“It’s brilliant. We chat about the tides and eat sugar cookies. I stop picking at my nails. I feel comfortable. She packs up the cups and casually adds, ‘Don’t worry, love. My room’s at the front. Make as much noise as you like.’ Then she pinches his cheek and leaves.”

The Iron Bull was chuckling now, respecting an artist at work. He had lost that intense focused look in favour of one more relaxed.

wrong wrong ring the bells

What the fuck?

Then The Iron Bull fell bonelessly sideways.

What the fuck?!?

Chapter End Notes

In case you haven’t gotten the memo, I have gone mad with power. Expect shenanigans.
I yelled out to the guards. My words echoed up the stairs but no-one responded.

It’s time. Grab the asset, disable all guards. Cut the big guy’s throat.

Oh shit! When are they coming, love?

…

Now.

To the right, from behind the big wooden door that lead to rushing water noises, I heard a thump.

What do we do? We can’t let them kill him!

He’s our friend!

Cole and I shrieked a moment then slapped each other out of panic.

Focus, focus. Bang. Okay, what do we know? Bad people are coming to grab us. They will kill The Iron Bull. No guards are coming. We’re locked in a cage and the keys are in a different room. We can’t protect him from in here.

Between and beyond, barriers banished.

Oh.

Oh no.

But the alternative.

You’re right. It’s the only way.

He said-

I know! But we’re us. What do you think?

Can. Must. Will.

Then do it. Oh Maker. Do it.

Cole possessed me.

He left me in a strange construct like a hay bale mixed with a theatre stall. I could watch. He could hear me.

I couldn’t do anything else.

Cole moved the third and fourth fingers of my left hand. Curl, curl. He wriggled my ears. He ran the arch of one foot down my opposite calf. He slapped my face, briskly. He flexed one buttock.
And then he Fade-stepped me out of the cell.

I watched as agony was ripped from every part of my body. He screamed with my voice until breath ran out, whooped it back in, and screamed again.

My ears heard the pounding on the outside of the wooden door grow more urgent.

Cole, still screaming, used my hands to pull a backup dagger out of The Iron Bull’s boot. My hands dropped it twice, once nicking a hole in the breeches. He kept it in the left.

   I’m right-handed, Cole!
   you are. I’m not

Still my voice screamed. Every inch of me hurt. My *insides* hurt. My *hair* hurt. It’d be nice if that stopped by the time I had to feel it in the first person.

The hinges bent. I watched Cole move me to the side of the door, screams finally reducing to a low panting. The upper hinge snapped. Cole wiped tears out of my eyes. The lower hinge snapped.

The door thunked to the cobbles, and they came.

One human, one elf. Both female. I could see perceptions stream into Cole but caught none of them. He clenched my right hand into an involuntary fist. Bad people. I could read his anger on my skin. These are bad people, and Cole will stop them.

Cole swung the dagger in one mellifluous arc. Cut the human’s throat before she knew what had happened. Blood splashed, shockingly hot on my arm.

The elf was fast. She shoved her dying ally aside and leapt over to us, knife slicing. Cole pinwheeled my still-aching body out of harm. He barged her with my shoulder, and then the real fight began.

Cole wielded me with ruthless precision. Sucked air into my burning lungs. Denied the stitch and the pain in my wrist. Bent and stretched and shoved me in a dozen new forms. Sprained my knee, ignored it. Banged me into bars. Paid no attention to the fine cuts opening on my forearms and across my knuckles. The whole time my voice moaned in obscene parallel with earlier.

In one last thrust, he shoved the dagger up under the elf’s ribs and twisted it viciously. Blood gushed over my hands, splashed up on my face. Cole tasted it in my mouth, spat.

He ran my hands over the corpses, looking for anything useful. Anything he could help people with. Took it all, wrapped it indifferently in my soiled smalls. He turned my body toward the broken door. Ropes, he suspected. That will be hard.

   Cole?

He stopped. Tilted my head.

   Cole, honey?

He trembled, troubled.

   Cole-love. Cole. Please give me back now.

He stared at my bloodied hands. I could do so much more this way.
Cole. You promised.

He did, he remembered. But this was more important.

Cole. Remember what happened last time.

Shuddering, Cole keened. Outside and then only inside and I was in my miserable body and a boy was sobbing hysterically in my head.

Honey, shh. Help me now. We need to move.

I opened my left hand. The knife bounced and nearly sliced me. Oh mercy, everything hurt. Everything. Through inconsolable tears, Cole tried to sing the lullaby.

My right foot weighed as much as a fishing barge with a big catch. I forced it along the ground, leaving bloodied smears. Cole still wept.

Oh honey. I understand. I -

I stumbled and fell. New bruises, I guess. Too hard to get back up. I pushed my lacerated forearms out and used them to drag my complaining meat behind.

traitor, terror, trouble. you should never -

Cole-love. Please. Be brave now. I need you.

He tried, so very hard, to stop sobbing. I made it to the uncomfortably supine form of The Iron Bull. Pleasepleaseplease…

A pulse! Strong and steady. Oh thank mercy for that. Clumsily, I used one leg to drag the half-full water bucket close enough to put my hand in and slosh around.

I don’t really remember what happened after that point.

Chapter End Notes

Hope ya'll like this - a lot of firsts in these chapters!

I don't think I've mentioned this before, but with any NPC I figure out their role first (impatient merchant, sneaky kidnapper) then use my trusty d20 to randomise gender, race, nationality and (as needed) sexual identity. Only exception is stuff like all Templars must be human, all Revered Mothers are female, etc. This makes for a whole bunch of outcomes I wouldn't have created, and is much more interesting, I think.
I was walking down the beach in Tanner’s Creek. The sun was shining but the bruised clouds over the water promised a thunderstorm later. I was wearing a shirtwaist dress and no shoes, feeling the grains under my toes.

Around the bend, Solas and Cole were talking intently over a tea party.

I sprinted up. I’m shorter than Cole, but I am only five years old, after all. I hugged his waist. Cole’s eyes were still red. “Don’t cry, honey,” I told him. “I understand, really I do.” He smiled back, uncertain. I stood on tiptoe to pat his shoulder. We sat down at the tea-table, hand in hand.

“How, Solas. It’s… confusing to see you?” He drank blueberry juice and did not answer.

“I found him,” Cole said. “I couldn’t find you. Whirled, wandering, wisp across the screaming sands sighing, scrambled. I was very frightened.”

“What happened?”

Solas said, “A non-mage used a considerable amount of magic. It is astonishing you survived the experience.” Ah. Yeah. Whoops? “But of more concern is what happens next, I fear.”

I remembered passing out in a pool of blood next to The Iron Bull. There are probably going to be consequences for that. I did kill two people, after a-

the sky sure is cloudy and swoopy and far far down a tunnel isn-

Someone slapped my face. Solas. Solas slapped my face! “Time is short. You cannot afford to swoon, Emma.”

“Mea culpa. It’s just I never killed anyone before and-” I hiccupped, choked. With one sun-browned, chubby little hand, I slapped my own face.

Cole held me, hat hiding us. My eyes burned but I didn’t cry. Couldn’t. If I started I might never stop. He hummed quietly and rocked me until I got hold of myself again. The wind threw sand against my legs.

I squeezed in against Cole and picked up my teacup. It was made of intricately folded leaves and willowbark; Hah’ren Lestalin taught us how. Oh, I must be six years old then.

I looked at Solas. “Hello, Solas. It’s very kind of you to be here. Thank you.” I hid my heart behind formality and hoped he didn’t misinterpret.

He regarded me intently then replied with the same neutral courtesy, “I am glad to help. Cole told me everything-”

Ooh, I hope not.

“And I have advice, if you wish to hear it.”

“Please.”
“You will be questioned. Thoroughly. To survive: Find out what they know. Decide on what you wish to conceal. Concoct a story that fits. Do not deviate from the story, no matter what.”

“But… won’t you come get me? Intervene? **Something**?”

“I…” He shifted. “After our conversation, I was… restless. I volunteered to accompany a supply caravan. As soon as I reach an outpost I will obtain a mount and return, but that will take some time.”

“How much time?”

“Hours. At least six.” My stomach ran off to join the circus. The waves had grown grey and choppy. “Perhaps Iron Bull will regain consciousness before then. Many fast-acting paralytics wear off quickly. But you must prepare for the possibility that you will be…”

My eyes widened. I said quickly, “Find what they know. Decide on what to hide. Make up something that fits. Stick with it. Right?”

“Yes.” He watched me with grave kindness. “One last thing: if you can’t tell the truth, tell a truth.”

“I am not looking forward to finding out how you know all this,” I said.

And then the storm blew in.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, readers. I love you all.
In So Much Trouble

Chapter Notes

TW: minor physical and psychological mistreatment. No gore, nothing intense.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I came to as they tied my ankle to a very solid chair. Templars, plural. None I recognised. All three against the wall, hands on hilts, radiating readiness.

Two questioners? No, only one. They’ll be the one who knows the most. They stepped around from checking my restraints and I saw…

Oh no. Oh pala adahl’en. It was Gardener. My interrogator was Gardener. Oh this is so bad.

all we have to do is stall. he’ll come

Quick, get it over with.

Flash, flash, flash: Gardener steps over the human corpse, evaluates the angle. Kicks at The Iron Bull curiously as the guards come to carry him to the healers. Picks up my stained smalls, sniffs them, grins vilely. Rattles the door to my cell. Peers at my defensive wounds. Looks at ropes slung over the waterfall edge.

“She’s seizing!” I heard someone yell, far away. My body arched in an extraordinarily painful manner against the ropes. I slumped and drooled. Someone bellowed for an apothecary. I tried very hard to think.

Good job, Cole-love. We know what they know.

Cole felt very proud. I could imagine the editing required to give me the necessary intel without making me want to peel my own skin off in disgust.

What do we want to hide? First, simple: too many templars. Rank-and-file. Gossipers. The Inquisition already has enough diplomatic problems with the glowy elf; they can’t afford to let a rumoured abomination live. Not one word about Cole.

what else?

If it gets out that The Iron Bull touched me, he’ll be in the fire. Security failures can’t be tolerated. So not that, either.

I told Solas

Did you. Awkward. But okay.

anything else?

I went through the mental list.

I hope not. We just need to stall. You know your part?
He did.

As I sagged in my chair I thought of a story that required only three lies. It was the best I could manage on short notice. The apothecary pulled up my eyelid - gah - checked my fingernails, a few other niceties. Pronounced me fit enough.

Stall. All I have to do is -

Gardener slapped me. Against the backdrop of the many and varied indignities I’d suffered tonight that was small potatoes, physically. That wasn’t the bad part.

I knew there was something with you, bitch. gonna find every single secret. you’re gonna scream until your throat bursts

Oh no. Talk, talk. He’ll stop if you talk, I reminded myself. But I couldn’t make words. I couldn’t even make noises. *He was in my head.*

...cut him into pieces. bury the pieces. go and jump on them?

Cole accompanied this with an image of him awkwardly jumping up and down on a patch of freshly turned earth. I giggled weakly and the block was broken.

“Wha- What do you want to know.” Say each word as slowly as possible. Stall. *Stall.*

Shit a boat. I forgot that Gardener, in addition to being an exemplar of moral fuckery, is a competent agent. He registered my attempt to slow the proceedings, and - fenedhis - how much I recoiled from his touch. He brushed my cheek, slowly.

you’ll look so fine covered in my handprints

I gagged. Cole tried not to transmit but the skin contact was too much for him to shield. Gardener’s mental voice was repugnant; every thought covered in slime.

We can’t even let Cole possess me ‘cos another attempt with Fade-stepping will outright kill us and oh of course there are three templars nearby and they would smite me into a fine powder if Cole so much as winks at them, we are tied to a chair in a different subterranean dungeon with a very bad man and my family won’t even be able to claim my corpse not that they’ll want what’s left of me it’s happening the worst is happening we’re gonna die and it’s gonna be so awful -

good. keep sobbing

?

he’s not touching us anymore. he thinks he broke you

You mean he didn’t?

Cole held me and encouraged me to have a breakdown. I obliged.

now. when he thinks you have nothing left

But I have you. Ha.

tell. don’t deviate

I’ll try.

I told the tale bare bones, the first time. Being interrogated by The Iron Bull. He collapses. Guards don’t come. Door broken down. Two intruders, never met them. They’ve come to take me away. I break free, grab a dagger from The Iron Bull’s boot. We fight. Somehow I win.

With some careful (and casually-delivered) wording, I didn’t even have to lie. That wouldn’t last. I hope Solas is a good horseman.

Then, the questioning truly began. If I showed signs of regaining my composure, he took it away. I bit my lip until it bled the fourth time his thoughts touched mine. Unclean, unclean. Oh mercy.

“What were you doing when the oxman collapsed?” Just talking.

“How many hits did it take for them to break the door?” A dozen or so.

“How’d they unlock your cell?” I didn’t see them do it. (Not the truth. A truth. Thank you, Solas.)

“Why were your smalls off?” I took them off, earlier.

“Why?” I’d soiled them.

“How?” With my juices.

“Were you alone when that happened?” No.

“Who was in your cell?” No-one who wasn’t supposed to be there. (I got slapped for that one. GAH.)

“Who was in your cell?” Exactly who you’d think!

“Iron Bull!” No.

“Any other guard?” No.

“Any other person?” All you see here, Gardener.

He slapped me again. My mouth filled up with spit and revulsion.

I can’t say *Just me* because you were there, but he keeps seeing through my evasions! What do I do?

flip

“Any other person?” No extra people! Just me and the thoughts in my head, alright?

“So you were rubbing one out?” I was having a delightful time, thanks.

“Alone?” No, I haven’t been left alone in days.

“So you had an audience?” Yes.

“Who?” The Iron Bull. He seemed to enjoy the show.

“You fucked yourself in front of him?” I climaxed so hard I nearly fell over.
“Who were the intruders?” I have no idea.

“Why were they there?” I think to capture me.

“Why?” I could only guess.

“Guess then.” Maybe they thought I was valuable?

“What did you slip into the oxman’s beer?” Nothing!

“What did your confederates slip into his beer?” They weren’t my confederates!

“How’d they let you out?” I never saw it happen.

“Why not?” I really wasn’t in my right mind at the time.

“How’d you know about the boot dagger?” I didn’t. Lucky it was there.

“Where’d you learn to fight like that?” I’ve never learnt.

“You cut the first bitch’s throat.” It felt like it was all happening miles away.

“Then you fought the second?” It all happened in a blur.

“There’s no way you fought that well without training.” There weren’t many other options.

“Why’d you grab their valuables?” I was in a fugue.

… and on, and on, and on. Tell me again, this time in detail. I lost count of the number of technical truths I told. He hammered me until I was too exhausted to lie well.

“Why was the human bitch facing toward you when you cut her throat?” Because I was -

she toddles toward me, face serious. daaaaa. grabs my lower lip as I pick her up. I’ll come home as soon as I can, buttercup

Sun on the daisies and the smell of kitchen herbs accompanied me as I had another seizure. Oh great, this time I pissed myself a bit. I flopped, completely wrung out. My vision greyed a bit and I let it.

Goojob, Coblub.

A vial of sal volatile under my nostrils brought everything back into sharp focus. Reprieve over, time to dance again.

Chapter End Notes

Yet another hard to write chapter! Hope it worked out okay.

"pala adahl’en" means "go fuck a forest", btw, and is an excellent insult in any language.
Can’t Get Worse. I Hope.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I really wanted to blow my nose.

I mean, I had one definitely sprained knee, an icky taste in the back of my throat from the sal volatile, a vicious set of abrasions and edema from the restraints, trembling complaints from every muscle, a larynx blown out by screaming, a split lip, a collection of handprints, cuts and bruises over every inch of me, a rapidly building backlog of psychic torture, plus a terrible all-body agony hangover from Cole’s magic.

But my nose was really bugging me.

I’ve become very strange, I thought absently. I wonder how long I’ve been here. I’ve had seven seizures. No, eight. Passed out five times. I hope Solas is okay. What if he fell off his horse, bashed his brains on a rock? That would be -

Someone pulled my hair backward and put a waterskin to my mouth. Does this taste medicinal? I drank deep.

- very bad. But maybe he just doesn’t really care about me. Maybe he’s taking his time. Stopped to make some sketches. Maybe I’ll die here. Cut her throat in one long arc. I wonder what happened to my belongings. That feather pillow and the big duvet. Cold mornings when I don’t have to get up yet.

Someone shook my shoulder.

grace, like her mother. she let us go


“She Nightingale,” I rasped. Why dear, we must stop meeting like this. “Herlo.”

She eyed me neutrally while the guards trooped out. (Bye, Gardener, hope you get sepsis and die!)

Once they were gone, she knelt and efficiently untied my wrists.

I yelped at the sudden blood flow then took my chance to blow my nose. On my skirt, elegance be damned. I blew and blew unsuccessfully for a long minute, then blarp! I honked out one huge bloody thing. Bloodied phlegm? A massive clot? I was riveted.

It… probably wasn’t the right time for this.

I chafed my wrists gently, stretched out a little. Oh Maker ow. I was afraid to make eye contact. We’d run the gauntlet, but there might be a headsman’s axe at the end.

“I am impressed,” she said. “I am so rarely impressed. Every time you come close to telling the truth, you pass out or convulse. Cole’s work, yes?”

No point in lying. I nodded.

“So how did you escape the cell?” I gave her the précis. My voice ached.
“As Solas informed me, then.” She untied my ankles. “I apologise for the length of the questioning. It is one thing to know that you can protect a secret. Quite another to find out what lengths you will go to for it.”

That makes sense, in a cold way.

the girl weeps at the woman’s hands. once there was a rose. once we were clean enough.

Oh, damn it. I didn’t want to sympathise with her. It was easier when she was the boogeyman.

easier for who?

_Double damn it._

Suddenly I could see it all from her perspective, and… oh. Put us in a wagon, then a cell. With a blanket! Sent two sympathetic and self-disciplined questioners, one of them an apostate of all things. Okay, Gardener was monster-adjacent, but he’d clearly been given orders to inflict no permanent harm. I’d done more damage to myself straining against the bonds when I convulsed.

She treated us kindly as she could, didn’t she.

The Nightingale vanished and Leliana remained. Petite, reed-tough, and grieving. Remnants of a sweet heart hidden behind the chain mail. _Lady J loves her._ That really should have been a clue, self.

“You had t’know.” I said simply. She read the understanding and sympathy off my face and stilled, searching for hidden anger, danger, lies. When she didn’t find any she stilled further.

I do not deserve. compassion, indeed

I smiled tiredly at her. My voice wasn’t up to arguing at present. Or my brain, let’s be honest.

“How happens now?”

She paced for a minute, thoughtful. Seemed to come to a decision.

“I have an idea. Do you know what it is?” she asked. I said no; we were both far too tired to figure it out.

“Cole,” she said. “Have you ever considered working for the Inquisition?”

I started to laugh.

Chapter End Notes

Leliana is a fascinating character. Hard to write accurate dialogue for, though - most of her character is shown in infection rather than word choice.
An hour later, I watched with the detachment of the deeply medicated as Healer Constance cleaned the dirt out of my new anklets. Magic had closed the cuts and reduced the swelling in my knee, but that was about all. I didn’t know whether that was due to the limits of the healing, or an after-effect of pulling a magical trick out of a non-magical me.

“Will they scar?” I asked.

She looked me in the eye. “Yes.”

Damn. I’ve never been gorgeous, but I had very smooth skin. People liked to touch it. I liked to touch it.

“I’ve mixed you an unguent. It’ll help.” Constance was a flint-souled battleaxe who’d mended too many broken toys to be gentle, but she was still an excellent healer. I slurred my gratitude.

She was mid-way through cleaning out my matching bracelets when I heard a cyclone on its way. No, wait, a cyclone requires a high-pressure and a low-pressure system, doesn’t it? Neither of the approaching two were the latter.

Why are they so pissed at each other?

the Qun

Oh. Yeah, that’d make sense.

The Iron Bull and Solas walked into the tent and stopped dead. I could imagine why - I’d spent some time fascinated by the contrast between the crisp white sheets and the filthy, bloodied, bruised flesh they covered. Not one inch of me was unmarred.


Don’t turn away, please.

who did this? neither deserve. break those fingers. my fault? she’s trying to smile, pretend all is well. that’s fucking heartbreaking

Aww, pity? Nooo. I don’t want them to pity me.

darkness deceives. praise the sun

Healer Constance glared at the two interlopers. “Nightingale says you’re expected,” she said to Solas, “but I got no orders about you,” this part spat at The Iron Bull. “You going to be a problem?”

“No ma’am,” he said obediently.

“Fine. Let me finish this. Sit your asses down.” They sat as directed. I grinned a little.

I tried to joke, “Hey, don’t worry, it’s worse than it looks!” but started coughing instead. Felt like knives in my throat.
“Well, that’s it, stop talking now. I’ll get a potion for it once I finish.” I nodded, tried not to hiss as she put unguent on a particularly tender strip. She sternly reminded me not to talk before she left.

As soon as the tent flap closed, The Iron Bull said, “I woke up with a pounding headache an hour ago and no-one would tell me shit. Found Chuckles stalking over here. What the fuck happened?”

Solas snapped, “What happened was that Emma allowed Cole to possess her. They escaped their cell by means of wildly dangerous magic that very nearly killed them both. Cole then fought both kidnappers—”

“Wait,” The Iron Bull said. “Why did you have to escape? Kidnappers usually carry incapacitating weapons. You could have held off until they opened the cell door, then bam!”

“Because of you, you fool! Cole said they were both certain that the intruders would have cut your throat first. They agreed that they wanted to save your life, for reasons which temporarily elude me.”

I gave Solas a level look. He made an exasperated noise and subsided, moving over to inspect my swollen knee.

The Iron Bull stood, horns brushing the canvas. He gently picked up my hand. “You and Cole risked your lives. For me.”

I smiled, saluted. Pointed to his eyepatch then us. *Learned it from the best.*

He said quietly, “Thanks.” I put my other hand over his and we stayed there for a bit.

He looked me up and down. “How long did the fight go for? Some of these are hours old.”

Solas made another angry noise.

Is he mad at us, Cole-love?

for us

Awww.

“I believe Emma and Cole have spent the last nine hours being interrogated by Sister Nightingale’s agents.” I nodded, a bit stunned. Nine hours? Fenedhis. We are so awesome.

Now it was The Iron Bull’s turn to look enraged. “What did they do to you.”

I smiled reassuringly. Mimed slapping myself, followed with loud talky gesture.

The Iron Bull looked at my wrists. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

I shook my head. Pointed two fingers at myself. He said, “*You* did this? What the fuck for?”

Solas looked rueful, maybe a little sheepish. “Ah.” I nodded. “I advised Cole and Emma to decide on what secrets they needed to keep. Clearly they found a unique method to accomplish that goal.”

My turn to look sheepish. I shrugged: whaddaya gonna do? Solas shook his head and sighed deeply. The Iron Bull started to grin.

“Shit, that’s bad-ass! Didn’t think you had it in you!” He totally would have slapped my shoulder companionably if I wasn’t already thoroughly pre-slapped. As it was, we fist-bumped.
Healer Constance came back in with a vial that smelt like a bouquet’s drunk uncle. I have to drink that? “And you’re done. Shoo.” The Iron Bull ruffled my hair and said he’d come visit tomorrow.

If…

He picked up on my fear and clearly wanted to ask, but Constance was physically shoving him out of the tent. (Impressive.)

She unstoppered the flask and held it to my lips. I drank and swallowed gratefully, then cleared my throat a dozen times. Oh, so good. I sang an E above middle C experimentally and it was fine.

“That’s as good as we’re going to get for now,” she said. “Once you’re done with whatever this is and you’ve had some sleep, I’ll be able to clean you off properly.”

She looked resigned. She didn’t know what was going on, but she knew enough.

“Yes, Constance. Thank you.” She nodded and left to report to Leliana, giving Solas one high-quality glare as she did so. I don’t know if I deserve all these people trying to protect me.

(Cole thinks I do. He’s maybe biased.)

The target of the glare was still too pissy to notice. “She insisted it was urgent and could not be delayed. The risks are… it would be much safer in a few days once you have had time to heal.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t have to spend a couple hours patching me up first. She’s being as kind as she feels she can be.”

“Are you defending her?”

I grinned. “A little. Understanding her, at least.”

“You are too kind.” He said it as a judgement. I laughed.

I said, “Oh! Before we… before, thank you. For helping Cole to find me. For giving Cole advice. For giving me advice. For riding back to intervene. And one blanket thank-you in case there’s some extra way you saved our lives that I’m not aware of.”

fade feeds frayed threads. spirit salved and sewn

“Oh, and also for sewing my self back together, apparently. Is that some kind of record? Saving the same people six times in less than a day?”

“As I said, it was my pleasure to assist.”

“Riding up a mountain on a hastily-commandeered mount of potentially dubious quality? Yep, that sounds like a hoot.”

He smiled a little, but it was a sad smile. “You’re delaying.”

“I sure am.” Mercy, I wish he’d hold my hand. That would help. “Promise me something?”

“I can make a guess of your request.”

“And you won’t?”
His mouth turned downward. “I will not. I cannot make promises regarding others.”

“Thank you.” I waited until he met my eyes again.

“Good night, Solas.”

“Au revoir, Emma.”

And with that, Cole possessed me.

Chapter End Notes

Me, playing Inquisition: SOLAS AND BULL PLEASE STOP FIGHTING GUYS ARGH
The relief from not being inside my aching body was exquisite. I sat back in my haybale theatre stall and watched with interest.

I wish I had some bonbons right about now.

you trust me

I thought about it for a long moment. It mustn't be a lie.

Yes, honey. I think so.

Jagged gratitude, like broken stained-glass. We both felt his need for the discomfort. The shards hurt, but it was right they hurt. He was afraid to let go of the pain, relax into this borrowed body.

Breathe, Cole-love.

Cole let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. I had no mouth, yet I grinned at the inversion.

He practiced blinking: fast then slow, left eye then right, until he was ready.

“Hello, Solas.” All Cole’s inflections and rhythms, in my voice. It sounded profoundly weird.

“Hello, Cole. You know what to do?”

“Sleep, slip, stay strong in the currents. Never unknit.”

“Precisely. I will be outside. You may call if you need me.” He let Leliana in as he left, all frosty courtesy.

“Cole. I waited as long as I could.”

“Yes,” he replied.

Leliana blinked. “Are you answering what I just said, or something else?”

“You want me to be me. Fix the flaws, find the failings. Stronger, stronger together. Help the hopeless. I want to help.”

“Why, yes. I am surprised you are agreeing so easily.”

“Emma says healer’s oath. She won’t whisper, secrets are safe and not ever shared. It might hurt if we did.”

“There are times that is not enough, no?”

“Traitors. Crimes in the dark. Sometimes words are armour, turn the blade.”

She wants more, doesn’t she? Wants us to report on everyone?
she knows we will resist. defy, deny. half a cup

Because we are *awesome*.

Cole smiled with my mouth. She took an instinctive half-step backward.

“We will help. Turn threats aside. Comrades and colleagues, woven and whole. Emma wants to know how much. Can’t do much from behind the desk, y’know.” His impression of me was eerily good.

“Yes, I had considered it. Perhaps a promotion, with more… flexible duties.”

“Emma will like that.” Emma is very much looking forward to seeing Lydia’s face when she finds out about it.

Priority?

“Emma asks who we start with. How do we…” he tasted the word gingerly, “triage?”

“I shall provide you with a list of key personnel. I want you to start there.”

Wait, what? That’s not how we work!

we could

But we’re supposed to help everyone!

we will

But what about the ones that are… Have you told her… I can’t just…

“Yes,” Cole said.

*I did not agree to this!*

trust

Oh damn it. Turning my thoughts against me? He’s going to make us deal with all the problems I can’t touch. Rage and pain and fear and oh mercy, oh no, this is happening. We’ve made ourselves fucking useful, so we shall be used.

*But I caaaaaan’t*, I wailed.

*we can*

“We will require kin and kind, trusted. To reach past our grasp.”

Oh shit. You don’t mean you-and-me we. You mean *we* we.

I reeled with relief. Yes, safer. Safer.

Leliana did not much like that request, but agreed. “As needed. Only trusted resources. Ones that I will approve, yes?” Cole nodded my head. “But until then, I require absolute secrecy. Only three people know of you. Only four will know, until I state otherwise.”

Who is the fourth? I wondered.
Cole agreed to everything and they shook hands. Very carefully.

“We shall talk details later. Once you are fully recovered, yes?” We took the hint. Again she and Solas passed each other at the entrance.

Ready, honey?

Cole wasn’t sure, but he made my body thrum with determination.

Solas told Cole to lay my head down. “Relax all the muscles in the body you are occupying. Excellent. Now as we discussed, Cole. Gently and slowly, like -”

“- the tide going out. Soft.” Cole murmured.

“Even so. Now Emma, your spirit is solid. Sure. Driven deep as the posts of the dock. Water moves but you stay immobile.” I had no muscles to clench, so I imagined my Self as a statue. Solid. Strong. I chanted the words to myself.

Slowly, softly, Cole’s control ebbed away. It wasn’t as sudden or disorienting as last time. I could move a fingertip, then a hand. After some unnoticed moment it was all me and Cole was again in my head.

I shuddered with relief. It seemed that not every part of me trusted Cole to give my body back this time.

“Welcome back, Emma. And bravely done, Cole.”

I agreed and then yawned impossibly wide, surprising all of us. Solas yawned in response, surprising us even more.

I giggled, exhausted. “That’s our cue, I think.”

“The last few days have been trying. And the next few will be worse for you, in many ways.”

“Gentle me into it, why don’t you,” I said dryly.

“However, the Nightingale has considerable resources, and they will be used on your behalf. Congratulations to you both. As you planned, you have become an asset to the Inquisition.”

“Hooray for us,” I said. “When shall we see you again?”

He paused.

why would you want to?

I startled into better awakeness. “Solas. Really?”

He looked imperturbable. He felt hunted and guilty and self-conscious. Then, adorably, amused.

“Am I one of your new projects?”

I shook my head sadly. “You’re our friend.”

For the second time, I left him speechless.

It was a good thought to drift back to sleep with.
Solas is not used to being forcibly befriended, apparently.
My face was being gently cleaned with a warm damp cloth. I opened my eyes to find Lady Josephine.

“Hello, my lady.” My voice was still a bit froggy but okay if I was careful. She squeaked and nearly poked me in the eye.

“Emma, you woke up so fast! You looked…” she bit her lip before she said something undiplomatic.

“Dead to the world?” I grinned. She smiled back. She has the cutest dimple when she thinks she’s being a bit wicked. I love the fact that she thinks that counts as wicked.

“Leli told me everything that happened.” Everything? Je suis sceptique. I have much more sympathy for her now, but I am still quite confident that Sister Leliana is a manipulator of the first water.

“About you, and, and Cole.”

Lady J made the same expression as an Anders noble confronted with a range of fish forks: unsure of the etiquette in this new situation, but determined to get it right anyway. You darling.

“He can hear you, my lady. Address him directly if you wish to, I’ll convey his replies.”

She looked nervous but said, “Cole? It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

I replied for him, “Lord Mounsey soars. Not a hawk, a vulture. He yearns for the taste of cherry preserves.”

She turned pale, an achievement for someone with her colouring. Then she narrowed her eyes. I watched the gears turning with delight. Whoever Lord Mounsey is, he is gonna regret all of his choices very, very soon.

“I… I see,” she said. “I believe this new arrangement will suit us all splendidly. Don’t you?”

We agreed. She spent some time telling me all about the magnificent new offices being cleared out next to the Great Hall (we have one of those, apparently), and the gardens beyond, and the unfortunate death of one of the workers on the scaffold.

“You did his paperwork. Do you recall if he had any family?” she asked, concerned.


“Oh, that reminds me! I wrote to your sisters while you were… detained. I told them you were well and would write when you were able to.”

I closed my eyes and one tear rolled down my now-cleaner cheek. I had worried about that. And she knew. She had been informed that I was either possessed or a traitor (or both!) but still decided to pay me a kindness. Is it bad form to tell your employer that you adore her?

“Oh, my lady. Thank you. You are so kind and I love you.” Whoops, that just happened. She blushed a little but was also pleased.
She thinks that’s the herbs talking, doesn’t she.

*Emma* is kind. even Leli sees it.

Aww, this darling. I would do anything for her.

Even… huh. That’s rare for me.

Am I going to fall hopelessly in love with *everyone* we meet from now on, Cole-love?

you weren’t thinking about love. you were thinking about skin

I note that isn’t a ‘no’.

you didn’t love Gardener. or want to touch him

Good point.

I made a stern promise not to make Lady J uncomfortable with any of my interesting new feelings, and got back to the important things. Like gossip.

***

Four different mages visited - bruises blossomed, muscles muttered, my knee did *something*, and the all-over magical hangover dwindled to resemble a case of the grippe. I was fed a variety of terrible-tasting tinctures. The cuts and rope-marks began to scab over and itched dreadfully; Cole had to nag at me a dozen times an hour not to scratch them.

Cole and I let that happen of its own accord. We spent our time mending all the other parts of ourselves.

We replayed the nightmares again and again until they felt old and irrelevant. Colourless. Like something that happened a long time ago in another continent to a different Emma and Cole. Some memories Cole made me forget entirely - most of the seizures, and every single one of Gardener’s invading thoughts. I knew they happened, but I didn’t remember them.

Such a blessing.

that is?

*You are.*

We talked for hours and hours about what we did and what we didn’t do, what it meant, what now, what we will never do again. We confessed. We forgave. We laid it to rest.

We both truly, for the first time, adjusted to our new shared reality and began to mourn our old selves. Wrapped them up in tissue paper and put them by.

In short, we started to heal.

Chapter End Notes

I love Josie, too.
And you, my dears.
Healer Constance was changing my sheets. I’d been plonked on a crate and ordered to keep my feet out of the dirt. “And no passing out, you hear?”

I occupied myself by looking at the scratchy night-rail I’d been given and ruminating. I was so deep in thought I didn’t even notice the tent flap move.

“What’s got your britches rumpled, kitten?”

I looked up at The Iron Bull and smiled. “Hey, beautiful. Possessions.”

He shot a quick glance at Constance and quirked an eyebrow.

“I escaped Haven with just the clothes on my back,” I continued thoughtfully. “The robe is wrecked, I have no idea where my belt pouch is, and the majority of my property was in my chambers in Haven. I think I might be destitute.”

“I can get Krem to talk to the boss about it. We could dig the place out, see what we can recover.”

the miniature. the letters, from before we argued

“That’s a great idea. Don’t you think so, Constance?”

She was superlatively grateful. I was a little bit jealous. He found that amusing, damn him.

“I thought you promised to come visit me yesterday?” I missed you.

“Only one visitor a day. The Ambassador outranked me.” I know you did.

Jerk. Why do I love you again?

Constance bundled up the dirty linens and said, “She’s heavy. You mind?”

Hey now! Rude.

kind of a kind

I didn’t get it until The Iron Bull nodded and picked me up. Constance and the bundle just left.

Oh. Oh.

He was carrying me like I weighed nothing at all. His chest was warm and firm and, buckles aside, very pleasant. I could feel his voice rumble through him when he talked. “Want me to put you down?”

“Do you gotta?”

He laughed and sat down on the crate, arranging me sideways across his lap. Careful with my bruises and my knee, hands solicitous. Shit, I need to say something before I start to get Ideas.

harmless!"

“Cole did that. Saw the work, he’s good.” He ruffled my hair at one particular spot above my ear.

that’s for me!

“You’d still be shit in a fight.” I really wanted to argue, but I had a sudden image of me holding the dagger, duelling that elf. Good point. “Besides, you don’t want to warn people that you’re a bad-ass. It’s better if you surprise ‘em.”

“Like how you pretend to be stupid?” I asked.

He grinned. “Yeah! So you’re kitten. Get used to it.”

I leaned against him and purred. I fucking purred. It felt good.

So good.

Too good.

It means nothing that he likes you, I reminded myself sternly. He likes everyone. He works for the enemy, belongs to them. He’s a mercenary. On a deep and important level, he is afraid of you and Cole. Pleasuring you through the cell bars was about re-establishing the distance between you as much as anything else. Enjoy him, adore him if you wish, but don’t you dare get attached.

All excellent advice. If only I could heed it.

I shut my mouth before something stupid escaped and listened, increasingly amused, while he told me about a rumour doing the rounds. Apparently I’d been kidnapped by Venatori cultists and had bravely escaped, exposing a plot to murder The Iron Bull in the process.

I winced. “Oh, that reminds me… I may have intimated that I pleasured myself while you watched. I doubt Gardener-” I sneered his name “- gossips, but the three templars probably do.”

“What?”

“It was all I could think of! My smallclothes were, ahem, in a state. And also I wasn’t wearing them. The truth would’ve gotten you in trouble so I made up a story.”

He started laughing. “Which three templars?”

I named them. “But don’t do anything on my account. Considering you seduce people based solely on their occupation you presumably already have a reputation. And I’m pretty sure any rumours would actually improve mine.” He laughed harder.

“I bet Red’s already locking that down. Don’t worry about it.”

He moved on to stories about his quote-unquote ‘crazy bunch of assholes’ and some of the jobs they’d done. His voice was relaxed, congenial. As if I was… anyone at all.

And to him, quite possibly I was.

“- so Grim grabs this guy by the ears and just runs at the cliff! Hah, the look on this asshole’s face.”

“The Iron Bull, what are we?” The wagon of thought broke an axle and he stopped. Inspected me for a minute. Waited for further intel.
“I mean, I was your interrogatee, then there was that nice sex, then I saved your life. And now what? Are we friends? Should I stop thinking about how your thighs flex?” Tired me talks a lot. “I’d just like to know.”

hadn’t thought about it. mistake. too fast, too weird

“Shit, I don’t know,” he said. “What do you want?”

I smiled lopsidedly. “I adore you. I enjoyed the sex we had. My wants are varied and interestingly perverse.” His nostrils flared. It felt very satisfying. “But I’m the wrong person to ask, beautiful. I don’t have a cultural taboo against receiving sex and affection from the same person.”

“Fuck,” he said. I smiled but resisted the obvious joke.

tangles. this… matters more than I expected

For some inexplicable reason, his confusion made things clear to me.

“Beautiful,” I said, “take your time. Decide what you want. I’m okay with whatever it is, I promise.”

He looked intently at me. “You really mean that.”

I really did. It was suddenly simple: I would take - no. Not take. I would *receive* as much as he was willing to give, and I would be grateful to have it. That felt right. I smiled my confirmation.

The Iron Bull nodded, too vigorously. Suddenly self-conscious. I resisted an insanely strong urge to kiss his cheek and yawned instead.

He bundled me into bed, scritched the Cole-spot, and turned to leave.

“I mean, it’s okay to still fantasise about you, right? Once these bruises fade I’m going to have nothing but time on my hands.” I gave my best mischievous grin. “I have this one excellent image of you covered in oil, see…”

“Good night, Cole.”

“And another where I’m on my knees -”

“Good *night*, Emma.”

I giggled. “Good night, beautiful.”

My smile faded after he left. Exhausted as I was, it took a long time to drift back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Word Nerdery:
Realising that you can't used the phrase 'train of thought derailed' in a pre-rail setting.
This is the kind of thing I spend hours pondering while stuck in bed.
The light blinded my eyes. (Shit on toast, between the wagon, the dungeon, and the tent, it’s been more than a week since we saw direct sunlight. Nearly two!) I stood, leaning hard on a support post, and blinked furiously.

Cole felt equally relieved to be back in the sun. The Spire haunts him as much as he haunted it.

Time to orient ourselves, Cole-love!

that way is east. where the sun is

I smothered a laugh and thanked him for the advice.

Once my eyes adjusted, I looked up in awe at castle walls. We were in a lower courtyard, but the walls loomed even over the upper one. They were tall and strong and incredibly comforting. I could see guards marching the battlements. I wonder what the view’s like from up there?

Only one way to find out. I still felt like twenty pounds of discomfort in a ten-pound bag, so I decided to take it slow. I ambled on badly-sprung legs around the courtyard. More healer’s tents - but surely not enough for all the wounded. There’s probably an actual infirmary somewhere and I’d been sequestered with the Very Important Patients. Right?

Then scaffolding and a row of merchants. Ooh, nice twill and brocade. I need a new dress or five. Also better boots.

that. we need it

The ribbon?

yes. to tie in her tresses. hair across the pillow, she smiles in my eyes

Happy to assist whoever that is, honey, but it’ll have to wait until I have actual money again.

money?

Yes, Cole-love. Goods and services need to be traded for with currency.

why?

Because otherwise we would be stealing. And that would hurt the person we stole from.

oh. okay

One day I will stop being surprised by the gaps in Cole’s understanding, but that day is clearly not today.

I finished browsing, already in need of a brief sit down. (Constance had only been willing to let me leave today since I was “not entirely an idiot” and that was a lukewarm compliment I intended to live up to.)
I found a chopping block and levered myself down onto it. Behind me, the familiar strident tones of
Cook washed down from an open door. I spent a while enjoying the sunshine and listening to the
mounts whicker. I wonder where the rest of them are? Outside the walls? So much to learn.

“Shit, you *are* alive.” I opened my eyes to find our unofficial choirmaster watching me.

“Hey, Fergus. Yep, I’m bruised but functional. And my voice is fine.” He looked relieved, there
aren’t many contraltos here. He doesn’t care about me, my history, my dark secrets, anything other
than whether I can hold the sustain in the coda. It’s oddly liberating. I’m on pitch, or I’m not.

“We’ll be setting up practices again once they’ve finished the tavern. I’ll let you know.” Also nice is
his assumption that of *course* I’ll be there.

“Lovely. Looking forward to it.” His assumption is completely correct.

He went back to… ostling? Stablemanning? Y’know, horse looking-after-ness. I watched him
companionably argue with Dennet about the best feed for a nuggalope, whatever *that* is. I realised
that the stables didn’t just hold horses. Is that a hart? Awesome. But another time.

I want to meet the nuggalope

Will do, honey.

Slowly, slowly, I climbed the steps to the upper courtyard. I leaned on the outer wall as I went, afraid
to trust my traitor legs. (Note: talk to Lady J about installing banisters.)

I sat on a low wall and oriented myself. Armoury, clearly. No sign of a barracks - are the soldiers
outside the walls with the horses? Seeker Pentaghast beating on a practice mannikin, what else is
new. Smells of sawdust, sounds of hammering, casks under canvas, a swinging sign - ah, a tavern
being built! Fenedhis that place is *massive*. More healer’s tents, perhaps there isn’t an infirmary yet.

Lots of people going in and out of that office, not sure what function it serves. Two guards in front of
a door and I *knew* that it led to the dungeons. I shivered in the sunlight. Anvil noises from another
door and suddenly I remembered The Iron Bull’s story of finding an old forge to roughly grab his -

“Hello?”

“Argh!” I said cleverly and nearly tumbled over the edge of the wall I was perched on. A hand
grabbed my arm, which hurt a bit but infinitely less than the alternative. I righted myself and stared
up into a familiar face.

“Raoul!” Wait, was I supposed to know his name? Too late now. “H-hi!”

“Hello, lady. You remember me?” Such good manners this lad has. Oh mercy, he’s still wearing the
scarf.

...warms his ears. warms his heart

Awww.

“Of course I remember you, sweetheart.” Probably there are military regulations against calling
soldiers by honey-names, but fuck it. “You’re still wearing your scarf!”

“You… are not.” He clearly wanted to add, “Also you look like you went through a corn thresher,”
but his manners were just too good to allow it. What *did* happen to that scarf?
scarf off, hood on

Oh. Damn. Right.

I figured it wasn’t too suspicion-rousing to be able to read between those lines, so I said, “I look like a fright, but I’m fine. I will be.”

“That is good. Maker watch over you.” I thanked him and waved goodbye.

I watched familiar faces and new ones for a while. Waved and repeated the “Yes, I know I look like I fell out of the crow’s nest onto the deck, but really truly I am fine I promise, I can neither confirm nor deny that rumour about where I have been for the last two weeks, it’s all good how are you?” dance until I was dry-mouthed but warmed by how many people remembered me and had believed the best.

Incidentally, the volume and variety of rumours was amazing. Apparently the Venatori had deliberately infected Inquisition members with a terrible, possibly magical, illness and I had bravely endured all sorts of tests while the healers raced to find a cure. Was it true I had to be restrained because I was speaking in tongues?

Silly, I heard that she was kidnapped and tortured to tell secrets about the Ambassador but had refused to say a word.

No no, I heard that you drank tea poisoned with The Hag’s Kiss and lingered near death for days. You were, right? I hear that only one in a thousand survives, even with the treatment!

Is it true that you were buried in a coffin with only one tube for air and had to hold on to your sanity as the agents desperately dug to find you? And you saved Bull?

Kudos to Sister Leliana, she sure does know how to prevaricate. The templars could repeat every word from the interrogation but it would be just one competing rumour amongst a dozen. None of the rumours made me look guilty of anything important, and half of them said I saved The Iron Bull, to boot. It was genius.

And sweet. She’d clearly made certain that my reputation wouldn’t be harmed. I owed her for that.

Cole and I had a number of ideas of how to repay her.

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes, my favourite chapters to write are the simple, non-dramatic ones.
After a much-needed mug of water I was ready to brave the Great Hall.

It was, as advertised, pretty great.

Workers were everywhere. Some were cleaning out sconces, dragging in benches, comparing draperies under the stern eye of Madame de Fer. Well, if nothing else we’re gonna look stylish, for damn sure. At the end of the hall, under a huge window, people were smoothing the stone of a small dais. What was going to be put there, I wondered.

I took the first door to the left. Ambled down a short corridor and into a state of awe.

happy place

Happy place!

It was a garden, and usually I can take or leave those. But it was… safe. Comforting. Serene. Mellow and kind in the lungs.

How old is this place, honey?

since the beginning. healing herbs sunk deep roots, sleeping roots. she planted lavender for pleasant dreams. every hand gentled the earth, no blood has fallen here. the fiercesome heart birthed her babes. nothing hurts

Maker, yes.

We found a bench and just drank it all in. An elven woman with the Apothecary Guild sigil walked past and smiled at me, perfume-drunk and ready to take a nap. Cole listened to bulletins from the bees.

In, out. In, out. Cole told me stories of Jayla (she of the fiercesome heart) and I made a daisy chain of some sweet herb I didn’t recognise. I donned it on my left wrist, over the bandages.

Much more to explore. We missed the garden as soon as we left it.

***

I must admit, it took a few minutes for me to gather the courage to open the door to the Ambassador’s office. I slipped in quietly.

Lady Josephine was writing a letter, clearly to someone she didn’t much like. Sister Temperantia could be seen slowly filing invoices. There were four new faces: one old, two my age, and one impossibly young-looking. Harden was deep in the ledgers, performing his usual accounting shenanigans; Circe was adding the eighth and ninth layers of meaning to a twenty-word note in Orlesian.

Lydia was also present.

I coughed politely.
Lady J lit up and gracefully greeted me. Behind her, Harden and Circe did their best to pretend that I looked completely normal and not at all like a vivid nightmare that would haunt their sleep for days. Their best was not especially convincing, but they received full marks for effort.

Lady Josephine took my hand in welcome. It’s going to be inconvenient to be mildly in love with my boss, I can tell this already. “I’m so glad to see you recovering! You’ll be back to full health in no time, Healer Constance tells me.”

“I’m ready to -”

Her eyes twinkled as she cut me off. “You are not ready to return to work yet, my dear, of course not.” Constance, you snitch. “After the Inquisitor returns. A few days and then -”

She picked up on my look of utter and complete befuddlement and paused.

I said, “The Inquisitor? Who’s that?”

“Maker, of course you’ve missed it. The Herald is now our Inquisitor!”

Harden helpfully added, “There was an amazing party. I ate my bodyweight in spun sugar.” I mock-glared at him to get a laugh, just by habit. My mind was busy comprehending the news.

Vanadirthavean… the new Lord Inquisitor? I remembered the inner council bickering in the snow and could imagine that they’d want someone to take the lead. Would he do a good job, I wondered. He’s clearly smart, focused and energetic. Also manipulative, possibly?

And isolated. I bet he’s even more isolated than before.

“Well, I shall look forward to his return, my lady,” I said. “May I meet my colleagues now, or wait until then?”

“Please forgive my manners, Emma.” She’s always sincere when she says things like this. “New staff, this is Emma. She has been absent on important duties.” What a turn of phrase.

“Emma,” she indicated a young-faced human of no definable gender, “this is Lark. They will be assisting me with scheduling and lodging for our guests.”

They smiled politely and said with a firm handshake and a clear Bannorn accent, “Pleasure to meet you. All sorts of rumours about where you’ve been, I hear. For your sake, I hope most of them are untrue.”

Lark gave the impression of being one of those deliberate, balanced people that are annoyingly calm under stress. Remembering the entitlement-driven tantrums of nobility, they were the perfect choice for the role. I returned the greeting and said sincerely that it was nice to meet them.

“Jamie and Katria are managing food and other staples.” Two humans, one woman and one - I checked quickly with Cole - man, both with hard eyes and heavy Starkhaven accents.

“Pleasure,” they both said in unison. Oh, an actual couple! I quickly checked for marriage bands. No.

she wouldn’t allow it

Boo.

I shook their hands and said, “Lovely! We don’t have many couples working together here yet.”
You’re the… third, I think.”

Katria nodded factually and Jamie didn’t respond even that much. Not a barrel of laughs, these two.

“Lastly,” Lady Josephine indicated a vigorous old man with a truly mammoth beard, “this is Gareth. He will help Sister Temperantia with invoices and other duties.” Gareth gave me one of those encompassing handshake-hugs that makes me feel like a little lass who just diagrammed the sentence correctly. We grinned at each other, no words necessary.

Lady J smiled beneficently. “Your room! Someone must show you to your new quarters.” Circe volunteered and went to make sure her letter was locked away like the dagger it undoubtedly was.

Lydia said with poisonous sweetness, “Your desk is all ready for you once you are back to your… usual self.” She pointed to the smallest, wobbliest desk, jammed in an awkward corner behind some bookshelves.

Tell me a joke, honey.

knock, knock

Who’s there?

me

Perfect. I gave a genuine laugh right into her punchable little face. “So kind, Lydia,” I said, mouth still twitching.

I kept the precious memory of her that-isn’t-what’s-supposed-to-happen face all the way out the door.

***

Our new quarters were down two-mandated-rest-breaks of stairs. Surprisingly airy and light, considering they were literally in the middle of a mountain.

“There are channels, cut into the rock,” Circe informed me. “Very old work, the masons say. This is my room -” she indicated a door, “- and this is yours.”

There was a latch and no lock, something I’d need to remedy. Inside was a basic but prettily-appointed room: one narrow bed, one desk, one washstand, one chest. The bedspread and rug and pillow covering all matched, which made me blink.

“All of our furnishings are new?” Circe nodded. “Which personages did we have to fulfill the strange sexual fetishes of to accomplish that?”

Circe didn’t laugh because she never, ever does, but I could tell she was amused. “The Ambassador casually mentioned to Lady Gustave of Pré-le-Court that Baron Desjardins was furnishing one floor of the servant’s quarters in exemplary style…”

“… and because they detest each other she decided to outdo him?”

“Bien sûr. There are five floors of pointed outmaneuvering. We even have bathhouses.” I laughed.

I opened the chest to find a towel, a night-rail and a pair of woolly socks. I fell in love with Lady J just a little more.
“Is that your only clothing?” Circe asked.

“If it can be accurately called such, yes.”

“We are all being given three new outfits to replace what we lost in Haven. The seamstresses are in the northern wing.”

“I’ll go later. With that many people to dress, I presume they won’t be hard to find… I’ll just follow the constant stream of vituperation and that particular high-pitched yelp someone makes when a pin gets jabbed into them.”

Circe didn’t smile because she never, ever does. But she did say, “I am glad you’re well, Emma. Harden and I missed you.”

Yes?

yes, but low

I leaned over and gave her a gentle hug. Our first; I never would have dared without Cole’s direct say-so.

She was startled but not displeased. “Thank you,” she said solemnly.

I laughed and told her she was welcome, then said I’d probably grab a nap while the chance presented itself. She approved, left, and softly closed the door.

The mattress was surprisingly well-stuffed; my body deliquesced onto it at once. My mind did not join in, tossing and turning and refusing to rest. What was the problem? I wondered. We’d set out to orient ourselves and that was progressing nicely! I knew where the office was, and my chamber, and half of the facilities. I could find the privy, which was definitely important. So why did I feel more lost than when I began?

Then I remembered the office, ticking along nicely with the new staff. All my duties were being handled. I flashed to meeting all my acquaintances and lying to every single one of them, almost as quickly as the greetings were done. There was distance between us now, and with Leliana’s edict there always would be.

I was no longer just another member of the regular support staff. I wasn’t one of Leliana’s single-word-job-name assets, either.

Where the fuck did I belong, now?

I decided to explore every inch of this big damn castle until I found out. After a tiny rest.

Chapter End Notes

Remember how I said that when creating new characters I figure out some details then let the dice do the gender, race, nationality, etc? I rolled 20 on gender for TWO of Lady Josephine's new staff. My fave part of this is that is does not affect their role in any way. As if they were just normal people or something... *slowly turns to camera, stares intently for a long moment*
Also, I stole Varric's knock-knock joke, and I feel no guilt about it.
I woke up the next morning. (Whoops.)

The bathhouse had combs and soap and tooth powder and all those other things I didn’t currently own. I felt properly clean for the first time in... since Haven, actually.

we squeak. I like it

Exactly, Cole-love.

I ate two breakfasts (healer’s orders) while chatting with a few familiar faces. Then I braved the northern wing.

“Strip.” The seamstresses were just as over-worked and under-polite as I expected. I was told - not asked, told - which colours from the limited range of cloth suited my colouring best. I managed to talk my way out of the dress with the shoulder straps and into something with no skin exposed to the wind.

I was given something temporary, all drawstrings and scratchy calico, and told to return tomorrow. Apparently everyone else already owned at least one decent set of clothes already so I was next in line. I won a couple of friends with my sincere amazement at how quickly they’d gotten everyone covered.

I continued our exploration of the Great Hall. (At Cole’s request we made a brief detour to pick up a dropped quill and return it to its owner. She was immensely relieved.)

The doors further down the hall had big slabs of guard next to them, so I took the rightmost arch. It led to a freshly-plastered rotunda with a mural being chalked onto a wall. Whoever made that, they’re talented. Stairs led upward to... books! Not many shelves were full, but the others had been cleaned and prepped so more books were coming. Marvellous. I sat on a comfy chair for a bit and enjoyed the paper smells while I rested.

“Am I disturbing you. I can return later,” said an uninflected voice. I startled. Neither Cole nor I had sensed the approach of the elven woman and looking at her forehead I suddenly understood why.

slowly smothered in a crystal-clear silence that has no meaning

I remember, love.

“No, sweetheart. You’re not bothering me.”

“You seem angered. Have I offended.”

Two years. Two years and the Divine has done nothing. The Left and Right Hands have done nothing. Don’t they remember Pharamond’s anguish? He literally wanted to die instead of being made Tranquil again.

They know how to undo it, fix it. All they’d need is one spirit healer and one willing Tranquil. The quiet soul-murder was, what... not a priority?
rebel mages. rebel templars. conclave

For the record, I hate it when you’re more reasonable than me, Cole-love.

Cole actually smiled a little at that.

I opened my fists, made sure my voice was gentle. “I’m not angry at you, sweetheart. What’s your name?”

“My name is Jarrah. How may I serve.”

“I… I don’t have any orders for you.”

“Very well.” She continued placidly cleaning bookshelves.

Slowly I extracted my anger, decanted it into essence, and bottled it for later use. I was starting to build quite a parfumerie in there. Essence de l'indignation, avec un soupçon de menthe.

belonging. upstairs

Okay. Give me a moment.

I gave one full-body shudder, the kind that goes up and down your spine a few times, and let all the tension go with it.

Then I walked up the stairs and into a face full of raven.

I followed all of Cole’s directions at (literally) the speed of thought and ended up with a raven on my wrist, head tilted, watching me with interest.

stroke his throat

I looked at the razor-sharp beak.

Or I could do… not that?

Gingerly, I stroked my knuckle down his throat. The feathers felt fascinating, both smooth and rough. Clearly I wasn’t the only one enjoying the experience: the raven leaned into the touch and ruffled himself.

Then he held himself still, expectant.

I chuckled, not loud. Didn’t want to startle him. Obeyed my new master and petted his throat, his head, even that vicious-looking beak. I swear I got one approving nod before he opened his wings and flew off. When I followed his flight I saw a number of new things that I had missed in the kerfuffle.

First was a stunned human man watching me. I could imagine most people’s reaction when the raven flew at them - Void, all I needed to do is remember mine before Cole starting helping. I saw a bloodied bandage on his finger and had to bite my lip not to smile, just a little.

Second, I saw Sister Leliana, enmoted by reports. She looked as immaculate as ever, but she felt very weary.
And third, I saw happiness on a shelf nearby.

Thank you, love!

“Good morning, Sister Leliana,” I said respectfully and plonked myself down on the bench opposite her.

“Good morning to you both,” she replied. “I am given to understand that you are not yet permitted to return to work.”

“Well, Emma isn’t, true,” I agreed. “But Cole works for you, not Lady Josephine.” She registered her appreciation of the nuance. “Besides, you are running yourself into the ground and we want to help.”

She skilfully used her fancy bard training to show no reaction, but she had already grasped the uselessness of arguing with Cole’s insights. Smart woman.

“Some assistance would be appreciated, if you are both capable of it.” She called a runner over - it was How Are You Not Pecked To Death Guy - and assigned him a brief note. He left quickly.

“When the Inquisitor returns, he will sit in judgment. He has a number of questions about Magister Alexius.”

“Certainly. Do you want Emma-answers or Cole-answers?”

“What is the difference between the two?”

“Poetry versus prose.” I made it clear with my tone that I don’t regard either option as superior.

We watched two Lelianas conduct an internal debate.

the singer and the spy

She’s a singer?

she was

No wonder Dorothea was… hey!

hey?

I don’t remember you telling me about Dorothea!

ill deeds, good needs

You’ve done it! You told me that so quietly that I only registered it as insight! I am so proud of you, love.

you wanted one conversation at a time

And you delivered. Because you are amazing.

One Leliana threw up her hands in despair and stormed out of the conversation. The spy wins again, I see.

she has forgotten how to hear me. all the days are prosy
“Ambiguity is useful in my business,” she said matter-of-factly. “But I would prefer simplicity in this matter.”

“Yes, sister. Fire at will.”

“When did Magister Alexius decide to indenture the mages?”

We searched my memories. “After the Conclave. A woman named Estella came to him, told him the plans had to be changed. ‘Some upstart elf has interfered with the Elder One’s ritual.’ They had a long discussion I didn’t understand about whether the new Breach could provide the… focal nexus point? if I got that right? for the time magic he’d been working on.

“She suggested Redcliffe. Suggested is too gentle a word. Strong-armed. Close to the rift, plenty of assets to be gained for the Venatori. ‘Do this and Felix will be cured, he swears it.’ He left a week after the explosion, and arrived in Redcliffe five days earlier.”

“And his goal?”

“Go back two days before the Conclave. Send an asset to cut Vanadirthavean’s throat in his sleep.” Sister Leliana blinked at the use of the name. Does no-one call him by name? Empresses have people who do! For fuck’s sake, we need to work on that.

“Why did he not do so?”

“He tried. Five times. If I correctly interpreted the jargon, he was using the Breach as an anchor. He couldn’t make the magic go earlier than the anchor point. He was already making pretty horrible plans to increase the power to the ritual, see if that helped.”

“Blood magic?”

“He started with blood magic. No, this was something about ‘growing power from the recalcitrant’. Someone named Samson was coming with the seeds in less than a week.”

Sister Leliana looked very grave. “That aligns with the Inquisitor’s report. He had one final question.” She stared intently. “Did Magister Alexius know about the cabin near the dock?”

The… what?

Cole shook his head in confusion.

“Not that I know of? We could go and talk to him in person, if it matters.”

“It does. I shall tell the guards to let you in. Before the Inquisitor returns, if you please.” I nodded uneasily. This does not sound like a fun conversation I’m going to have.

Next, she passed us a piece of parchment.

Twenty names. I recognised most of them: maids, stablemen, cooks. Another few had military titles.

I hummed. “Security checks?”

“Yes. These are the staff who could cause the most damage if they have been compromised. I must be sure their loyalties are to the Inquisition alone.”
You want to ask this one?

she *is* my boss.

Cole said that with internal pride. He likes belonging, too.

I delivered Cole’s words. “How do we find the torn, the traitor? A flag of fear, a second sorrow? How to hear?” She furrowed her brow, so I sighed a little and translated, “Cole doesn’t know how to tell if someone is a traitor. Especially if they aren’t afraid of being caught.”

Her brow cleared. “Ah. Of course, neither of you are trained for this kind of work. I had thought of that -” of course she had “- and I have a solution.”

She looked over my head. “Admirable timing, as always.”

“I aim to please. A veritable marksman of satisfaction, I.”

I froze.

he isn’t. other way around

Cautiously, oh so cautiously, I turned on the bench.

“Hello, Chandler.”

Chapter End Notes

Word Nerdery:

Essence de l’indignation, avec un soupçon de menthe. - Essence of rage, with a hint of mint.

I don’t always provide translations, when I think the meaning is clear from context. If I ever miss one, lemme know.
What do you say to the person who ferreted out your most guarded secret while you were vulnerable due to your sympathy for that same person? I’ve been forced to read a number of manuals of etiquette over the years, but none of them had a section on that.

Considering how often it happens, there’s a clear gap in the market. Perhaps I could write one. Entitle it Well Play’d: Responses To Being Manipulated By A Professional.

Not that I took it personally, because I honestly didn’t. Abominations are generally the walking definition of bad news and uncovering one is important, whether or not they just cried about you. He had to do his job, and oh dear he’s been castigating himself ever since. Well, that won’t do at all.

“Darling, how are you?” I fluttered. “It’s been ever-so long since we spoke. I’ve just been devastated by your absence.”

I saw his mustache twitch, but registered his relief only through Cole’s help. “I suppose you’ve just been languishing. Pining. Imprisoned by your feelings.”

“Oh my yes. It’s been absolute torture.”

We both smiled complicated smiles at each other until Sister Leliana got uncomfortable with people having emotions and subtly shuffled papers in a Please Go Away formation. (I don’t know the language of fans, but I know that one well.)

Chandler indicated a door. “When you are free, do join me. I have already found the best nook in this place.”

“Of course you have,” I said solemnly. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Sister Leliana watched him leave. “You approve?”

“Cole does. Emma’s… not sure yet. Why?”

“I will let him tell you that. He has been cleared and told the essentials.”

“Five, then?”

“For now.” So nice of you to keep us informed, madame. “So if there is nothing else…”

Oh look! it’s a trap.

only for the unworthy

“There is one more thing,” I said. I let my eyes flick to the second shelf. Cole told me that she’d seen me do it. I could feel her waiting, giving me every chance I needed to lose her respect.

“Three weeks.”

It was fun to watch her surprised blink. “I don’t believe I understand.”
“From what I heard, the tavern hasn’t much in the way of supply. If you want a bottle of plum distilled brandy on time, you should order it now.”

Outrage, startlement, sorrow, and more than a touch of fear danced behind her eyes but got nowhere near her face. She took a long deep breath.

“Thank you, yes. I should see to that immediately.” Translated: you win this round, with extra marks from the judges for being considerate about it. “Oh, I forgot. This is yours, I believe?” From the shelf she took down my belt and its pouches, and presented them to me like the prize we both knew they were.

“Thank you. Very much. I have so few possessions left, and I’ve owned this since I was fifteen.” I tried to also say in an under-message: Here, here is a way to control me if you want to. As if you needed another. I am not trying to play that game with you.

I think I like spies. They’re really good at reading subtext. Sister Leliana nodded her understanding and dismissed us politely.

I opened the door and stood, utterly gobsmacked.

“Quite a view, I agree,” said Chandler, to my left. I couldn’t look away. “I gather this is your first chance to appreciate it.”


“You must be freezing your nipples off, precious.”

“Well, yes. But in an enlightened profound way?”

He laughed. “Round here. The nook has all of the view, with less of the windchill.” He tucked my arm under his and escorted me to a hidden spot around the side of the tower. Some brilliant soul - no guesses who - had installed some comfy seating and a bottle of red wine.

“You know I don’t drink, Chandler.”

“You will note I didn’t suggest it was for you. For you, dearest, I have acquired this.” He brandished a box.

Inside were four tiny perfect fruit mince tarts. “Oh look!” I said. “A bribe.”

“You understand me well.”

“Well, as I said during our last conversation… I do like you.”

He looked stern. “Emma. There is a natural order to things. Rain falls downward, mabaris howl upward, and we do not discuss emotional issues before I have drunk at least two glasses of wine.”

“Right. Sorry.”

We devoured our treats and the view.

Chapter End Notes
Some things I control consciously, some things I leave for the other parts.

So I was both surprised and delighted to see Chandler make a reappearance.
So, funny thing -

I understand you might be -

I’m really not -

I was up to my twenty-seventh conversational opener. All previous attempts had been rejected on the grounds of being too flippant, too serious, or in one truly terrible case, both. I hadn’t had a conversation this awkward since I broke up with my third lover, and I had the fine excuse then of being nearly nineteen.

Judging by the slightly tense silence at my shoulder, I wasn’t the only one experiencing this problem.

Alright, cards on the table. I -

I stood up so quickly I nearly reeled, a bad idea this high up. Chandler grabbed my shoulder.

I pointed almost straight down. “Storeroom, windowless. Casks, smells of molasses. Go. GO!”

Responding to nothing but the urgency in my voice, he ran. I wobbled in his wake, then followed as far as the Nightingale’s office. Sister Leliana was holding a cipher and regarding the direction he’d charged through with birdlike curiosity.

“Ma’am,” I said and leaned against a column. “Chandler will need a healer and two labourers sent to the tiny storeroom down there.” She calmly ordered a runner to make that happen.

“Also, Lady Josephine will want to know that Elise tumbled a bunch of badly-stacked crates on herself. She was knocked out. Should be okay once he gets the weight off her chest, I think, but a sack split and she got a lungful of flour as she went down.”

She scribbled a beautifully-formed note and dispatched it. “You do not wish to join them?”

I laughed tiredly. “Too many stairs. By the time I get halfway there it’ll be all over. Will Chandler be okay, appearing like that?”

She smiled. “Invention on a moment’s notice is a strength of his. Thank you for your concern.”

I wasn’t sure if that compliment referred to Elise or Chandler, but either way I was okay with it.

I slowly ensconced myself back in the nook to await the outcome. First I checked all my pouches. I own things again! My pen nibs are all there and oh look, so is the Chant. Hooray! I belted everything back on with quiet joy then looked around for a distraction.

Down below was that handsome Warden, chopping wood. Tragically it wasn’t warm enough for him to take his shirt off, but a pleasant sight nonetheless. A door high on the wall opened and three military types walked out. I squinted: all captains? Must’ve been a promotion, then. I can’t remember how many troops it was supposed to be per captain, but that must be a good sign.

Knight-Captain Rylen nodded to Captain Ferrars as she left, then kept the new officer talking. Is… is
he an elf? Hold on, is she an elf? Andraste’s burning expectations, they’ve promoted an elf woman to captain? Nice job on making a statement, Commander! Being freed from Chantry control is clearly kinda liberating.

Rylen respected the newcomer, was giving advice but without being patronising about it. I sat next to him once in the mess, he seems like a decent man. Good. She’ll need all the help she can get, what with…

Oh. Shit.

How many here think she ought to be put in her place?

I braced for impact while Cole calculated.

one hundred and eighty-seven

Sigh. And how many have already thought about how to accomplish it?

forty

And how many have sincerely thought about doing it?

twenty-six

Damn and double damn it. I went through my pouches and found my aide-memoire.

Diligently, I wrote down every name. Most were not a surprise.

Harden? Damn it, I thought better of you.

nothing personal

Sure it isn’t.

At least he was in the least repulsive category. I’m pretty sure he’d never actually act on his shitty thoughts, even in subtle ways.

he tries not to think them. they think themselves

Yeah, I guess. Still.

Skin-crawling dictation finished, I wanted to go back to watching the Warden chopping wood, but he’d finished. Boo. The mountains were an acceptable scenic alternative.

Maybe I drifted a bit, because I was startled when Chandler reappeared, covered in triumph and more than a bit of flour. He settled himself, picked up his wineglass and casually took a sip.

“You saved her life,” he said.

“You saved her life.”

“We saved her life,” he corrected implacably. “Unconscious when I arrived, didn’t seem to be breathing. Devil of a thing figuring out how to get enough flour out to let her breathe a bit. Ended up slapping her butt like a newborn babe. She let out an outraged cough, and voilà.” I giggled at the image. “That makes three lives you’ve saved, as far as I know.”
“Does it?” I was startled at the thought. “The Her-Inquisitor, I guess? I never found out if he would have been found without my interference…”

“He collapsed out of sight of the scouts. Perhaps he would have found the strength to pick himself up and keep going, but that does not appear to be the prevailing theory.”

“Oh. Good. And The Iron Bull, I suppose. Though I think you lose life-saver points if you save a life when that life is in danger because of you.”

“That one may be complicated, true. But that young lass -”

“- Elise. You should know the name so you aren’t surprised by the badly-scrawled note that will accompany the plate of sweetmeats that mysteriously arrives at your table sometime soon.”

Chandler detests being interrupted. “Yes, yes. That young lass would unambiguously be dead if you were not here.”

“I… hadn’t thought of that.” Cole and I enjoyed the realisation, the simplicity and cleanliness of it. Elise is alive and that is a Good Thing.

“You are really rather pretty when you smile like that,” Chandler observed.

I grinned. “And what am I the rest of the time?”

“Pleasant.”

My grin became ever-so-slightly mocking. “Chandler, precious. I am aware that you are trying to put me off balance so that the next thing you say is easier for you. I will forgive you this time, but fuck with my self-esteem again for your own benefit and I will unleash the most demonic hurt pouting you have ever seen.”

His face was wry. “You are a nightmare for spies. A nightmare.”

I just looked at him and didn’t try to shield my expression.

“And I have actually hurt you a smidgen. I apologise, my dear. You do look rather pretty when you smile like that. The other was -”

“Irritatingly true?”

“Less than half of the story, and as you said, manipulative to boot.” I watched him deliberately disengage some of his usual charisma to make the next words more sincere. “If an artist were to sketch your features, then yes, I think they would be described as pleasant. But that would be to entirely forgo the charm of enthusiasm and expression that you possess.”


“I of course am perfection incarnate under all circumstances.”

“Naturally.”

Chapter End Notes
My sweeties!
We sat awhile.

Chandler struggled to find the perfect words for a few minutes then gave it up as a bad job and just barged in.

“I was an orphanage brat. In Gwaren of all Maker-forsaken places, right after the occupation ended. You can imagine.” I could. It was not a pretty image. “There are people who search such places for talent, and naturally I was chosen. Acquired.”

“How old?”

“Eight.” I winced. “I was carefully trained for a decade, then into the field. Where I’ve been ever since. It -”

He stood up. “I’m saying this all wrong.” He paced for a minute then suddenly swerved to me and said, “When I was a child, what I wanted was…” He sighed. “It was utterly irrelevant.”

eat it or don’t, there isn’t anything else

He continued, “Then I was an apprentice and my wants were regarded as actively subversive. We were punished for them.”

“For acting on them?”

“For having any at all.”

I winced again, harder, then thought about a few implications and winced even harder still. My face hurt.

“They did have a point. When you’re working in the shadows, your desires are something between inconvenient and dangerous. We must be able to complete the objective, no matter our personal feelings on the subject.

“One acclimatises, creates one’s own sense of normal. Depressing, really. Then came that day, on the road. You and your sudden uncanny insight.”

what did you see? how much do you know? how much can I hide?

I moved quickly to reassure him. “It wasn’t that big a leap, dearest. All I knew was you needed a hug and someone to care that you existed. And that you were sick of people trying to acquire a piece of you, like you were a particularly tasty sandwich.”

“What a flattering metaphor, thank you kindly.”

I shrugged cheerfully. I still had no idea where this was going.

He said, “This is ridiculous. When I come to say it, it seems so small as to be insignificant. But when you made it clear that my wants signify, and anyone who thinks otherwise is wrong…” He looked off over the rooftops. “No-one has ever said that to me. Ever.”
“It was revelatory. I’m still trying to parse that idea, what it means. I’m finding that I am quite angry at a number of people, and I am here partly because the Night Lady and I agree that I should not be anywhere near field work right now. But also I’m here because… what you are doing is good work, Emma. You changed my life.”

My eyes misted over. When they cleared, Chandler was holding out a hand. I took it and was hauled up into a hug.

“Fuck you, Chandler!” I sputtered. “You just wanted me to get all floury with you.”

His laughter shook even more flour into my hair.

Chapter End Notes

Maker bless the wiki people who allow me to do some intensely detailed research into timelines.
After deflouring ourselves - ha! - Chandler and I made an appointment for the next morning to begin my Official Spy Work. I needed to run a few errands and have a nap. I was mildly certain he’d spend the entire time on his mustache.

Errand Number One: Tell Sister Leliana About The Potential Captain Hurters. She was not there, so I sat at the decoder’s desk and wrote a note, appending the list. I tried (and mostly failed) to not feel self-righteous as I did so. It’s amazing how quickly that happens when bigots are involved.

Errand Number Two: Acquire The Chant Of Light In Kingspeak And Orlesian To Perform Linguistic Comparisons With My Shiny Elvhen Copy. That was about as easy as you’d think. I even managed to find ones that fit into my pouches. My belt got heavy, but broad hips must be good for something.

Errand Number Three: Shopping. None of the merchants had boots, but I was told a cordwainer was supposed to be coming in a week. I bought toiletries, a new quill, a lovely shade of indigo ink, and the ribbon Cole had been talking about earlier.

Who do we give it to, honey?

Betsy.

Is she the one wearing the ribbon, or giving it?

giving it. to Shannon

The below-stairs maids are having a love affair? That’s so sweet!

...

Okay, but how do I give it to Betsy without either scaring the Void out of her or telling her about you?

Chandler?

Yeah. Chandler will know.

Errand Number Four: Report To The Healers For A Check-Up. I was poked, prodded, and lectured about my humours for a bit. (My choler is inadequate. And that is apparently a… bad thing?) Then there was a lot of umming and ahing about my continued exhaustion. One mage muttered, contempt dripping from every syllable, about “the apostate’s ill-informed speculations”.

No they aren’t! Solas is brilliant, you ignorant muffin!

Of course, I had that thought assemble about five seconds too late and so I had to choke on it in fuming silence. Damn it.

Next, an apprentice was tasked with removing my bandages, while his mentor watched and clucked. She was physically restraining herself from taking over the task, which I found so amusing that I didn’t look down until after the job was finished.
Oh. Oh mercy.

The scars on my wrists and ankles were jagged, uneven. I thought that the months of weaker southern sun had evaporated my Marcher tan until my skin was contrasted with these pale pink obscenities, each most of an inch wide. These weren’t subtle, weren’t benign. They shouted, and they taunted. They were so. Ugly.

four

I can count them, yes.

Chandler said you saved three lives. but it was four. he forgot to count mine. Vanadirthavean, The Iron Bull, Elise, me. you saved four people

Four scars.

Four lives.

I bit the inside of my lip and accepted the trade. It’s not that big a cost to save four lives, I reminded myself. It’s not. It’s really not. I blinked back a tear. It’s fine. Fine. I am okay with this.

“Good news!” said the apprentice. “These have healed enough that we don’t need to bandage them again! You can just leave them as is.”

“Ah. I see,” I replied. “Thanks.”

The mentor told me I was free to go. She didn’t even wait until I was out of earshot before starting to tell her charge that his patient-care skills needed some further refinement.

Chapter End Notes

So many puns and I love every single one of them
I awoke just as tired as when I laid down. Time to go bother the ignorant elven apostate, I guess.

It’s not that I didn’t want to talk to Solas, because I did. He’s clearly one of those friends who require a lot of work, but is also completely worth the effort.

I just didn’t want to be clingy. Pretty sure he isn’t a fan of that.

I’d been planning to bump into him at some stage, you know, all, “Oh hey, friend! How are you? I am not the kind of person who you will ever feel the need to flee from and hide behind a bookcase because they won’t leave you alone! Nope, not me.” Casual-like.

But it’s been… six days? I think? since the fight in the dungeon and I’m still tottering and falling asleep on vertical surfaces. I’d like to start impressing Sister Leliana and helping people.

Not in that order.

(Maybe.)

Cole sternly insisted on food first, then led me back toward the spiral stairs. We found him perusing the small history shelves. Whenever I do that spine-reading head tilt I look utterly ridiculous, like I’ve been decapitated and haven’t yet received the memorandum. Solas looked like a very urbane, literate heron.

Flashback to our first meeting, one of Cole’s echoing insights: Solas, maybe ten years old. Split lip, purpling eye. Same heron stance. Reassuring his mother: I didn’t start it, I kept my composure, yes mamae, I let them hit me a couple of times and then I ran away.

He was only five when his magic came; he doesn’t even remember what it was like not to be hunted. Keep control, little one, at all costs you must keep control.

And he has. At all costs. Oh, fenor.

I took one involuntary step forward but Cole held me back.

stay shaded, subtle, seeing the scene, unseen

Shit, you’re right. If I go to Solas now I will emote all over him and he will run the fuck away. We’ll return later.

“Hello, Emma. Cole.” Damn it! “You were looking for me?”

Do not say what you’re thinking. Say something else. Say anything else. I rifled through my idle thoughts, desperately.

“I’ve been thinking about memory palaces, and the implications of them.” Yesss, brilliant. Saved by the blurt.

Solas tilted his head in curiosity. “How so?”
I took two steps forward, then everything went a bit wobbly and I ended up briskly bonking my head on a corner. Fenedhis that hurt.

Solas shooed me - never touching me directly, other than slapping me in that dream-place I don’t believe he ever has and why am I thinking of this now? - into the puffy chair and looked me over intently.

“I told her it was far too early for you two to merge again,” he tsked. “You are not healing, Emma. Is your sleep shallow, unfulfilling?”

I thought about it. “Yeah. I don’t feel like I’m dreaming.”

“And indeed you are not. Your connection to the Fade is wounded; you seek to replenish the energy you used, but you cannot. And thus you sleep and sleep again.”

“Will it heal naturally?”

“Given time, most injuries heal. I suspect that it would take a very long time indeed. You are no mage, thus you have no instinctive connection to guide you. Cole may be of help.”

“Risk, ridden screaming into being, the whirlpool draws. Will if must, must if she says.” I cleared my throat. “I’d like to add that I think that sounds terrible and would prefer not risking Cole if better options exist.”

“Alternatives exist. Whether you would regard them as better depends on you.”

***

The Trevelyan library was built into its own wing, with massive windows high up on every wall and a domed roof made of some translucent material that I never identified. It is well-lit at all times, but most lovely at about four in the afternoon.

I was back in the stacks where I once made out with a visiting archivist for a half-hour. Not many encounters are so small and perfect, are they? We never saw each other again but I still think of him fondly.

Cole put his hands on my shoulders, exactly in the right spots. I placed my hands over his. “Cole-love.” I said it as a blessing. I turned and tiptoed to kiss his cheek. He smiled bashfully.

I ran my finger down shelves, breathed deeply the smell of paper and… hey! I marched to the closest porte-fenêtres. Threw them open and stepped out onto the balcony. The ocean, oh mercy the smell of the ocean, I have missed it so much.

In, out. In, out. I closed my eyes and filled my lungs.

I heard a noise behind me. “I don’t know why you said this was possibly a worse option. This is amazing.”

Very wry, Solas said, “This is not the ritual. I simply needed to locate your consciousness before we begin.”

Oh. Damn. I didn’t feel any desire to move from the ocean and the library. “I did notice… last time my projection matched the memory, but this time it doesn’t. Why is that?”

“How are you certain?” he asked.
I pointed inside at a stand-lamp. “A bunch of those fell over during the quake, nearly burnt the place down. They were all replaced with sturdier bases. The quake was in 9:30, about three months before we got word of the Blight. I did not look like this -” I gestured broadly “- more than a decade ago.”

I hummed. “Although I don’t look like this now, do I? I have scars now. Is my mental projection derived from how I perceive myself?”

He walked around me, thoughtfully. “Yes. I am impressed that you grasped the concept. Many students of magical theory struggle with it.”

“Cole was something of an object lesson,” I remarked and managed not to think something very snarky. I stroked Cole’s arm and smiled at him; he was completely distracted by the seabirds wheeling overhead. “I wonder how long it will take for the scars to be seen…?”

“Generally that occurs when you accept them. Are you ready, or would you like to procrastinate further?”


“Likely you need do nothing but exist. That would prove challenge enough for most. The Fade, the true Fade, is not the structured place of your conscious mind, or even the whirl of dreams. It has shape, and logic, but both are determined by rules that are not always those mortals are familiar with.”

“So not just crazy shit, but the kind of crazy shit that I don’t even have the vocabulary to comprehend?”

“Even so.”

I took a deep breath of ocean air. “Kay. What if I fail to continue existing? Is this a ‘wake up in a cold sweat’ kind of deal, or a ‘I don’t bother bringing flowers anymore, she just lays there’ kind of deal?”

“I will be present, to keep you safe. I believe you would describe the outcome as a ‘Cuss, cuss, now we must waste Solas’ time once more’ kind of deal.”

I grinned my most unabashedly delighted grin at him. We’re coming along splendidly, I think.

“There are dangers. Demons, you have demonstrated a good theoretical understanding of. You understand the rules. Not every interaction is capable of causing you harm, but it is best to assume that an arrow is something to be avoided.”

“Safe. Simple. I like it.”

“Remain as calm as possible. Strong emotion will attract many kinds of attention, not all of them pleasant. Lastly, I will be present, but you will not always be aware of me. Mistrust any who present themselves in my form.”

“Do we have a secret handshake so I know it’s you?”

“No,” he said, sternly. “Many clever spirits know how to mimic such signs.” I hung my head and tried to look ashamed instead of amused. Not my best work, there. The sterner he looked the harder I had to bite my lip.

Once he’d finished schoolmastering at me he asked, “Are you ready?”
“One moment.”

I turned into Cole’s arms. Awkward with his elbows and still so self-conscious, but sweet as always. He stared down at me and said, intently, “Bears sleep. Even in the Blight. Long, slow, always knowing. It’s a cave, not a cairn.”

“I know, love. I’ll remember.”

“I’ll wait!” he replied, then vanished. Solas and I were alone for the first time. Odd thought.

“You are very good with him,” he said, neutrally.

“It’s easy,” I replied.

Then the world disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

Word Nerdery:
'porte-fenêtres' literally translates to 'door-windows' and why you would ever use another term I cannot fathom
Ever cracked a peppercorn between your teeth? That wasn’t what was happening, not even a little, but it’s the best approximation I was able to make of the sensation.

I found myself in a grotto, green and enclosed. An elven woman was kneeling over her three infants. Each was wiggling and happy, but she had her hands over her eyes, shoulders shaking.

In Elvhen I said, “Mother, may I help?”

She startled, and replied in something I heard as Kingspeak but would bet wasn’t spoken as it. “I am empty. My babes will starve.”

My heart ached with sympathy. Physically ached. Woah, there. Demonsdemonsdemons, do not volunteer to breast-feed a random spirit’s infants, self.

I pulled my penknife from my pocket and leant over. I cut my dress from mid-thigh in one long strip and gave her the fabric. “Here, bind them with this. We’ll find someone who can help.” Together, a little awkwardly, we attached all of her children to her back. They instantly fell asleep.

We walked three steps together and then we were on a road. Fitted stone, like the Tevinter highways. Embedded in one I saw a small timepiece, which I carefully stepped around. We walked along the road and then followed as it arched sharply upward. I put my hand on my companion’s shoulder to help; it felt nothing like flesh.

After a long time walking up the incline I realised that the joins in the stone had disappeared and we were walking on smooth marble. Another unmeasurable time later I realised that actually we were walking on bone - a giant tusk of impossible size. Maybe a fang.

The babies started to cry, simultaneously. Behind us, a great baying of horns began. “Run!” we both cried, and did so, down a line of fan bearers and clapping dwarven courtiers. In one of the lost tongues they encouraged us and gave critiques of my ankles that I could definitely have done without.

We clambered awkwardly over a mound of linen the size of a small hillock and stopped. A griffon flew over our head, diving toward a horror shaped as a dragon. Soldiers flying the banners of Tevinter and Rivain marched with a mass of tribeman toward an oncoming horde of darkspawn. I heard dwarves singing as they fought, and were cut down. Then a massive blast of light, blinding and incredibly loud, came forth from the dragon. Wailing in terror, the darkspawn fled.

The next moment, there was a moment of painful silence, then the battle began again from the beginning.

“Holy shit,” I breathed.

We climbed down a rope made of hair and into a shallow river. I froze to the knees, but my companion seemed unbothered. She made a complicated gesture; a great bear came forth and knelt before us. We clambered on.

I found a massive thorn carved with runes embedded between the bear’s shoulders. “Bear, should I
remove this?” I asked.

“Nay,” she rumbled. “For then I should be cursed once more. You can scratch my neck if you wish.” Leaning forward I did so. The bear laughed melodically.

Then the bear was gone and we were moving through a mass of ?? ?? toward a ?? ?? I smelt a strong odour of ?? ?? and my head swam.

“We grow close,” my companion said. My eyelids felt wrong. I was falling in a non-existent direction and there was a wolf on my trail.

I forced myself to use the ?? ?? to ?? ?? the ?? ?? until we ?? ?? at least once more.

Then we arrived at a dark-purple ocean with the moon shining from the wrong direction. “Good, good,” she crooned. “Drink, little one, this is what you have sought.”

I fell to my knees in the foamless surf and drank. It tasted of fortified wine, dark and earthy. I wept pale pink tears. She took the tears and fed them to her babes, who giggled drunkenly.

She said, “None take. In a closed system, all we do is rearrange.”

I nodded sagely then I was gone once more.

***

I surged awake from the pallet I’d been placed on. The pale scars surprised me as I moved my hands; they did that a lot. Solas slowly stirred from a nearby chair.

“Interesting,” Solas said. “You went deeper than I would have guessed. Are you well after that experience?”


“Of course you… what?!!”

Chapter End Notes

Writing Fade stuff is a goddamn blast, ya’ll.
Wheeeeee

I left Solas, still half-asleep and wholly convinced that I was joking when I said I wanted to do it again. I don’t know why. I rode a bear. I drank the ocean. I’m pretty sure I saw the end of the First Blight. It was awesome.

I told Cole about it and he was impressed. Okay, he didn’t really see why I liked it so much. But he was happy that I was happy.

Not just happy. I was suddenly aware of energy, the kind that makes perpetual motion machines out of young children, the energy that says, “Go places. Fast. Do things. All the things! Nownownow!”

sleep

But I feel so much betterrrrrr

but you still need sleep

I have slept forever why can’t I go help some people don’t you want me to go help some people?

no. SLEEP.

The last was said in a tone stolen directly from the Parent’s Union. Unfair.

Muttering and pouting and grumbling under my breath, I went down the stairs to my chamber. Stupid rackin frackin spirits think they know so much more than me just ’cause they’re in my body don’t know what they’re on about I feel fine, better than I have in years in fact why can’t I just go for a walk along the battlements or something no way I’ll even be able to sleep when I feel this electrified anyways…

I undressed and laid down. I was out so fast that I didn’t even hear Cole get to say, “I told you so.”

***

“New dress?”

I twirled for Chandler. I wasn’t much enamoured of the colour, being a flat brown midway between chocolate and caramel, but the square-cut bodice fit beautifully and Antonia had added a sheepskin collar that felt both warm and very comforting. She’s a sweet lass. She’d burbled happily about the boy she’s walking out with while one of her more cynical co-workers rolled her eyes so hard they seemed in sincere danger of popping out.

Like most scribes, I chose three-quarter-length sleeves. None of the seamstresses had commented on the scars, but they all saw them. Same as breakfast. Same as the bathhouse. Same as the guards.

they will stop noticing soon. then you will get used to them

I ’spose.

Chandler and I had decided on the Great Hall as our meeting point. He lead us through a door - garden? please can we go there? - and then down. (Boo.) Stairs and a big space and a room lined
with oddly-shaped bottles, one of which he pulled on.

A door swung open in the wall.

“You have got to be shitting me. We have a secret room. With a hidden door. Who even built this place?”

“I have no idea, precious. I rather like them, whoever they were.”

Down more stairs into a hollow echo-y darkness. Light travelled timidly, revealing old casks and long rows of wine shelves. The candle flames flickered. It felt… ominous.

The hairs on the back of my neck bristled. I did my best to ignore them.

“Right,” I said. My voice came out too loud in the space. I threw off the megrims and continued. “Where do we begin, milord?”

Chandler gave a professorial flourish. “A conundrum. Clearly we are required, by the vagaries of the Night Lady’s demands, to perform a nuanced and difficult task. The uncovering of traitors.”

“Which Cole and I have no idea how to accomplish.”

“True. But being, as I am, extremely brilliant and experienced, I do.”

I grinned. “Bully for you. Teach us, then.”

“I could not possibly hope to teach you even a fraction of the craft, pet. Not in this Age, at least. No, for this task I shall be in charge.”

“Meaning?”

“I shall sniff out traitors, using your… powers.” That sounded infinitely more feasible than anything I had thought up. I nodded. “First, I’ve read the reports on you. Allow me to clarify a few points.”

“Sure.”

“You cannot read minds. Not in the way most people think of.”

“No. Just hear them. Or parts of them.”

“Parts.”

“Need, fear, want, anger, sorrow. Cole hears those, and can pass it on to me. And also a lot of information that is tied to them.”

“If someone is angry, I presume that means what they are angry about.”

“Yes, but not just that. What shoes they were wearing when she told them. The weather on his last day. The taste of the apple before the raiders came. All sorts of stuff.”

“And the underlying pattern is…”

“A mystery to me. I think it’s just how people’s minds work. They take in lots of details when emotions are high, and the details become part of the gestalt.”

“Intriguing. And you cannot see that which is not part of those emotional experiences.”
“Yep. I know what you ate during your first meal with a hangover -” Chandler winced theatrically in memory, “- but I have no idea what you ate this morning.”

“As I thought. We can work with that.”

“Neat!” I wandered around a smidgen, looking for a chair or crate or perhaps a spooky skeleton to sit on. I made do with a low (quite sturdy) wine rack. Chandler tipped his head, clearly wondering what in the Void I was doing.

I said, “What? I wanted to get comfortable! I figured this would take a while.”

His eyes narrowed. “You think we can do this task. From here.”

“Yes? For a number of the names on the list, at least. I already know those people.”

“Correct me if I err, but you are telling me that you can read a part of their minds. Without being near them.”

I caught myself from giving a “Well, duh” shrug. A month ago all of this was new, I reminded myself sternly. “Yes,” I said. “We have a connection. Pretty tenuous in a number of cases, y’know, we’ve said hello a few times, waited in line together. But that’s plenty for Cole. He can follow the thread back to the person and hear them.”

I waved my hands, trying to frame the thought. “He… doesn’t see the world like mortals. Space is a largely irrelevant concept to him, and proximity is navigated by love more than miles. Anyone I am connected to is especially easy. And not to boast, but I am connected to a lot of people.”

lovers, friends, family. a thousand threads in every direction

I love it when you’re proud of me, honey.

I watched Chandler try to truly understand that idea, that perspective on the world. I saw the exact moment when he decided to stop trying because it made his mind hurt.

“Right. First on the list: the Inquisitor’s maid. Birgid.”

I blinked. “No.” Oh mercy, I didn’t tell him. How did I forget to tell him?

“Clearly, I am missing something, pet. Educate me.”

“Chandler… the first person on the list is you.”

Chapter End Notes

I had a lot of fun adding to the geography of Skyhold.
“Absolutely not.”

“I can see why you wouldn’t want to, but-”

“Absolutely fucking no!” Chandler stomped five steps away, hands clenching and unclenching. He kept moving. *Pacing.*

nonononono she can’t see mustn’t see nonono

“Oh precious,” I breathed.

“Don’t you fucking *precious* me,” he spat. “Don’t look at me with your big eyes and pretend sympathy. You don’t know me. And you *will not* know me.”

He thundered back at me, towered over me. Hands jerky and impatient. Threatening. Deliberately threatening.

I kept looking up with my aforementioned big eyes. Soft, soft and sad.

why isn’t she scared? why is she still looking at me like that?

The giant angry tempest glared at me.

I sympathied back at him.

Long, long moments passed.

He started to laugh. It wasn’t a happy sound.

“Fuck me,” he spat. “I can’t even threaten a mouse like you. I take it back, *pet.* I don’t believe you helped me at all.”

I stood up and wrapped my arms around him.

He stiffened, almost pulled away. Maybe only the awareness that I wouldn’t follow stopped him.

At first, he just endured the embrace, a block carved from hardwood and recriminations.

Just a little, his head moved. As if it were suddenly too heavy for him to keep upright. He wilted into my shoulder and just like that, all the bolts came undone. We ended up in a heap on the cobbles and he was weeping, uncontrollable and a little frightening.

I rode it out, stayed solid and soft as my sheepskin collar got a drenching.

you’re doing so good

Thanks, honey.

Some time - who cared how much - later, Chandler acquired a dire case of self-consciousness. He started shaking his head, like a bell whose every chime rang, “Idiot.”
“Stop that,” I chided.

He smiled a bitter smile but did. “Well, this is deuced awkward.”

“Only if you let it be, precious,” I replied. I dug through my pouches and gave Chandler back his own handkerchief. He snorted and began to wipe his face.

“You must understand…”

“I do. Some, at least.”

“Really,” he said, skeptically.

“Want me to prove it?”

He shuddered. “I would infinitely rather you didn’t, no.”

“Then just believe me. I understand. We won’t read you, not without your permission. We’ll still pick up… snippets, accidentally. But we won’t try to. Okay?” He nodded. “But you must understand my position, too.”

He regarded me, thoughtfully. “You… can’t share secrets. Better: you won’t share. Not without knowing unambiguously that they are safe with me. Which you can’t do without reading me.”

“Which you won’t let me do. We are at an impasse.”

“We would be,” he said as he stretched himself into his full height, “if not for the fact that I am utterly, unquestionably, brilliant.”

Still on the floor, I grinned up at him.

***

Chandler rubbed his face - without disarranging his mustache - and paced thoughtfully. “This isn’t impossible,” he said. “Granted, you have what we in the business refer to as a speaking face. Seriously, look at you right now. So pleased at the description. Ah, you’ve caught yourself feeling perhaps a little smug. Now you’re amused at me. I can continue.”

I snickered. Chandler said, “But you aren’t an idiot and clearly you do have excellent information sources. We won’t make a spy out of you, but we can still form you into one deuce of an asset, Maker willing.”

I thought about it. With the Nightingale’s non-disclosure edict, we would be extremely limited in our options for helping people openly. If we used Chandler’s spy tricks, perhaps we could do more good. Give the damn ribbon to Betsy. Satisfy Sister Leliana. Help people, without the risk of discovery.

Underhanded do-goodery it is, then.

“We accept,” I said.

Chandler and I shook on it.

“Where do we start?” I asked.

He rolled his eyes. “We are beset by an abundance of options, precious. We should begin with your
most immediate deficiencies in regards to the current mission.”

I was surprised by how irritated I was at not already being a perfect covert operative, despite having spent literally zero days of my life before this one working toward the goal. Actually, I realised, I had deliberately worked at becoming the opposite of one in a number of ways.

It made the first priority obvious.

“Chandler, my sweet. Teach me how to lie.”

Chapter End Notes

Word Nerdery:
I am currently going through this, making a few corrections (mostly where I have let the word 'hell' sneak in, thank you astute readers). Some I am replacing with 'Void', but some can't be directly translated so - although "Voidacious" is kinda great? - and alternatives must be found.
I like 'deuce'. It belonged to Chandler, but Emma starts using it too and I love that so much.
We sat again in the nook, both enjoying the mountain air. I’d acquired a few grimy stains on my dress from the cellar floor that made me sigh.

"The first thing to keep in mind," Chandler said, “is that we believe we want the truth. This is not correct. What we actually want is for the world to make sense.”

My brow crinkled.

“Surely this is not a surprise to you, pet.”

“No, that I did already kinda know. I was just… not expecting you to use the word ‘we’.”

He chuffed laughter. “Speeding ahead to lesson number two, and so quickly! Amateurs fall into the trap of assuming that because they can use the rules of deception, somehow they mystically become immune to them. We are not so stupid.” He made a gesture that clearly said that we’d return to that subject later and got back on topic.

“Implications of this first insight include…”

… utterly destroying a few of my assumptions about myself, increasing my general cynicism levels by about 17%, and opening up a plethora of new ways to lie. Also, on the plus side, showing me how to solve the dilemma of Betsy and the ribbon.

He tested me on the theory and practice, gave me deceitfulness homework (!!!) then declared that we’d covered enough on that topic for our current needs, with dry commentary on how much I had yet to learn.

I did not disagree.

We wrangled amicably for awhile about the next priority. I deliberately spent some time looking at the mountains and quieting my mind before I began.

***

Cole and I found Solas in the rotunda, working on the mural. Oh, I should have known it was his. It feels like him: ordered and brilliant.

As always, I toned my greeting down by three shades and he still found it a bit overwhelming. He returned it politely, nonetheless.

“You seem much improved,” he observed. “You slept well?”

“Ugh, it was amazing. Yes. Thank you again.”

“And have you regained your sanity?” He picked up his charcoal and marked a few strong lines.

“Have I… oh! Do you mean, am I still completely enthusiastic about visiting the Fade again some time? Most assuredly I am.” I could see the corner of his mouth quirk.
I moved closer to the wall so I could watch his profile. “I still don’t see why you think that is odd. You do it all the time.”

“It is… a complicated matter, and one perhaps best left for another time. I doubt it is why you are here today.”

“No. I wanted to have the conversation I began before I went all woozy.”

“About memory palaces?” He added a curve to the piece - a head? Not human or elf.

“Yes.” I cast a glance upward, to the huge space full of potential eavesdroppers. He took the hint and put down his charcoal.

“Shall we continue this conversation in my chamber?”

“Yes, please.”

He led us through a small archway, down a narrow dusty corridor and opened a door.

“You’re shitting me.”

He regarded me narrowly as he wiped his hands. “Is there a problem?”

I looked around the tiny windowless room we’d spent time in yesterday. At the pallet on the floor, the single chair, the simple desk. “This is your room?”

“What did you think it was?”

“I thought it was a storage closet! Because that is clearly what it is. This is -” I rubbed my face, angrily, “- just - don’t tell me this is the room you were assigned, please. Tell me you are an idiot, I would much prefer it if you were an idiot.”

He grew very still. “Yes, I chose this room. It suits my needs. I fail to understand why it makes me an idiot.”

Cole chided:

what needs? you know


He leaned against the desk and said, “I grow ever more confused. Certainly you add a touch of the unexpected to our conversations.”

I laughed. “Well, lovely. Glad to keep you entertained.” I moved my hands, helplessly. Where to start? “I can see why this room appeals to you. It’s very secure, especially while you’re asleep.”

“It is.”

“And yet. I…” I scrunched my face in thought. “I’d wager five royals Lady Josephine was massively displeased when you refused the rooms she’d offered and demanded this one instead.”

“Demanded? You think I demanded it?” He was mildly amused.
“Tell me I’m wrong,” I replied.

A long pause.

“She was indeed less than thrilled by my choice and I was forced to be… quite determined.” I laughed out loud. “I presumed that was due to her own sense of propriety. Perhaps I missed something?”

“You missed the Payroll Riot.”

“Which was?”

“We’re paid on the first of the month. The first occasion was before I joined and apparently went smoothly enough. It was a small payday, of course.” He nodded. “The second payday… we had fifty-odd furious shouting people crammed into the Ambassador’s office. The noise of it…” I shuddered at the memory.

“What was their grievance?”

“The Inquisition was paying elves as much as humans,” I said. I tried to squeeze in as much contempt for the idea as I felt.

“Ah,” Solas said. It was a big ah, with lots of nuances in it.

“After - have you ever seen Lady Josephine angry? It’s an awe-inspiring sight - after she Dealt With the situation, once a handful of self-righteous shitweasels had quit in high dudgeon, once the rest had slunk away, I brought her some tea and did my best to tell her that she’d done the right thing.

“I was a bit surprised, you know? Pleased but surprised. Lady J is a deeply conservative woman in a number of ways, I hadn’t expected such progressive ideals from her. She took the tea and said, ‘How we treat our elves tells the world how we expect them to treat our Herald. I will not allow them to treat him at anything less than his worth.’”

Solas understood. “Hence my chambers.”

“Hence your chambers. Don’t want word to get out that we stick favoured and important elves into terrible poky cupboards, y’see.”

“Even if terrible poky cupboards is what they would prefer?” His eyes twinkled.

“Even then. Again, I apologise for calling you an idiot.”

“If such great stirrings are going on under my nose unobserved, perhaps the appellation is appropriate. Now, Emma.” His tone took on a great mock-frustration. “What did you want to ask me about memory palaces?”

“Oh. Right! How do I build one that Cole can use?”

Chapter End Notes

Published a day earlier than usual due to Reasons.
Be kind to each other, jellybeans.
By the time I returned to the Secret Cellar, Chandler had acquired the following:

1. A large table
2. Two chairs
3. Two candelabras
4. Candles for same
5. One bottle of consolation wine
6. Three slates and chalk
7. A lunch basket
8. A portrait of some old king?

How in the blazing fuck he’d managed to bring them down here without being spotted, I shall leave to more brilliant minds than my own. He looked quite smug about it, so I refused to ask.

“So, good news. Cole can access any memory palaces I create easily enough. As to adding items to it, that’s more complicated, yadda yadda magical et cetera, but we’re going to make some experiments.”

“That was… stunningly uninformative.”

“Do you honestly want the long version? I didn’t understand a quarter of it and I was there.”

“Pet,” he said patiently, “You just seem terribly blasé, considering the conversation is literally about messing about in your mind.”

I paused. That was a good point. “True. But it’s Cole.”

“You trust him that much.”

“Yes,” I said. My absolute faith perplexed Chandler, I could tell. Just the idea of consciously choosing to hand over that much control was painful, like a hot poker held in a leather glove. Burning and ruin yet to come.

He shook his head. “Very well. Clearly you know the theory of memory palaces. Only the theory, I suspect.”

“I have some friends who use them. They’ve always sounded interesting… I just never got around to actually putting in the time.”

“You’ve dabbled in mnemonic devices.” I cannot possibly convey how dry his delivery was.

“You arse,” I laughed. “I’ve considered it. Mostly I’ve just made do, with, y’know, *writing shit down.*”

“Welcome to the complicated world of cloak-and-dagger intrigue. Written records are too risky. You could still tell me all the answers you dig out, if that’s simpler for you.” His eyes glinted.

I rolled my eyes at him.
We spent a few hours establishing the rudiments. I’d chosen Lady Evelyn’s study, a place I had worked in for more than a decade. Chandler listened to my description of the room and its furnishings.

“Good, the foundation is set. You have quite an eye for detail, dearest. Impressive.”

“I… umm… thanks.” I smiled an awkward self-conscious smile. I couldn’t explain why that compliment made me feel so pleased and embarrassed. Maybe because praise from experts is always the most gratifying? I didn’t know. I just knew that it made me fidget and blush and try hard not to show it.

He pretended not to notice. Very polite.

After more practice and a late lunch and one long chat about nothing in particular, he pronounced that I was ready for the next discipline.

“Imagine, pet. You are a traitor. Set the scene.”

“Me? Like… actual me?”

“Certainly. Simplest.”

“Okay. Ahh…” I drummed my fingers on the table. Why would I want to betray the Inquisition?

the lady

Ooh. Good one. Thanks, honey.

I stood up and paced as I thought aloud. “I’m furious at the Inquisition. They let Lady Evelyn die. Marta. Ser Grieves. It’s all their fault, I think. The Bann thinks so too.”

“Good. Continue.”

“I will… join. Pretend I support them. Send information back home. Do them harm if I can. Fuck those guys.”

“Very well. I like the venom, very compelling.” I slashed a grin. “Now… consider. What are the questions you would not want to be asked, that would undo your façade, reveal your hidden agenda.”

“I thought you were going to tell me, oh great spy.” I sounded very snippy; I’d possibly gotten a bit too deep into character.

Or I’d found a pocket of real anger, one I’d hidden so well even I didn’t know it was there. I suddenly remembered Marta, giving me advice on the morning of the Conclave. Leaning over to straighten my collar. Fenedhis. I missed her.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, hard. “Fuck,” I muttered.

Arms went around me. I sighed into his shirtfront. “This just never ends, does it?”

“I am as patient as I am exquisitely coiffed,” Chandler reassured me.

I breathed my way through it. Eventually, anger melted into sorrow into quiet regret. “Sorry.”

“Pet,” he replied, low and a little clipped. “The vast majority of my problems are caused by people
who refuse to admit they feel the way they do. I find you absolutely refreshing by contrast.”

I looked up into his eyes and smiled at him. “You’re wonderful.”

“Well, yes.”

We disengaged and I shook my arms and legs out. “Okay. Back on track. I am a traitor. What questions would I not want to answer? Well, that’s a simple one to start. What do I want people to not find out about me? Bad wording. What do I want to keep secret about myself?”

Chandler nodded encouragement. I followed the thought. “Maybe even better: what am I afraid people will find out about me? I’m not sure if they’re the same question, or different ones.”

“Slightly different, pet. In most cases the answers will be similar, but some things we want to keep secret for reasons other than fear.”

“So should I ask both questions?”

“Unless you have reason not to, yes.”

“Am I allowed to write this down?” I asked cheekily.

“Just this once, I shall permit it. It’s been a long day, your memory palace is still under construction, and I can see you’re starting to flag.”

On a slate, I wrote Want to keep secret and Afraid people will find out about. I doodled a stick-figure woman in the corner, and gave her a speech bubble. “Fie, you have found me out!” she said.

Chandler thought this was very silly but didn’t bother commenting. Cole felt sorry for the little woman. I smiled at them both and badgered my brain into action.

“Right. Traitor. Grr.” I resumed my thoughtful pacing. “This is about loyalties, isn’t it? Or it can be. Who you want to punish. Who you want to win. Who you want to lose.”

“All of those are possibilities.” I leaned over to scribble Want to punish/suffer, Want to win and Want to lose on the slate. “Now think more mercenary thoughts, pet. Less vengeance, more lucre.”

“Umm. Who do I feel obligated to? Who am I afraid of?” He nodded, I paused with the list. “I may have to reword that first one.” I wrote Want to please, Who afraid of and Want to meet the obligations of. That should cover it.

I looked at my list of eight questions. They felt… comprehensive. “Okay, Chandler. Tell me about traitors.” He quirked a questioning eyebrow. “Y’know, actual traitors that you know. Have heard of. Hypotheticals to run my questions against, see if I’d catch them.”

“Ah. First type are financially motivated. They vary in the amount of guilt they feel.”

“But all of them would not want it to be known?”

“All is too sweeping a word to use on any group, dearest. All those I have known would likely be revealed by your list, I believe.”

“Good. Next type?”

“Idealists.”
“You mean fanatics.”

“Not always. Please do keep in mind that not all betrayals are identical.”

“Such as?”

“Such as quietly passing on word of a master’s mistreatment of his servants.”

Oh. Oh, I hadn’t thought of that.

My cheeks flushed and I bit my lip. I felt foolish and judgemental. I picked up the slate and wrote *Proud to have done*.

“Good, that closes one possible loophole,” said Chandler. “Next, the malicious.”

“What, people who betray secrets or create sabotage… why? Because they’re bored?”

“Occasionally. Sometimes because they will be paid or praised for fixing the mess they’ve made. To prove how superior they are. Some simply enjoy the chaos and suffering.”

“People suck.”

“Regularly.”

“Will the existing questions catch them?”

“I would add one more. Something about desperation. Betrayal can be cold, or very hot indeed.”

I banished the image of a schemer, fingers stapled together, laughing maniacally. Conjured instead a memory of a man I once saw begging on the street, with the face and stench of addiction all over him. A merchant’s runner had flung a few copper toward him in disgust. The beggar was rummaging through steaming horse dung to find any coins that he’d missed as I turned my face away.

That man’s betrayals were likely many, small, and desperate. *What do they need. What would they violate to get it.* I wrote small to fit the words in.

we can help them

Maybe. We can try.

“Is… is that all?”

“I think so, pet. You’ve had a long day. We can begin the actual questioning in the morning, once you’ve had a rest. Before the Inquisitor sits in judgement.”

“Wait… that’s tomorrow? I thought I had one more day!”

“For…”

“Nothing. Just an errand for Sister Leliana. Don’t worry about it.”

“Generally, errands for the Nightingale are worthy of concern, precious.”

“Sure,” I said, breezily. “But this one will be fine.”

*Chapter End Notes*
I'm pretty sure that the vast majority of EVERYONE'S problems are caused by people who refuse to admit they feel the way they do.
The door to the dungeons swung closed behind me. It was sunset and the light had a clarity and sharpness to it that made me remember once more that we were in the mountains.

I found myself standing in front of the training manikins I’d seen the Seeker skilfully thwacking at. Sure enough, there was a practice sword leaning nearby.

I picked it up. It was heavy, cumbersome. The wrapped leather of the handle was rough and warm in my palm.

I looked at the burlap man-shape. Memory rushed toward me, fingers hooked.

###

“You. You were in the wagon.” Gereon speaks with no inflection and no real interest in his voice. All life left with Felix.

“I was, yes.”

“I suppose congratulations are in order. You’re on the other side of the bars. You must have proved yourself useful as you wanted.”

“As… as I wanted?” How did he know that?

“You mutter in your sleep,” he says, factually. “What do you want now.”

“Just one question, serah,” I search to make sure I have the words exact. I still have no idea what this is about. “Did you know about the cabin near the dock?”

“What nonsense is this?” He straightens his back and looks at me, really looks at me, for the first time. He is interested.

“No idea, serah. I was just sent to ask. I assume it’s important, to someone.”

“A cabin. Hmm.” He ponders. “I cannot think what - ah, unless it was the site where the oculara were made. I believe Regnus said his planned location was near the dock.”

“What are oculara?”

He tells me.

###

I stared at the dummy and felt a bitter kinship with it. How stupid had I been? How ignorant? I’d pitied Gereon. Understood his terrible choices. Even forgiven them, a bit.

But I hadn’t known what he’d ordered done to the Tranquil.

“He didn’t think it was worth mentioning,” I told the manikin. “It’s not like they’re people, after all.”
My hand tightened on the leather. I remembered a guard, one of those who hasn’t yet learned how to flirt, ponderously telling me that some of the bigger swords don’t have sharpened edges. “They’re a bludgeoning weapon,” he’d informed me.

I tightened my jaw and my hand. Added the other one to the grip. Raised this ridiculous heavy metal thing on high and, overhand, slammed it down on the faceless head before me.

The impact shuddered up my arms. It felt good.


The sword jarred and fell out of my throbbing hands. I crumpled next to it and howled, like a wounded dog.

I covered my face in my hands. I would have wept, but I was just too tired. So I just sat there, in the dirt, until my arms stopped trembling.

Cole comforted me, mostly by just being there.

 Neither of us knew

 No.

 my presents have been painful

 Sometimes. But your presence is still a blessing.

Puns. Puns help.

I stood, swayed. Washed my face in a rain barrel and drank deeply. A dozen faces watched as I walked away, showing everything from contempt to concern. But none had the courage to approach.

I didn’t blame them.

***

I sat at my wobbly desk in the Ambassador’s office.

My first note was simple:

===

Nightingale,

He knew.

C & E

===

I dispatched it and stared at the empty parchment. I’d tried to write this a hundred times, and every time I’d given up. No more fucking delays.
Darlings,

We have to meet. Soonest. *Please.*

With love,

Your big sister

Two copies, in opposite directions.

I sat alone in the dark office after I sent them.

Outside, the wind was beginning to pick up.

Chapter End Notes

Every one of those oculara makes me sad. And angry.
“Emma. Emma. Maker’s armpit, you are a fright.”

“With diplomacy like that, you should have my job. Lady Josephine would love you.” I said this with a grimace that wanted, very badly, to be a smile. “It’s fine. I just overdid it on an impromptu workout yesterday and now my arms kinda don’t work.”

“That explains your hair, at least.”

“Hair is on top of my head. Arms don’t go that far right now.”

“Must have been… vigorous.” His face was very even, but his eyes glinted.

“You know, don’t you? Damn your eyes, you already heard.”

“I heard a rumour that someone who resembled my precious Emma did her utmost to decapitate a training resource. Didn’t go well on your errand, I surmise.”

“It… did not.” He patted my arm and took the opportunity to fix my laces. Then he gave out an exasperated sigh and went through his pockets. To my utter lack of shock, there was a comb in one.

“Sit still,” he chided, and began to neaten my hair. I heard more noises and smelt a strong odour of pomade. Pleasant, citrus-y. He changed my part and I mock-growled at him but endured it.

Then he pulled out a familiar - once more clean - handkerchief and moistened half of it in a water jug that had mysteriously appeared during the night. He scrubbed my face with simple ruthless efficacy that more than anything else made me recall his youth in an orphanage. He dried my face with the other half of the handkerchief and then popped it into my sleeve for later.

“Better?” I asked.

“Infinitely.”

“I’d thank you, but you were clearly doing that for your own benefit.”

“Looking at that wreckage would have been a hardship, true.” I poked my tongue out. “We are expected at the big to-do upstairs in an hour or so -”

“Are we? Is there a roll call?”

“- pet, if you believe the Night Lady would not notice our absence you have as much to learn about her talents as you do about the rudeness of interruptions. Miss Impudence, remove that smirk. I made your hair and I can just as easily unmake it. Yes, yes, I am delightful, you may continue that grin. As I was saying… we are expected upstairs in an hour. We may spend that time working on the list of traitors, if you wish.”

“What would you recommend?”

“I would suggest you spend that hour sitting in the garden reading one of the books I can see in your pockets. You are looking ragged.”
Cole strongly voted in favour of the idea. Outnumbered and grateful, I agreed.

***

There was no word/For heaven or for earth, for sea or sky.

Aucun verbe n’existait/Pour le paradis ou pour la terre, pour la mer ou le ciel.

I let both versions fill me, the subtle differentiations between “there was no word” and “no word existed”. The idea of an absence, the feel of it. Heaven and earth existed, perhaps, but with no word for them, what did existence even mean?

Then I opened the third book.

Manis, tel’av/Tel’av’En’an’sal’Tarasyl, tel’av’Tiralas, tel’av’manaan, tel’av’Tarasyl.

The first line was beautifully clean. Mana meant the past, but with that suffix it meant the eternal past. As far as past could get. It didn’t mean ‘in the beginning’. It meant, before the beginning. Before beginnings even existed. And tel’av, very simply, was ‘no word’. Not pluralised. Indicated that not one single word existed.

The second line listed each not-word that existed. Was earth the right word, or world? I admired the creativity of the translator in differentiating between ‘heaven’ and ‘sky’. I’d seen old Orlesian versions that struggled with it, wanting the ambiguity of heaven without having the right word to render it.

Before beginnings, no word/No word for blesséd sky, no word for earth, no word for ocean, no word for sky.

Okay, that’s the first level of meaning. Go deeper.

Manis, tel’av. I repeated it over to myself, quietly. Beautiful poetic weight, iambs both. Quiet rhythm, reverence in the simplicity and gravity of it. Unconventional choice in the verb tense. Was it simply to conform better with the shape? No. Deliberate. First word made clear that this was a time long ago, as far back as one could possibly go. Then the second part was in present tense. Clever! Adds an interesting dynamic tension.

Also creates the idea that time isn’t a construct that existed then. With no word, how could it? We can only experience that wordless moment through the lens of now, both because we are temporal beings caught in this reflective second, and because there is no valid way to experience that past. It was too formless to be apprehended.

Wow. My mind reeled at the implications, and I felt the reverent awe that these works are supposed to engender. The vastness, the incomprehensibility of it! All unlocked by two short words.

Then the second line. Mercy, that first one is a mouthful. I choked over it a few times before I realised that I should make the breaks at the composite words. No-word Blessed Sky. I tasted it, over and over. The contrast between the first two parts - negation and blessing. Holy nothingness. Nihilistic profundity.

I felt my eyebrows move every time I said tel’av’Tiralas, and while I was confident it was simply the kind of facial adjustments you gotta make to correctly create sounds, it also mimicked shock and then sorrow. It felt correct to be sorrowful that no word existed for the world. Anything that solid should possess form; not doing so was… just wrong.
Repeating the whole line over, the phrase was long and bludgeoning and I felt my mouth run out of spit before the end. That was definitely deliberate, a linguistic confusion that I was supposed to feel. How would it have been, existing before words? Terrible, utterly terrible.

I sat back, happy and sated in the sunny garden, letting the words sit in my mouth and along the limbs of my soul, and that was a phrase I just fucking said.

I liked it

Of course you did, Cole-love.

your mind is full. I like that too

You and me both.

is there more?

There’s always more.

Okay, authorial intent. Here’s where shit gets a bit distasteful. I remembered Hannah, the pest exterminator, winking cynically as she told me, “I always show them the snake under the bed ‘fore I kill it. They’re much more grateful that way.”

Show them the snake first, then bask in the applause. That definitely sounds like the Maker’s modus operandi.

And then there’s -

The gong rang. Did I just spend an hour translating six words? Yes. Yes I did.

And it was awesome.

Chapter End Notes

This is, unambiguously, the single geekiest thing I have ever written.

My mother was consulted on the French version (just to double-check) and she was powerfully confused. You’re doing literary analysis... with a fictional language?

I won't be doing much more of it, because it slows the story down and we have SO DANG MUCH story to get through, ya'll. You should see my notes.

But I hope you enjoyed it. I sure did.
I filed into the Great Hall after one quick detour to check what Chandler did to my hair. (It looked amazing. Of course.)

Inside, the Hall felt… not great.

not again it isn’t the same keep it together hey! fuck you friend give me some space here

We got this, honey. Where’s Chandler?

Found him. One muttered consultation later, I began to hunt.

“Sister Nightingale’s compliments. Would you join us on the balcony above?” I said to a dozen people having Haven flashbacks, three who’d describe themselves as Not Great In Crowds, and two who were getting overwhelmed by the smell of perfume. I deposited them into Chandler’s waiting courtesies.

The levels of tension had dropped considerably by the time I decided adding any more people to the gallery would be counterproductive. For the rest, I moved politely through the crowd, humming The Dawn Will Come at a volume most people wouldn’t hear through the susurrus. Not consciously, at any rate.

I found my colleagues, all clumped near the front with the boss.

“Ah, Emma,” Lady Josephine said, quickly squeezing my hand, “do join us. It will begin soon.”

I wasn’t half done, but I knew that tone so I didn’t bother arguing. I said hello to the others and stood, as usual, with Circe and Harden. He promptly told me an obscene knock-knock joke. I told him I’d missed him too.

Subtly, I nudged Circe with my shoulder in a companionable way. She didn’t smile because she never, ever does, but she nudged back. I beamed.

I turned around and did my best to peer above the crowd to the gallery. I couldn’t see a damn thing.

ugh, woman. cease your clutching

I snorted. It was going fine.

Between a seas of shoulders, I peeked at the dais. Front and centre was a chair, spikes and the eye motif, declaratively ugly. It wasn’t a throne, but it wasn’t not a throne, either. “The King and the Empress are going to throw a collective shit-fit,” I said, sotto voce. “Look at that thing.”

“Now it all becomes clear,” whispered Harden. “The Breach, the Inquisition… all an elaborate conspiracy designed to get Orlais and Ferelden to agree about something. Oh no! we are in the end times.” We snickered together.

Behind me, I could hear Lydia pretending to keep her voice down as she talked at Lark. I heard the word “scars” and promptly feigned a coughing fit so I didn’t have to hear the rest.
A door opened, and the Lord Inquisitor appeared.

Vanadirthavean wore it well. He had chosen to stay with his usual leather armour - it was already fancier than our stuff, anyway. He’d added one of the sigils on his shoulder, but that was it, I thought.

But his stance, his entire presentation, was different. In charge, was the only way I could think to describe it. If I’d been up there I would be wilting under the combined gaze of the gathered hundreds, but he was calm, smiling a little as always. Confident that he belonged. Confident in his rule.

It was honestly pretty hot.

I was most definitely not the only person who thought so.

“Thank you all,” he said, with modest volume and decent projection. We burst into an endless round of applause. His smile never altered as we cheered ourselves out.

“Thank you all.” He repeated it precisely and was rewarded with a round of laughter. “Thank you for the work you have all done to make Skyhold safe, secure, and comfortable. We will do good work here.” More applause. He smiled deeper for a bright charming second then grew serious.

“Ambassador. The first prisoner, if you please.”

Lady Josephine stepped forward, onto the first step of the dais, and made a gesture. We parted to let the guards through.

Gereon. I sneered along with the crowd, used the movement to get as close to the front as I could manage. The mages were not subtle in expressing their disapproval of their enslaver.

hurt him break him you know what he did hurt him punish him hurt him HURT HIM

Lady J read the charges, with accuracy and political neutralness. The broken magister replied with weary contempt. We all turned to the Inquisitor for his judgement.

Vanadirthavean paused, thinking. I saw him look very intently at someone in the crowd but could not see whom.

“Many here wish your death, Alexius.” The crowd roared their support of the idea. “But your death will not undo the harm you have already wrought. Nor help us to avoid harm yet to come.”

“But it will stop him!” A voice cried. “He still has power! What if he ruins more lives with it?”

“What would that accomplish?” Gereon replied. “I am already broken. It matters not. I will neither harm nor help you.”

“If you become one of our researchers, assist us in understanding the magic you used in Redcliffe, I am minded to let you live.”

I could feel the fucks Gereon utterly failed to give about that proposal. “Why should I do so?”

Vanadirthavean replied softly, very softly, “It would please Dorian.”

Gereon’s shoulders hunched. Still cared about a few things. Good to know. “Very well,” he agreed, ungratefully. He was dragged away, not fighting the guards but not assisting them one whit.
The crowd was still furious about the decision, but not at the man who made it. Andraste’s flaming bowels, we have a Leader. Feels very reassuring.

Next, a human man was brought forward. Scout armour, the Eye sigils removed, clearly with some force. “This is Jarvis,” enunciated Lady Josephine. “He has been accused of stealing from dead soldiers in the Exalted Plains.” She laid out the case; he was sentenced to two months assisting the healers and warned very strongly never to consider corpse-robbing again.

A number of soldiers were given commendations for their heroic actions during the battle of Haven. Each was presented with a decorated sword-sheath. Clever. An obvious distinction, but also a practical one.

I got a little bored, and spent a few minutes looking around. Chandler was doing fine. I waved at a few acquaintances. Caught sight of some horns above the crowd and smiled.

I was lost in my own - highly personal - thoughts when Lady Josephine said, “Emma. Emma of Ostwick, step forward.”

Beg pardon?

Chapter End Notes

Silly Jarvis, only the Inquisitor is allowed to rob corpses.
For a moment I was convinced that my pleasant daydream had wandered off into a nightmare and I
had imagined that whole thing. But Harden and Circe had both startled and were now looking at me
with similar, “What did you do” faces.

That is rather a long story, I thought nervously. I shuffled forward, clutched my hands together and
tried to remember how to breathe.

Surely, if I was being condemned there would be chains and things. Right?

Right?

I caught a glimpse of Lady Josephine and all those worries vanished. She was quietly, decorously
gleeful. So, not being executed then, which is nice.

I still had four hundred people looking at me. All of the yikes.

but your hair looks good

True!

“Emma,” Lady J said, “has performed acts of heroism, at great personal risk, that have saved many
lives. For reasons of security the details cannot be discussed, but this should not go
unacknowledged.”

That is totally not what happened.

cell. scared. save him, no matter what

Oh. Okay, that is kinda what happened.

Vanadirthavean nodded. How much did he know? I had less than no idea. “Our soldiers, our scouts.
Those we expect to risk their lives for the cause we serve, and we honour that sacrifice. But our
scribes?” He smiled warmly at me and it might have been entirely false but it felt so very thrilling. I
blushed.

“It… I was happy to serve,” I squeaked.

Out of absolutely nowhere - rogues are sneaky, but are they that sneaky? or was I just that dazed and
overwhelmed? - he produced a varnished box and presented it to me.

Inside was a chatelaine. A lovely piece, enamel and summer stone, not too rich or elaborate. One tiny
aide-memoire, a nib holder, a tiny pen-knife - it was clearly made for a secretary or a scribe.
Decorated with the Inquisition sigil, the one I had heard the elf who was a Red Jenny had started to
refer to as the Hairy Eyeball.

Dangling from the centre hook was one small, very elaborate key. I stared at it in shocked
understanding. I’d just been presented with a passepartout. Symbolic it might be, but I could open
any door in the castle with it.
I’d just been given absolutely unrivalled access to the Inquisition’s stronghold. You sneaky, magnificent bastards.

“Emma, thank you for your bravery and commitment.”

Applause rang out. Thunderously. Holy ashes, they were applauding me. I turned to face the cacophony.

For a moment I just stared, uncomprehending, at the noisy blur. Then Cole pointed out Tara, wolf-whistling and grinning at me, and suddenly I could see people again. Lots of familiar faces, mostly showing approval. One deliberate yawn from a noble who was immediately added to my To Be Carefully Monitored list.

Up the back, The Iron Bull gave me an enthusiastic thumbs up. Next to him - standing on a table, surely - Varric Tethras watched it all with a gleam that suggested he was taking copious notes.

The Commander, still at the front after presenting the soldiers with awards, politely clapped. He definitely doesn’t know about Cole, I decided. Lady Josephine beamed at me. My colleagues mostly basked in the approval, except for Sister Temperantia, who seemed to have nodded off.

And Lydia. Oh, I am a terrible person but her furious jealous grimace would keep me amused for days to come.

I scampered away from the dais and back into the crowd. My face was red and it had gotten suddenly quite warm in here, no? I exhaled noisily as Harden extended his hand for a high-five.

I could not possibly tell you how many other people were judged or recognised. Eventually it was done and the crowd dispersed.


“You noticed?” she smiled. “At my last report, you had not yet been fully cleared by the healers. See to it then meet me. We have some new duties to discuss.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

***

An hour later, the Ambassador and I met for tea.

For myself, tea is one of those take-it-or-leave-it kind of things. But Lady J has both a fondness for ceremony and tiny sweets.

I had rated the tiny biscuits with crème fraîche, which are sweet and a touch sour and generally fucking amazing. We ate in reverent silence then drank our tea, some pleasant minty blend I’d never tried before.

“Leli and I have been arguing,” she said.

“Over me? I’m flattered!” I was trying not to think about how stupidly pretty she looked at that moment.

     she thinks your eyes are pretty, too

     Oh, I did not need to know that.
“More about how best to make use of your talents. I hear she has you searching out traitors, which is an excellent start.”

“Technically, Cole is doing that. I’m just the ambulatory assistant.”

“Of course. My apologies, Cole.” The manners on this woman. We should lock her in a room with Corypheus; I’d give him an hour before he came out humble, wringing his bony hands together and begging everyone to forgive him.

“And of course I worry about you both. The training manikins…” She coughed politely.

Of course. No chance the Ambassador wouldn’t have heard about that.

I put my teacup down. It clinked in the saucer. “It’s hard,” I said simply. “I won’t pretend otherwise. But it isn’t just a question of… operational efficiency. I think Cole and I have the chance to make a lot of lives better.”

She paused, absorbed that thought, then rewarded me with a real smile. It was far sweeter than the little biscuits had been. “Perhaps a more useful question, then, is how Leli and I help you to do that.”

“I have some ideas. But I’ll need three things from you.”

Her head tilted. “And those things are?”

“Ten royals. One piece of parchment. And trust.”

She smiled. We began to negotiate.

Chapter End Notes

Nerd Notes:

A chatelaine is like the Ye Olde equivalent of a Swiss Army knife. Feel free to Google them if you want to lose a couple hours in the realm of functional prettiness.

The word "passepartout" literally means "go everywhere" and is the name for skeleton keys. (Plus the adorably luckless flunky in Around The World In Eighty Days.) In this case this isn't a master key as much as an all-access-pass that tells the guards to open the door. It's like the Inner Council wants to make Emma and Cole's job easier, or something.
One Brisk Negotiation Later

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One hour later, feeling excited and trepidatious and further full of love for my brilliant relentless boss, we returned to the office.

“Everyone,” she said. “Emma has finally been cleared to return to work. She will be taking on a number of new projects at my personal direction. I am sure I do not need to ask, but do extend all aid to her in her endeavours. Thank you.”

Everyone nodded and then returned to their work. I swore I could see actual smoke coming out of Lydia’s ears and I am a terrible person but it made me happy.

thinks she’s so -

Cole-love. Do not make me sympathise with her. I have limits.

I spent a few minutes shimming the wobbly legs of my desk, and then found that the chair was wobbly too. Sigh. I decided to ride it out for the time being. Probably the wrong choice. By the time I’d written out half of my mental notes from our meeting, I was feeling a tiny bit seasick.

Once finished, I took a break from my nausea-inducing chair. Asked a favour of Tara to fix that damn thing. The chatelaine attached to my belt drew eyes and approving smiles everywhere I went. Much more pleasant than the few looks given to my wrists. Perhaps I was projecting: I was still experiencing that uncomfortable, “What’s that flash of white in my vision oh that’s my scars I have those now, aren’t they hideous?” feeling roughly one thousand times a day.

It will pass, I reminded myself. Others have it much worse. You saved lives.

All true, not helpful. Different tack!

Okay, honey. Who shall we help first?

Cole Listened.

this way

***

As I suspected, there was a massive stable complex outside the walls, complete with grazing pastures and a couple of scouts setting up jumps.

Cole directed my attention to an old human man who was driving in fence posts.

What do I do, honey?

as little as possible

Ohhhkay. I have no idea what’s going on, but that is just fine. I ambled over and said, “Hello. Lovely day, isn’t it?”

That was all it took.
Jerrod - his name was Jerrod - told me about the weather when he was younger, and the way his joints responded to the sea breezes when he lived near the sea, and his first wife when he was much younger, and a good recipe for honey mead, and the time he got a splinter stuck in his ass and his second wife was laughing so hard as she tried to remove that he still has a scar there, and a bear he once found killed by mabari, and how he spent the money after he skinned it, and the same recipe for honey mead, and the regulars he used to see on his wagon driving route, and the worst job he ever had, and why he decided to stay here, and...

On one hand, it was an agonisingly boring exercise. Jerrod was one of those people who has nothing particular to say, and no particular skill in delivering it. He meandered, he repeated himself, he often referenced people I had never met without any context whatsoever. And he talked, with practically no encouragement, for the better part of three hours.

But. I could feel, unfurling like a new seedling, his soul taking up a bit more space. It was a very simple soul, ordinary and almost indistinguishable from a thousand others. But it was his, and it had been wilting. All it took was enduring one of the least interesting conversations of my life to change that.

The dinner bell rang, across the fields, and thank fuck for that because I was starting to run out of polite faces. I made my excuses and left, feeling exhausted and proud of myself.

Cole was proud of me too, of course.

I am fully aware that you chose this one partially so we could maybe see the nuggalope, Cole-love.

he took longer than I thought

Yup. Dinner first. Nuggalope another time, I promise.

yes

***

“So, are you gonna be there?” asked Merewether.

“Huh?” I answered brilliantly. I was mostly paying attention to the roast beef.

“The Inquisitor is opening the new tavern. Free ale!”

“Eh.”

“The bard is going to perform a new song!”

“Double eh. The only song of hers I really like is the one about Sera.”

“Aww, c’mon! Bull said it’ll be a party to remember!”

Well, that changed everything. I still hadn’t managed to catch a glimpse of him since he got back last night, except for that one bit in the Hall. And I really, really wanted to know if he’d made a decision regarding that whole friends-or-lovers situation.

“Oh, sure. Could be fun.”

***
It was not fun.

It was hot, crowded and incredibly loud. I had beer slopped on my one-and-only dress by four different idiots. Everyone wanted to congratulate me on my award, which necessitated them screaming kind words right into my ear.

I had a headache, bruised toes, and a very low opinion of people.

And then, when I was my most grumpy and dishevelled, the crowd swirled and I was standing next to The Iron Bull.

My heart went sideways in my chest. He was so solid, so real. So… him. I enabled the emergency protocols to stop myself from kissing his feet or blurting, “Marry me” or maybe kidnapping him into my ready-made sex dungeon.

I just grinned up at him and mouthed, “Hey, beautiful.”

He grinned down at me and said, “Hey, kitten.”

That was all he needed to say.

Chapter End Notes

AO3 was having Issues this morning when I went to post this chapter and I have spent the last FIVE HOURS itching to do so.

I... may be addicted to ya'll.
Cole helped. Of course.

He got me through one brief, oh-so-friendly chat before The Iron Bull vanished to get beer and I took the opportunity.

I snuck out to the ramparts.

At first, I just enjoyed the cold, sweatless mountain air. My headache left and I began to feel pleasantly chilled. I listened to the wind and the distant revelry and came back to myself.

Only when it was safe and comfortable to do so, I said:

Now.

And Cole let go of the floodgates.

I found myself biting my lip and realised, For what? No-one would hear me over the rager below and even then, no-one would care.

No-one would care. That was a bad thought to have.

It brought friends: thoughts like Gonna Die Alone and Failure At Relationships, which dragged in You’re Nearly Forty and Still No Grandchildren? Because You Are Quite Unloveable.

I tried to fight with reason, with reminders that many people cared about me, and a number of them had also found me very attractive, thank you, even at my advanced age, and just because one of them is rejecting me it doesn’t change that, even though I am on a mountain with hundreds of acquaintances, no family, only a few friends and quite good chances of being killed sometime soon and I thought that with Cole I would no longer be lonely but clearly that is not quite true and I need, need someone who understands…

I put my arms down on the battlements and wept. I wept bitter, confused half-articulated regrets and the terrible feeling of being in some ways lonelier now than I had ever been. I wept that I would never be able to tell my parents anything. I wept that the Bosun was too far away. I wept that Marta was dead.

And yes, I wept because The Iron Bull had decided not to ever have sex with me.

It was a rainstorm of angry sobbed choking, intense but brief. I pulled out Chandler’s handkerchief - not yet laundered - and wiped my face with it. I decided to go to bed and masturbate and deal with all of this in the morning.

Instead, I turned around and hissed, “Oh for fucking out loud.”

The Iron Bull, lounging casually against the stonework, made no reply.

“What is it, beautiful,” I said, wearily.

“Yeah, that is pretty much what I was wondering. What all of this is.” He added an encompassing
I sighed.

Why did you not tell me he was there?
he didn’t want me to

_Traitor._

He was far too beautiful to be angry at. “Do not attempt to understand my emotional responses after a day like this, it’s a sucker’s game.”

“You’re saying this is just fatigue.”

“Yes. Precisely.”

“You’re lying,” he said.

“I’m trying to! It would be lovely if you just got out of the way and let me succeed at it.”

He thought about it. I could see him doing the calculations. If person Emma (E) wishes to lie about Subject Crying Alone (CA), with the variables of Long Day (LD) and Smells Like Ale (SLA), within five (5) minutes of nonverbal conversation We’re Just Friends (JF)...

“Tell me,” he ordered.

No point asking if he was sure. He was very sure.

Fuck it.

***

“This is one of those things that go in layers,” I said softly. I laughed.

“One layer is simple math, you know? Other than you there are only four people I can ethically have sex with. One is a hard no, two are wildly improbable, and the fourth scares the ever-living Void out of me.”

“Shit, I hadn’t thought about that. Does it really matter?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Beautiful, if you found out _afterwards_ that I contained what you might regard as a demon… are you honestly telling me you would be fine with that? No concerns?” He sucked air in through his teeth. “Yeah, didn’t think so.”

The ale-stains on my robe were starting to get quite chilly. I said, “So, there’s that. The whole enforced celibacy thing. No point in telling you about it, is there? It’d just make you feel… at best, pity. Which, ugh.”

His eye watched me carefully. “Is that all?”

“Yes?” His eye narrowed. “No,” I admitted.

I stopped talking. I couldn’t, I just couldn’t.

He drifted closer, until he towered over me. Close enough that I could feel the warmth of his skin.
“Tell me,” he ordered again. This time softer, but no less sure.

“I live in pieces,” I said to his chest. “There’s the Emma who is a philosopher and the Emma who laughs if she farts in the bath. There’s the sensualist and the rationalist and the emotional one, too. Lots of aspects. Different people see different parts of me.”

“The ones they want to see.”

“Yes.” It was very quiet, with his bulk maneuvered to block the wind. “Most people, it’s only a third or so at most. Good friends are two-thirds, maybe.” I paused. “It’s just easier, simpler, to edit myself down to the parts they respond to.”

“Sure. That way they don’t reject you.”

I swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. It’s not very polite of him to just say it out loud like that. All of sudden, I needed some space. I had the terrible conviction that he could just read all my deepest thoughts off my skin.

I turned to face the mountains. They helped. The mountains had seen a hundred ages and they knew that in the end none of this shit mattered. They told me to be brave.

“Oh,” I said, voice low, “there are the few, the precious few. The ones where I don’t have to censor myself. The people with whom I can just… be.”

In my peripheral vision, I watched realisation smack his face. Only just getting started, lovely. I continued, “Even more rare are the lovers, of course. Most seem to want a sweet soft embrace or to hold a fistful of your hair. I’ve only had two who really understood that sometimes I want either. Sometimes I want both.” I smiled at the memory of Perser and the way he’d growl sweet nothings as he attempted to pound me into the wall.

“So that’s it,” he said. “You wanted that kind of sex. I get that.”

“Darling dumbass.” I turned to face him. “What makes you assume I’m talking about me, here?”

Chapter End Notes

There are better people to try out your new lying skills on.
His flabbergasted face is a sight to behold.


He’d changed to the no-face spies clearly get taught as standard.

“Remember, when you were starting to hit the rhythm and I was starting to fall apart a little, what I said? Beautiful, I want it all. All of you, my dear. I want all of you.”

His eye closed, as if in pain.

“It’s okay if you don’t, beautiful. Or if you won’t allow yourself to want it. I understand, I do.”

to be whole. oh, to be whole

He shook his head a little, in denial of the thought. “No. You were right. That isn’t something I want.”

“Of course, Hissrad.” Keeper of Illusions. The name was not lost on either of us. “That’s why I didn’t bother you with it.”

We stood in long silence. I could feel The Iron Bull putting his mind right. Re-educating himself.

“You getting cold?” he asked.

“Why’d you ask?”

“You shivered.”

I definitely didn’t want to answer that. “Why,” I drawled, “you got a sweater to lend me?”

He laughed. I wanted, desperately, to make him laugh again. To get us back to normal, even though let’s be honest, that isn’t something any of our encounters have had, to date. So I kept on.

“Hey, sudden thought. Now we have Gereon Fucking Alexius in our dungeon, I should get him to use his time magic. Send me back a month, tell my previous self to go seduce you while I have a chance.”

The Iron Bull looked at me, startled. I didn’t understand why - it wasn’t that bad a joke.

“What?” I said. “Are you saying you wouldn’t jump me with abandon if we weren’t friends? Because I am damned delightful and you’d be missing out.”

He still looked… off, somehow, but his mouth can operate independently and said, “Shit, yeah. I’d be all over you. No hesitation.”

I beamed at the sentiment, and reminded myself very sternly that it wasn’t worth ripping apart the fabric of time and space just to get laid. Even though, obviously, it absolutely would be.
At the same time, he kept following his own path of thought. “Yeah, if we weren’t friends. Not sure how that would have worked later, though.”

“After Cole?” I hmmed. “Well, zero chance I would have read that much about you and not ended up completely adoring you -” did you know Qunari can blush? “- so we would either never had sex again, or ended up in some elaborate series of mindgames.”

“Like what?” I got the strongest feeling I was being led somewhere, but had no idea where.

“Y’know, I pretend that I feel nothing more than respect and a mild fondness, and you pretend you don’t notice anything different, and I pretend not to notice you pretending, et cetera…”

“Sounds like a lot of work,” he said. Too casually.

I smiled saucily at him. “Would you be worth it?”

One significant pause.

“Absolutely.”

Maker give me strength.

I dug, desperately, and adopted my best casual tone. “Well, then there you are. Instead of No-Pants Friday we’d have No-Friends Friday. All of the nudity, none of the emotional complications.”

Both of us, wound tight as viola strings, took a moment to imagine it.

Really imagine it.

We looked at each other.

My lips parted, but I didn’t dare say a single fucking word. He watched the movement with absolute attention. Everything thrummed.

The moment hung.

He cleared his throat. Breathing, that is a thing I should do.

“So, I’ll… see you around.”


Both of us turned in unison and marched away.

Fuck yes

Fuck. Yes.

Chapter End Notes

Blame my Destiel-loving sister for this idea. *single perfect tear of pride*

Also, I enjoyed figuring out what the Qunari version of serial numbers looks like.
I should go do something.

I should go do something to distract myself because there are 122 hours until Friday begins and that is not a number I should already know.

what about -

The nuggalope is probably asleep, honey.

aww.

He is just the cutest.

I marched to the laundries - resolutely quashing the first association that leapt to mind - and handed over my robe and Chandler’s handkerchief. I was given a dress that was far too long and tight in the bosom to boot, but it’d do for now.

Then, for the first time, I used the key.

***

I gave a practiced knock. It’s the soft, undemanding one that says, “If you are sleeping or busy or - ahem! - occupied, ignore me and I shall return another time.”

“Yes,” came a reply.

I entered the door, held my too-long skirts as I climbed yet more stairs, then smiled. Vanadirthavean, as I had guessed, was up to his beaded braids in paperwork.

It felt unsettling to have no definitive answers about what he was thinking or feeling, but good, too. Enlivening. I threw all my whirling mind into the task of interpretation, reading teensy-weensy facial cues, and most of all, sticking a toolbox worth of spanners into the conversation.

I had a strong instinct that was the way to play it.

So instead of apologising for visiting so late, commenting on the view and the décor, or finding out whether he still wished to be addressed by name, I smiled warmly and said nothing. Cole kept my hands from fidgeting, which would have spoiled the effect.

After a long minute, he asked, “Do you want a brandy?”

“Yes please,” I said. I rarely drink, but high-quality brandy is worth making an exception for.

I curled up on a chaise and watched him pour. He handed me a snifter and sprawled on the other end. We did not clink glasses.

I took a long thoughtful sniff then one very slow, mildly obscene swallow. Again I let my face settle into a pleasant neutrality. We gave each other a chance to be impatient. We both declined.
Eventually he asked mildly, “Did your spirit send you here?”

“Nah. You’re the only person he can’t hear, interestingly.”

“The Anchor?”

“Presumably.”

“Ah.” We both enjoyed the silence. He took a sip of brandy.

I asked, “Did I save your life? I’ve wondered.”

He shook his head, minutely. “Quite possibly saved a few of my toes, though.”

“Oh. You’re welcome.”

“I didn’t say thank you.”

“I noticed.” I smiled, a little wickedly. He gave a faint reply.

I drank another sip of brandy, enjoyed the taste of it on my lips. He stretched out his neck, grimaced at the loud popping noises. I tackled the words “Long day?” to the ground before my brandied lips could say them.

Instead, I just regarded him. He closed his eyes for a long moment and sighed, and I felt the victory of it. It was the equivalent of a ten-minute complaint from someone else.

He downed the rest of the brandy in one swallow and stood up. “Back to it,” he informed me.

Cole kept my face neutral while my mind worked frantically, assessing the direction of his gaze and his feet and how his hands moved. I wasn’t sure, but I rolled the dice.

“Of course,” I replied, and took out my books. I made myself even more comfortable and began to read.

Through my peripheral vision, I saw him smile. Just a smidgen.

He returned to his desk.

***

An hour later, the combination of brandy, linguistic analysis, and That Conversation were taking their toll. I let out one unselfconscious yawn and put my books away.

Quietly, I left the room. Vanadirthavean pretended not to notice, but I saw his shoulders move.

I don’t understand. that didn’t happen like you thought, but you’re happy

Don’t think about what I planned, Cole-love. Think about what I wanted.

oh! oh.

Exactly.

On that thought, we went to bed.

I thought of Friday and grinned to myself in the dark.
Chapter End Notes

It's good to have something to look forward to.
113 hours, stop that stop that.

I woke up much earlier than I really wanted to, but I promised myself that I’d spend at least an hour doing something just for my pleasure every day. It seemed the best method for avoiding future training dummy incidents.

First I needed to be comfortably dressed. My robe (and Chandler’s handkerchief) had been dried overnight by putting it in a vent over the bakery, so it was now clean, warm, and faintly woodsmoky. I liked it.

Then I played with Tara’s kids, some game that combined catch, piggyback, yes-Your-Highness and that perennial classic Run Around Yelling. The rules changed constantly, usually at the behest of the toddler, and eventually snared not only me, but two guards, a merchant’s assistant, and one very pissed-off cat.

After scratch-tending and breakfast, into the Secret Cellar.

First here. I lit the candles and made myself comfortable. Deep slow breaths. Imagine the study.

Smell of wax, vellum and birch in the fireplace. Sounds of that stupid scritchy nib Marta liked for no sensible reason. Steel on glass as she dipped into the inkwell. Lady Evelyn humming tunelessly as she read a frosty note from the seneschal. Moan of the wind from under the south-eastern door.

Now, see it.

I opened my mental eyes and saw one unexpected addition to the landscape. I gave him a hug.

I looked around our memory palace and saw more additions. Notes, attached to every surface. I focused on the mantelpiece, and its nautical-themed collection of trinkets. Leaning against the model of Eleanor Cousland’s Mistral was a slate written over in a sprawling childish hand. It read:

---

Birgid

afraid people will find out she soiled herself during the evacuation

wants idolaters punished, but not very much?

wants Inquisition to win, and the Chantry

wants Tevinter to lose

wants to please Lady Josephine

afraid of Dorian Pavus, mice, and getting too old to work

wants to oblige the Chantry
proud to have raised George

needs safety

would sell trust

---

I picked up the note and felt the answers. Who George is. (That made me smile.) Why she’s afraid of Dorian Pavus. A few unexpected depths and shades. I knew that Birgid was not a traitor, not yet. And I knew under what circumstances that would change.

“Cole-love. Have you been working while I slept?”

He nodded anxiously, hoping I’d be pleased. Afraid I’d be angry.

I moved up to him and held his face in my hands. So cold, so thin. “Darling heart,” I said. “Thank you. This is amazing.” He smiled into my palms.

Work be damned, some things are much more important. I led us over to the rug in front of the fireplace and sat us down. Removed That Hat and put his head in my lap. Stroked his hair.

He wriggled like a pup into the tightest possible bundle. He knows I’m no threat, but old habits are hard to break.

“Did you hear the birds today?” he asked.

“No, honey. Tell me about them.”

He spent a long time describing the patterns of their flight and their songs and their nesting hopes, in one long convoluted loop of poetry.

“... willow will weather the wings, wild winds wash wes- he’s here.”

“Should we go, honey?”

His shadow-lined eyes stared up at me. “We have help to do.”

“But you hadn’t finished.”

“Oh.” He thought a minute. “I’m like him!”

“Yes, Cole-love. Your wants signify, too.”

His face went utterly blank for a moment, then he said, “I want to help.”

“Let’s do that, then.”

***

I rubbed my arms, just for the tactile feedback. Enunciated a long string of nonsense. Sniffled. Then opened my eyes.

Urbane as ever, Chandler watched.

“Good job on the balcony, pet. Thanks for the help.”
In his driest tone, he replied, “It was my pleasure.”

“You filthy liar.”

“Slander, pet. I am an impeccably clean liar.” We both laughed.

I told him that we were already a third done on the traitor-sniffing and ready to knock the rest over today, if possible. I asked if he was willing to accompany me on the rounds.

“I even have an explanation for your presence!” I told him brightly. “What do you know about inns?”

***

I knocked on the door and waited for a brusque, “Enter.”

Inside, the Commander was reading through an impossible stack of reports. He looked exhausted, stubborn and badly fed.

“Emma, isn’t it? And… my apologies, but I don’t know your name.”

“Chandler, Ser Cullen. I’m one of the Night Lady’s assets.”

The Commander looked between us with stern befuddlement. To be fair, we did make an unusual team. “Pleased to make your acquaintance. What brings you to my office?”

“Three things, Commander,” I said, all professionalism. “First: do I need permission to visit the military camp?”

“You do.”

“Right. Well, I request it. The other two items will make the rationale clear, I believe.” He waved me on. I tried to put thoughts into thinky thing. “Lady Josephine has appointed me to oversee the construction of an inn for the visiting pilgrims. Outside the walls, to reduce security concerns.”

“Ah. A joint project with Leliana? You’ll have to overcome your fear of her.” He smiled wanly and I rewarded his incredible memory with my best smile in return. “And you require…?”

“Require? Nothing. But a number of hefty young recruits to act as unskilled labour would certainly speed the process. Call it bonus conditioning.”

“I assume you won’t require them immediately.”

“No, Commander. At least two weeks, maybe longer. This is the planning phase.”

He looked over his paperwork. “I can give you twenty men each day. Dawn to dusk, you’ll need to feed them their midday meal.”

“Excellent, thank you.”

He nodded while making a note to himself. “And the third item?”

“Do you have any specific recommendations for the site? Lady Josephine had a few suggestions, but you undoubtedly know more of the terrain than we do. Also we want to ensure there aren’t any defence factors we haven’t thought of.”
less butter than most diplomats. well chosen

You want I should change into Orlesian? He’d fucking love that.

be kind. he doesn’t know

I know, honey.

He pulled out a well-annotated map. Spent a few minutes pointing out every possible location and the benefits and deficits of each, not just in regards to defence, but also water supply, ease of retreat, and even - to my delight - the quality of the view.

He ended by saying, “I still don’t see why you wish to visit the lower camp.”

My mind threw a shoe and just stopped. Stopped cold. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to reply, Chandler took pity on me and gave some acceptable bullshit.

“Very well,” the Commander replied. “See Sergeant Kallis at the gatehouse. She’ll provide an escort.” I brightened at the familiar name. “Ah, yes, you’re from Ostwick, aren’t you?”

“I’m glad she’s still with us, messere,” I said. “She’s a good soldier.”

“She is. Is there anything else?”

“No, Commander. I won’t take any more of your time.” He was already deep in correspondence before I closed the door.

“I knew you were dreadful at lying, pet, but that was abysmal even for you.”

“I was distracted. Headache.”

“That came on suddenly.”

I replied lightly, “It wasn’t my headache.”

Chandler threw a glance at the door and back at me. “Our dear Commander. I thought he looked more constipated than usual.”

“Don’t mock him, dear. If I was in half the pain he’s in I’d be rolling on the floor and howling.”

He opened his mouth to say something cutting, but then narrowed his eyes. “You’re serious.”

“I really am. His pain was so loud I could feel it ambiently. Like… pain radiance. Cole says it’s like that for him most days.”

“Gracious jittering fuck.”

I smiled faintly at Chandler using one of my best profanities, but the smile quickly vanished.

I am an abomination. (Ish.)

He is a Templar. (Ex. Whatever.)

We are not oil and water. We are oil and bonfire. Even just the act of discovering more about why he is in so much agony could be dangerous. Actually interacting with him? Guaranteed conflagration, no survivors.
But. I relived, over and over, that image: crippling pain in every limb, stabbing behind his eyes, and yet he smiles and makes a referential joke. Thoughtfulness from an aching mind.

I cannot go anywhere near that man. I cannot help.

I wish, so much that it hurts, that it were not so.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of time in bed = immense amounts of backstory that never make it on to the page. Normally I am fine with that.

But Birgid and George is a rather sweet tale and if it never comes up during the main story I will add it to the list of bonuses I'm gonna write afterward.
The next afternoon, my list of traitors was nearly complete.

It had gone well, mostly thanks to Chandler. If neither the inn project nor any acceptable paperwork excuse had presented itself as a reason to chat, he just moved in on the person Cole needed to connect to, and schmoozed the ever-living shit out of them.

I was reminded of watching a shark go after a tuna, except with more flattery.

In the late afternoon we headed to the military camp, a long and nerve-making journey on horseback including steep switchbacks and crumbling cliff edges. I spent the entire ride with my shoulders touching my earlobes. My pony, in contrast, was so bored it nearly fell asleep.

Quickly, we knocked over the last few names on the list then took some time stretching our legs (and in my case, procrastinating on going back up that damned mountain).

As we wandered, Chandler and I both received invitations. Mine was dinner with Jonah. Chandler’s was bellowed c’mons from a half-dozen idiots with a flagon of distilled spirits.

We both accepted.

In the mess, one soldier carried Jonah’s tray and another cut up his meat. Both actions were done with no fanfare, no charity. It was beautiful to see. Jonah was beautiful to see.

you helped him. all by yourself

It wasn’t so much. All I did was nag him into talking to the sergeant-at-arms about a job.

and now look

I did. I smiled as I ate my steak.

After, he showed me around the camp.

“Tents on a frozen river? Remind me never to become a soldier,” I said.

“I didn’t tell,” he replied.

Ah. Of course. I patted his short arm. “I never thought you had, sweetheart.” His shoulders relaxed at the sincerity. “There were only a dozen people who could have told you about the Herald. I think Leliana just kept an eye on all of us.”

His own eyes dropped to my wrist and his mouth turned down. I bit my lip at the sympathy I saw there.

He said, “Did… was it bad?”

“Yeah. But not as bad as it could have been.”

He accepted that.
It was the truth, after all.

***

Six hours later, I finally made it back into the stables.

The ostler helped untie Chandler from his saddle and considerately dumped him into a wheelbarrow before disappearing with our mounts.

I picked up the handles and hissed, “You troublesome fuckweasel, I should drop you in the well. Mercy, what right do you have to be so damned muscled?” He snored loudly and did not reply.

My room? Way too far. Healers? Too busy. His room? Too many stairs. (Also, I am not supposed to know where it is.) Inspiration struck and I awkwardly wheeled his supine form into the adjoining space.

Where the handsome Warden sat, sandpaper in one hand, a spinning top in the other. Sleeves rolled up to reveal hairy forearms. He looked at Chandler and an understanding grin made his teeth shine white under the mustache. Wordlessly, he rose and helped me swing the drunken reprobate onto a row of hay bales.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Seems fair,” he replied with a strong Markham accent. It was a good voice, warm and self-aware. “I’ve been him enough times that it’s likely my turn.” He considered my face. “I can watch over him, my lady. Get some sleep.”

I was tempted; as I said, it had been one long-ass day. But I shook my head. “I’ll stay, if you can stand my company.” He made the correct polite protestations and mentally I updated my recruiting poster. Join The Inquisition: We Have Improbably Attractive Leaders… And They Have Excellent Manners!

“I’m starving. You want anything from the kitchens?” I asked.

“It’s the ash-hauler’s hour,” he replied, absently, already wrestling off one of Chandler’s boots. “Larder’s locked tighter than a virgin’s tw-” he coughed, embarrassed.

“You’re right about the virgin’s twat,” I replied, and he choked a laugh in return, “except… I know something you don’t.” I winked. “Be right back.”

When I returned, Chandler was covered in a horse blanket, boots at his feet, a strategically-placed bucket near his head. I was staggering under the weight of a tray with an entire teapot plus enough food for five starving Qunari. Blackwall leapt to his feet and cleared space on a workbench.

From under my lashes I smiled up at him and murmured, “My hero.”

I love a man who knows how to flirt. “My lady,” he replied. It was all he needed to say.

Then both of us demolished the moment by picking up a doorstep sandwich and a mug of tea and enthusiastically devouring them. I moaned in appreciation and Blackwall nodded solemn agreement of my assessment.

I waved the remains at Chandler. “I forgive you, a tiny bit, because of this delicious sandwich,” I informed the unconscious lump. The Warden raised a mildly curious eyebrow. “Chandler saved the life of a scullery maid a few days ago. We are eating the kitchen’s gratitude.”
Blackwall’s curiosity went from mild to sharp. “Chandler? He’s one of Leliana’s men?” I nodded. “But you work for the Lady. Josephine.” He harrumphed over her name and I worked not to smile. Clearly I’m not the only person with a tendresse for Lady J.

I explained about the project. “I’m in some ways a terrible choice to run this,” I said. “Chandler is at least providing valuable input in the Habitual Drunkard department.”

“Ah, plenty of us to go around.”

“Are you a sot, serah?” I asked, all wide eyes and sauce.

He laughed. “I had my day. Plenty of advice to share, if it’d be any good to you.” I encouraged him. “Don’t hire the bartender from The Frosty Embrace, for a start. Plenty of barkeeps’ll spit in your mug, but I never saw another get his dog to do it.”

Thus began a series of yarns about the worst taverns he’d ever spent time in.

Creators, he was funny. Observant, self-aware, and happy to take the piss out of himself: I laughed until tears ran and my face ached. Association led me to tell the tale of the Day of the Chicken, which in turn made him roar until he spilt his mug of tea.

Some time later, he was obliging me with stories about mabaris he’d met, when Chandler snorted and rolled onto his back. I went over to roll him onto his other side. Blackwall took the chance to gather all our tea things; we’d devastated the pile of food.

Chandler never stirred as I rearranged him and his bucket. His hair was sweaty. Frowning slightly, I gentled it back from his forehead and made him comfortable. “Dearest,” I murmured. “You shouldn’t do this to yourself.”

As I stood, I saw Blackwall, shaking his head slowly. I picked up my mug and brought it over. As I put it on the tray he said, never making eye contact, “You cannot care for that man. You must know what he is.”

I replied, equally quiet, “I’m not naive. He’s not a good man. He’s done a hundred things that would harrow my soul to hear of, and I’d wager he ate heartily and slept well after doing them.”

“But you like him. Love him, maybe.”

“I do.”

His voice was a deep-cut mine, every layer tensions. “How can you possibly love a man who has done those things?”

I thought of all the answers I could give, and I chose the most true. “Because he needs me to.”

Blackwall stood very, very still.

He gave one deep, shuddering, seismic groan of a sigh.

Then he picked up the tray and left with it.
I really like this chapter a lot.

Feels time:

I love every one of you who has commented, bookmarked and kudos'd.

Health issues and the recent death of both my remaining grandparents has taken my backlog of written chapters from a respectable 20 to an increasingly-precarious-looking 15. I ain't fishing for sympathy, but *everything* is hard right now.

This, however. This is still fucking glorious and thank you all for being part of it.

*defiant fist in the air from the sickbed*
I rubbed my neck.

The list, for those wondering, of things Emma finds reliably attractive:

1. Broad shoulders.
2. Deft hands.
4. Resonant voice.
5. Capability and intelligence.
6. Good sense of humour.
7. Attracted to me.

So yeah, this was tricky. And it made every lie just a little more painful.

you didn’t lie. every word was true

Lies of omission count, honey. The words were true, but I shouldn’t know that they need saying. And I can’t tell him how I know that they do.

but the only other choice is to do nothing. he hurts so loud

For some reason, I thought of the Commander. He wasn’t asleep, either.

You’re right. I still don’t like lying to him.

why are you so sure you’ll never sleep with him? he thinks you’re a -

NOPE, stopping you right there. Because of the conjoined twin thing, honey.

oh. you mean sex! I thought you meant napping

Napping I’m all in favour of.

good. you’re too old to stay up all night without aching in the morning

Tactless, but correct.

I mentally hugged him and yawned. Wish he hadn’t said the s-word.

***

Blackwall returned, doing a reasonable impression of his usual self. The rest of the night passed pleasantly. Stories, comfortable silences, and yes, even one small nap. Solo, while he watched over Chandler. And me, I guess, which I was unexpectedly warmed by.

I liked Blackwall. A lot.

Worse, he liked me.
It made things *much* more complicated.

***

“Chandler, my dove,” I purred. “Get your wretchéd carcass ambulatory. We have ten minutes before we’re due upstairs.”

He replied, eyes still shut, “We aren’t due for anything. I have an *excellent* mem’ry.”

“Oh but we are, my sweet. I know because I organised the meeting. Sister Nightingale is expecting a report on the inn progress. In ten minutes. We don’t want to disappoint her, darlingheart.”

Sheer adrenaline propelled him into an upright position. He was bleary, smelly, and had a network of straw imprints across one cheek. I didn’t even try not to laugh.

I used the familiar handkerchief to scrub his face and then dry it. It went up his sleeve. Then I pulled out his comb and pomade and got to work. Odd thought: *I* knew how to style his hair because *Cole* knew how to style his hair because *Chandler* knew how to style his hair. I hummed aggravatingly while I did it.

As I was putting the final touches on, Chandler captured my hand in his.

“You should have left me in the middens.” He tried for a light touch and failed.

“Never happen,” I said. “You’re stuck with me.” I said it as a promise.

“No bookmaker would offer odds on whether you’ll regret that choice, pet.” His eyes were tired. Sick of himself. I kissed his forehead and gave him a mug of ginger tea.

While Chandler drank and critiqued it, I went to Blackwall. He looked just as tired. Careworn.

Screw subtle. I slipped my arms under his, hugged him for a solid minute. He was smiling as I moved away.

“Au revoir, my hero.”

“Au revoir, my lady.”

Chandler bravely struggled upright and approximated a human being. With an effort I found honestly heartbreaking, he looked completely normal by the time I joined him. Creators, what he must have been through to learn that.

He threw one glance at Blackwall, once more picking up his woodworking, as we began to move.

“You have to tell me what all that was about, my dear.”

I gave Blackwall one last smile as I left. He returned it with a salute.

“No,” I said. “I really don’t.”

Chapter End Notes

I don’t have ships for Emma.
I have FLOTILLAS.
The night shift had left, and the day shift was yet to begin. In the grey pre-dawn at the top of the rotunda, we were alone.

Sister Leliana looked visibly unimpressed with us. To be fair, I yawned every - gah! - three sentences and Chandler winced at the noise of one raven’s wings.

As promised, I gave a two-line update about the project, then to the real purpose of our debrief, which was of course relating the results of the loyalty checks.

“None of them are compromised,” I said. She nodded, pleased. I described a few vulnerabilities that could lead to later problems, all of which she was already alarmingly well-informed of, until:

“Do you know about Pietro’s sister?” Head shake. “She has one of those slow degenerative illnesses. He isn’t particularly motivated by money -” yawn “- but he’d listen to anyone who had a proposal that would help her out.”

“What would you suggest?”

“With a decent apothecary and an understanding employer she’ll likely be able to work another six months or so. She’s in Rialto, so…” Mythal’enaste, stop yawning, “I’d ask Lady Josephine if she knew which merchant prince wanted a good deed they can boast about at dinner parties. One who’d actually follow through and make sure she’s looked after once she can’t work any longer.”

“I shall do so at our next briefing.” Sister Leliana smiled. A real smile, charming and a touch impish. “You and Cole have done excellent work. You can guess the next job, yes?”

“Checking everyone else in the Inquisition?” She confirmed it. “There’s a few things we’ll need.”

“Tell me.”

“First -” damn it! that was a jaw-cracker “- we need a list of your agents. They aren’t on the normal payroll, so I don’t know how many there are. And you also need to order them to talk to me for a couple of minutes, like actually talk, not fence. They are a big pile of suspicious and I doubt I can bamboozle them.”

The Nightingale gave a musical laugh. “Done.”

“Second, the military. Do you have a copy of their personnel list?”

“I can obtain one.”

“Gosh,” I said wryly. She laughed again. (Yay me!) “I don’t currently have any reason to talk to all of them, either. I can do it subtly, but that will take a very long time.”

“I shall think on it.”

“Third, the mages. We’ve been staying far out of their way. If there are actual abominations among them, that would go… badly.” Something of an understatement, that.
“Report to me before you start with them.” Does she have plans for every contingency? Yes, quite likely she does. Splendid.

“Thank you. Lastly: is there a priority list? Anyone you particularly want Cole to start with?” She presented me with a piece of parchment. I read it, memorised it, grinned at a few names, then handed it back.

I spoke at a hangover-respectful tone. “Chandler, watch the stairs, if you would?”

He bowed dramatically, aching head be damned, and sauntered away to keep us private.

I walked over to a bench near the shrine and sat, leaving plenty of room beside me. Waited. Asked Cole to please ensure I didn’t yawn again. He obliged with a surge of awakeness like triple-strength coffee.

How long?

once you stop

Is that all? Worth it.


I did the hard hard thing of looking at her in three-quarter profile, more so she could read me than vice versa.

“She did love you,” I said. The Nightingale took a deep breath. I waited until she was ready before I continued. “It didn’t feel like it at the end, in that ridiculously over-furnished cottage. You thought then that she hated you. And she did.”

A raised eyebrow requested that I make some fucking sense, please. “Marjolaine.” A tensing at the name. “In order to save her own skin, she betrayed someone she loved. Consciously betrayed them into torment.” Sister Leliana unconsciously moved her hand a half-inch toward a patch of covered skin on her forearm. I shivered in sympathy. “She had to accept that, believe that about herself. And she simply… refused to.” An understanding ah. “So the bard told herself a story. About a fiendishly cunning redhead who had never cared, had never been as innocent as she seemed to be.”

I put my hand between us, palm up, a polite and ignorable offer. “She was a very good storyteller. So good that she believed her own tale.”

A small and bitter smile. “You’re saying she hated me because she loved me.”

“Oh no,” I replied. “She hated you because she was a coward. She hated you because she didn’t deserve your love.”

Sister Leliana closed her eyes. One perfect tear brushed her cheek. She smiled, just a little.

“I… always wondered, whether she ever truly loved me. It has been on my mind often lately. I do not know why.”

“It’s the mural Gatsi is working on. It reminds you -”

“-of the mural in the University. The conversation with the Empress,” she concluded. I nodded.

She sat awhile, thinking. Reviewing events, conversations, from a new perspective. Answering long-asked questions. Closing shadowed doors.
One last deep breath, an exhale that relaxed her shoulders under the chain mail.

She stood.

“Which of you do I thank?”

I grinned, which is not normally a respectful thing to do. In this case, she appreciated the normalcy of it. “We’re a team effort, sister.”

“Merci bien, Cole. Merci bien, Emma.” Her eyes pretended to be detached, casual. “You may as well call me by name, yes?”

I skipped all the way down the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

*victory fistclench*
Chandler left to eat a greasy meal and vomit three or four times. (I wasn’t certain of the exact order of operations.)

I walked out through the rotunda - coming along nicely - and into the setup of a joke. My favourite Qunari, my favourite scout, in all honesty not my favourite author but still one I quite liked, and an elf I’d been avoiding meeting. All of them were the careful, circumspect kind of drunk that said they’d been at it all night.

“Kitten! Come say hello.”

As much as I sincerely would have enjoyed being the only human in the gathering, I started to make my apologies. I needed to go get ready for a nap before whatever Cole did did wore off.

Only three words in, a massive hand grabbed me and dragged me onto The Iron Bull’s lap. The hand then scruffled the Cole-spot and my honey boy was so damned happy about it that all my small capacity to argue vanished.

So I turned the my right and took the bull by the horns. (The metaphorical one, not the literal one.) I put my hand out and said, “Hello, you must be Sera. I’m Emma.”

I didn’t add it was nice to meet her because I really wasn’t yet sure it was, a suspicion that paid off when she squinted at my hand and said, “How’d you know I’m her?”

“Tragically, there are currently only two elves in the Inquisition who wear plaideweave. I’m pretty confident you’re not Lachlan’s toddler, so…”

She grinned and shook my hand. “You’re weird,” she said cheerfully.

“True,” I admitted, which increased her grin a little. Then I moved my hand. “Messere Tethras, a pleasure to see you again.”

“Varric, please.” We shook hands. I tried not to giggle. (I did not entirely succeed.)

“And Lace! I’m trapped here, sweetie, come give me a hug.” She did. “I hear the choir is coming along nicely.”

Enthusiastically, she said, “We have a name chosen: the Sing-Quisition -”

“Terrible. I love it.”

“-and Faye is the new choir mistress, we have the first songs chosen. We’ll begin Tuesday after next in the tavern.” She fumbled out a list and I nodded at each choice - not too ecclesiastical, to my relief - until I got to the last one.

“Nuggins!” I shrieked. “Bless your brilliant heart, Lace, I know that was you. Nuggins! Yesssss!”

She grinned. “Have you started getting the word out?”

Her grin turned sheepish. “Well, I’m getting sent out later today to investigate. Some scouts haven’t reported in.”
“And you’re… hoping that a friendly scribe will copy a couple dozen pamphlets and post them around Skyhold?” I said, eyebrow raised.

She nodded, shame-faced.

“Happy to, honey.” Her grin re-established itself and she told me to keep the list. I promised her that the pamphlets would be done within the week.

Finally, I craned my head up and said, “How’re you doing, beautiful?”

He barely opened his mouth to reply when Sera hooted, “Beautiful. She called… him… beautiful!” She then proceeded to cackle so violently that she fell off her stool, which was something which up until that moment I didn’t think actually happened in real life.

She then kept giggling, interspersed with “Beeeyewtiful! Bull is soooooo byooootiful!” while laying on the ground. Everyone else just regarded her with fond smiles.

I blinked and repeated, “How are you? Chargers not back yet?”

“Be another week. They’re nearly done digging everything out, but the Boss asked them to stay and help with this memorial they’re building.”

A thought struck. “Does… does no-one call the Inquisitor by name? The Inner Council don’t, but you all travel with him.”

“The all-touched Lord Herald thingy? Too private, him. Doesn’t want anyone close,” said Sera, as she re-seated herself.

“Oh,” I said. “That seems…” I trailed off, trying to find the word.

“Dramatic?” said Varric.

“Elfy,” sneered Sera.

“Odd,” added Lace thoughtfully.

“A problem.” Both The Iron Bull and I said that together. I looked up at him and we came to a silent agreement. “Shit, I’ll put the word out.”

Sera whined, “Can’t I just call him Inky? His name is…” Her face scrunched. “I don’t even know what it is, right?”


“See?” Sera said. “So elfy!”

“Sera,” I replied sternly. Before anyone else, to my surprise. “Every person deserves to hear their name being said. No matter what that name is.” She fidgeted and wriggled and muttered random syllables, all the signs of someone who knows they’re wrong but vehemently doesn’t want to admit it.

This time I joined in the fond smiles. I decided that I like Sera. She’s simple.

I sat a few minutes more, listening to a friendly wrangle between Lace, Varric - oh, we’re on first-name terms, the famous author and me, y’know, no big deal - and Sera about fletching materials. I
started to get a wee bit comfy on this nice warm lap -

stand up stand up we have to go to bed now

wha - OH FUCK

All of the tired came crashing through the door, brandishing a bill of sale and yelling about the compound interest. I babbled goodbyes and flung myself toward the servant’s quarters.

Behind me, I heard Sera. “Proper weirdy. Great arse, though.”

Chapter End Notes

1. I like writing Sera, which is not a surprise.

2. Very definitely, I intended Emma to have pre-existing relationships with as few of the known characters as possible. But when I started thinking about the choir, it became obvious that she and the adorable Scout Harding are acquainted.

3. ”Proper Weirdy, Great Arse Though” is now the name of my autobiography.
Made it to bed (just) and straight into into a vivid dream.

I was in a wide grassy field. There was a tortoise, with a solid-gold shell roughly the size of a soup bowl. The tortoise had the world’s tiniest plough attached to its back and was slowly, unceasingly ploughing the field.

Every now and again, I would move a tiny pebble out of its path. Mostly I just sat and watched. It was soothing.

An hour later, I woke up feeling much refreshed. Good thing too, I had an arse-ton of work to get done if I wanted to take Friday off. Only 41 hours, and damn I thought I’d managed to stop doing that.

The staff had a morning meeting about Satinalia. Half of it was the hard logistics - when should we do the payroll? Will there be enough merchants in the week before with ribbon and such? One feast in the Great Hall, or numerous smaller gatherings? Will the choir be ready to perform? (Nope.) Where will the Chantry want to use for their ceremonies? The other half of the meeting was most of us realising that the gifts we’d carefully been preparing for relatives and friends were still buried back in Haven, and panicking in harmony.

Circe brought me dinner, which was very kind. (I’d been meeting with the carpenters and missed lunch entirely.) Cole repeated his new awakeness trick some time after then, and fruitlessly lectured me about stretching for a bit.

Finally, around nine bells, I dropped the documents on Lady Josephine’s desk. A finished proposal for the pilgrim’s inn, including possible locations, basic design, staff requirements, occupant capacity, and an estimate of materials, labour and costs. All ready to be comprehensively altered at the next war table meeting.

My feet were unconsciously moving toward my chambers before my higher mind intervened.

As I raised my hand to knock, I heard a thud and an absent curse. I awkwardly debated with myself for a moment then went ahead anyway.

“Yes.”

On the bookshelf, one book had a dagger sticking halfway through its spine. Other handles were visible, neatly snugged... between volumes? Vanadirthavean, standing next to his bed, threw a matching dagger using an economical underhand throw. It shelved itself neatly in the space between two books.

Holy fucking shit.

He walked over to the bookshelves and absently gestured a spot for me before wrenching the one not-quite-accurate dagger from out of the binding. He neatly plucked the other five out and walked back to the same spot by his bed. I sat on the cedar chest at its foot and stayed very quiet.

One. Two. Threefourfive... six.
Walk. Retrieve. Repeat.

One. Two. Threefourfive… six. Every dagger flawlessly inserted into a hairsbreadth gap.

Walk. Retrieve. Repeat.

It had the feel of a meditative practice, something done to keep the body occupied while the mind untangled a problem. I could imagine him back home, throwing these daggers into the bark of a tree or the mortarless chinks of a brick wall.

I found myself getting lulled by the rhythm, too. Not sleepy - thank the Maker, falling over on the Inquisitor’s bed would be superlatively awkward - but calm. Resting. I have been so damn wound up, lately.

One. Two. Threefourfive… six.

Walk. Retrieve. Repeat.

After a dozen repetitions, the line in his brow suddenly smoothed. I love watching that moment of epiphany. He dropped the daggers on his desk, picked up his hateful shem-appeasing boots, and plonked down next to me to put them on.

“Who?” I asked.

He looked at me sharply. I seriously think he’d forgotten I was there. “Cullen.”

Cole and I listened. I nodded. “He could use the distraction, I suspect.”

His eyes narrowed. “From?”

I smiled and made no reply. He quickly buckled those boots and paused. Turned to look at me, face-on. I sensed a dozen questions behind that smooth mask.

He hesitated. Perhaps he didn’t want the answers.

He left.

I went to bed.

***

I was back in the tortoise dream. The tortoise had made impressive progress while I was gone.

Time passed, measured only in lines on dirt.

Then a shadow fell over us.

Chapter End Notes

Dear brain: sometimes you invent really interesting images. Keep it up.
“What are you doing here?!” said… Solas? Oh. Oh. “Are you—”

I held up a hand and to our mutual surprise, he actually stopped talking. I turned back to the tortoise. “Diligence,” I said, “my name is Emma. Apologies for my rudeness. If I’d known I was in the Fade I would have introduced myself at once.”

Diligence nodded, a greeting and acceptance all in one, without missing a step. I turned back to Solas. “Hello, Solas. Only guesses, but they all start with the letter C. How are you?”

“You must come with me.”

“Must I.”

“You are in considerable danger here.” I looked around at the wildflowers bobbing in the breeze. I raised my eyebrow, gently sarcastic. Solas tsked, “You are aware that circumstances may change here. Rapidly, and not for the better.”

I looked up at him and replied with deliberately aggravating mildness, “Hmm.”

Solas, fidgety and impatient, glared at me. Not a bad glare, so far as they go, but it didn’t send me rushing to obey.

“I’m still waiting, you know,” I said instead.

“For what?” I made no reply.

A seething caldera with pointy ears glared at me. When that failed, he began to ruminate. I saw his face change when he got it.

“I still owe you an apology. For my behaviour during the questioning.”

I smiled.

He sidled.

“Is this the time?” he asked.

“I am in the Fade. An entity that resembles a friend rushes up, behaving erratically, and demands I go with them. Somewhere undisclosed. Without a thought.”

Comprehension dawned. “You wished to be sure I am myself.”

I grinned. “Nah, I know you’re you. I just still want that damn apology. Which you just failed to do. Again.”

He actually growled. His shoulders moved, and for a second I was certain he was going to just… leave, get away from this annoying-ass shem who keeps smiling at him.

Under your skin, I thought triumphantly. I’m under there and I’m not coming back out again, fenor.
He took a long, practiced breath and sat down next to me. Much more gracefully than I’d done. He greeted Diligence and received the same nod.

Silently, we both watched two rows of furrows slowly created. I was fine with waiting.

“I apologise,” he said, eventually. “You are worthy of better treatment than I gave you. Even then, you had acted with nothing but kindness and respect, and I…” A long pause. Finally down to the bare and ugly truth. “I was *arrogant*. Arrogant and-”

“And scared,” I interrupted gently. “You’ve used knowledge as a weapon all your life, and I am a walking arsenal. Of course you needed to find a way to manage me.”

“Manipulate you,” he corrected.

“Same root word, you know that. You had to handle me. Because I am dangerous.”

His mouth twitched. “When they say they are dangerous, most speakers are boastful. Very few make it sound-”

“And adorably wistful?” I said hopefully.

“Certainly, if you like.” This time he smiled properly. Like most people who smile rarely, it was a delightful thing. I felt, obliquely, like I was a delightful thing. That doesn’t sound like a compliment, but it is.

I put my hand on the ground between us, palm up. For the second time that day (is it still the same day?) the offer was not accepted. I hadn’t expected it would be, really.

“Have I apologised adequately?”

“More than. All is well.”

After another short pause he simply could not stop himself any longer, my dear arrow-heart, and said, “Will you come with me, now?”

“Why?”

“Truly, it isn’t safe in the Fade. Even here. Not for you.”

I thought I knew what he meant by that last part. In the Fade, emotions attract attention. *Intense* attention. And Cole has said more than once that I am loud. (“Which is nice!” he always hastens to add. Darling.)

“That’s one why. What’s the other?”

Solas gave me the irritated look he uses when he doesn’t understand something but doesn’t want to admit it, either.

I grinned and explained. “*Advice From The Mother-Queen*. It’s a book of excerpts from Queen Asha’s correspondence with her relatives. Marvellous read.”

“I have never heard of it.”

“Printing is limited solely to her descendants. Not much point having her kids kicked off the thrones she wedded them to.”
“So what is this pertinent advice to her noble children, in addition to the staff who have access to their libraries?”

I grinned, assumed my best royal voice. “Ahem. ‘When evaluating offers, it is best - you must forgive this small witticism - to be too wise. The first why is usually easy to discern; most offers, indeed, state it explicitly. It is: Why should I accept this offer? The second why is much harder and more vital to know. Why is this person making this offer? Always seek to learn this before deciding.’”

“Wise woman.”

“Gosh. Thanks!” He glared at my misinterpretation; I was gleefully unrepentant. I raised a patient, happy-to-wait eyebrow. “So, what’s the second why?”

I swear I could see the thoughts happening. And now this aggravating woman is making me explain myself. Me! I should refuse. But then she will stubbornly refuse to accompany me. And then? My choices are to manhandle her like a barbarian, or sit here and watch her defy me. Arrrrgh.

“Don’t strain yourself, lovely,” I said. “Pretty sure I’m starting to wake up, anyway.” Did he look relieved? “You’ll have plenty of time to figure out your answer before next time.”

As I swam up toward consciousness, the last thing I heard was a strained, “What do you mean, next time?”

Chapter End Notes

Emma is an adorable shit sometimes.
where did you go?

To the Fade. But not in Skyhold, for some reason.

it’s slippery. if you try, you become elsewhere

It was a good elsewhere!

I told/showed him Diligence and our interloper while I brushed my teeth. Make plans for the day. Lots to do, and less than a day until Friday begins.

(If there is a Friday. It’s not like I can go ask about a construct that only functions as long as both parties pretend it isn’t there.)

(Oh mercy, what if I’m wrong?)

(What if he’s changed his mind?)

(What if the sex is actually not good?)

(Okay, that’s not possible.)

(Busy. Must keep busy.)

Breakfast first? Ooh, no. Important item on the list to knock over, passing by my room… now.

“How about we talk while we move, yes?”

“Betsy?”

Arms full of linens, she turned and bobbed a quick, practiced curtse. “Emma?”

“May I ask you a favour?”

“Depends what it is, dear. I’m all out of thicker blankets.”

back is tight, good to keep moving

“How about we talk while we move, yes?”

“Maker, yes. Not as young as I used to be, that’s certain.”

She deposited the dirty linens and picked up a bundle of clean. Into someone’s chamber. I did the pillowcases while we talked; a job that stays out of the way while still being of some help.

Thank you, Chandler. This isn’t anywhere near as hard as I thought.

“Did you know that the healers use spider-web?” I asked.

Her face wrinkled more deeply. “What? Why?”

their supplies are almost gone, after Haven. And I was thinking…”

She looked worried. “We’ve dusted out most of the old nooks, dear. Probably all gone, now.”

I smiled. “They don’t want the old ones. Too dusty, mucky. But I know that new webs will come up. Around the privy, the midden, the garden, the kitchens… all the usual places. And maybe you could pass word around?”

“What do we do with ‘em?”

“Honestly, honey, I’m not precisely sure. I was hoping you could talk to the healers, see what they need.”

“That’s the favour?”

“The favour is not mentioning my name.”

She regarded me levelly. Like all below-stairs maids, she’s seen a lot. “Why.”

Luckily, the truth sufficed. “I’ve been too visible, lately. With the award and the gossip and all.” She nodded. “The deed needs doing. I’d prefer if credit goes to the people who actually do the work, not the passerby who overheard a healer complaining.”

“Stupid prissy healers,” she said reflexively. “None of them smart enough to think of asking us themselves.”

I agreed and bobbed a curtsey for the compliment. “Will you?”

“Of course, dear.”

She straightened the covers - damn, fast work! - and made to shoo us both out. “One other thing?” I said, awkwardly. I pulled the ribbon out of my pouch. “I was… at the merchant stall and the seller mentioned someone who looked a, a lot like you eyeing this off, and…” Damn it, I’m stammering a bit. She looks like she’s deciding whether or not to be furious.

Warm affection from Cole and I found my centre again.

My voice softened. “I heard about you and Shannon.” She stiffened. “I think it’s marvelous, you’d be so perfect together! And so I had to. Just because it’d be sweet to be involved, even on the edges.”

I pushed the ribbon toward her. She took it, unconsciously ran her hands down the design. Bit her lip.

“I’m too old for her. I know that.”

My mouth fell open, talked of its own accord. “What? You’re only a decade older than her, surely. And she’s what, in her early twenties.”

Her hands kept moving on the ribbon. She didn’t look up. “Fifteen years. And I’m old. And she’s so damned young.”

I knew what she meant. “That’s one of the reasons I think you two would be amazing together! She’s energetic, and you’re -” she tried to insert a cutting self-assessment and I literally pinched her lips shut over the word “- grounded. You complement each other.”
“I love her,” she said. First time.

I squeezed her arm fiercely. “And I wager she loves you too.”

She responded with a sigh. “As if she knows what she wants, the giddy girl.”

“That isn’t truth talking,” I said severely. “That’s fear and old bullshit and I will not have that out of you, you hear?”

Finally, she looked up. “Aw shit, you’re right. I think you are. I hope you are. I’m so damned afraid, you know?” I knew. I definitely knew. “But life’s too short and I’ll give her that ribbon and thank you and oh Maker I’m leaking.”

She unceremoniously blew her nose on a leftover pillowcase and I laughed. We hugged and she wiped her eyes.

“You’re a good lass,” she said. “As soon as I get some extra blankets you’ll have the first one.”

“I didn’t do it for that,” I said primly, “but I will abso-fucking-lutely accept because it’s not even Firstfall yet and my considerable arse is already freezing.”

We laughed together.

Only sixteen-and-three-quarter hours to fill.

Chapter End Notes

*stands at the dock, waving frantically as the ship sails*
Go ahead, honey.

We were in the big stables, and Cole was trembling my body in excitement. He shuffled along the stalls and there it was. The nuggalope.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but it was definitely not that. It was massive, dark grey. Two sets of curling horns. Hairless. Oh mercy, it had hands.

Personally, I would have been backing away slowly. Rumour said the Inquisitor had paid ten thousand royals for this mount, which was absolutely obscene if true. I didn’t think there was any creature that was worth that much.

And then my cinnamon bun changed my opinion. He vaulted - my body can do that? - over the stall door and hugged the beast, murmuring hellos into its big nug-like ears. It clearly liked the treatment, responding by licking our face in long swipes of its purple tongue.

My dear heart. He was absolutely, unequivocally transported. His mind, normally reverberating with the needs of the hundred closest people, contained only one thought. It was, oddly, reminiscent of really good sex, of the space where only this interaction exists and every other stupid fluttering thought just… stops.

There was just Cole and the nuggalope. And me, smiling at them both.

For some time I just sat and enjoyed it. His mind was a white wall of !!!!! and it was so very sweet.

Predictably, I got tired of it much much faster than my sweetling did. I started to think. I thought about the hay-bale theatre stall I was currently occupying. I thought about memory palaces, and mental projections.

I closed my non-existent eyes and concentrated.

Yes. Good.

I was in a suite, of sorts. One wall simply did not exist: in its place were my hands splayed across dappled grey. I knew that the scene was precisely as wide as my field of vision. The smell of beast, the feel of the warm flexible hide, the sound of Cole murmuring secrets in my voice was not projected from anywhere. It simply was.

Turned to face the view was my favourite reading chair from the Trevelyan library, complete with a side table covered in books. In the back corner was my childhood bed, accompanied by - oh my - the fretwork screen from his usual room in The Net Hauler’s Lament. In the other corner was sand, and the smell of the ocean. And at the far wall, between them both, was a door.

I gripped the brass handle and opened, praying to no-one in particular that I hadn’t miscalculated.

Before me stood the study, surfaces still covered in Cole’s notes. I was in the doorway that led to Lady Evelyn’s chambers. I did not quite have the bravery, yet, to step through and let the door to my
new suite swing closed. I knew it would be fine. But still.

Instead, I retreated to the reading chair and adored Cole for a while longer. He was oblivious to it, and that was even more delightful.

***

Somewhere, in building this addendum to the memory palace, I had given myself a body. Did it… huh. Faintly, it bore scars on its wrists. Huzzah? Solas is right, I’m starting to accept them. If going from being startled and revolted fifty times a day down to only ten or so means accepting them. I guess it does.

Solas. That whole Fade interaction was weird, wasn’t it? I would have wagered five royals he’d be utterly (although not demonstratively) thrilled to have a co-voyager in the Fade. I wasn’t at all prepared for him to be so…

So…

Panicked. Yes, under the usual controlling and superior yadda yadda, I think he was terrified of finding me in the Fade. But why?

I marched out from my space into the study before I could think too hard about it and get nervous. I checked all the surfaces and… voilà. Shelved with the ledgers was a book whose spine, in gold leaf, merely said SOLAS.

That uncanny echoing feeling began when I picked up the tome. I hadn’t expected otherwise, really. The curious itch remained about why it was happening, and why only with Solas. Somniari weirdness was still my best guess? With my best source of information unwilling to discuss it, I supposed I wasn’t going to find out for sure any time soon.

I ignored the feeling and opened the book.

Cole’s letters are childish, rounded: the writing of someone indifferently taught who rarely practiced afterward. But he’d picked up - undoubtedly from me - the principles of baselines and x-height, so all his clumsy letters were immaculate in their slant, proportion and line height. It was charming and eerie in equal measure.

Cole had also learned about the importance of a good index, bless him. There were three pages of references under the title Fade, and I quickly scanned the entries for tragedy (not useful, it mostly referred to witnessed tragedies), companions, and painful experiences in.

I found one that was cross-referenced between all three, and flipped to that page. Touched it. Opened to the memory.

Ah.

Oh, dear.

Well, that explains quite a lot, really.

And now, important answer gained, I should put this book down. It would be terribly rude, selfish and immoral to… ooh, really? Fascinating. Stop that! I mean, it wouldn’t hurt to look at the index, surely.

There… there are a considerable number of entries with my name on. A few more and they’ll need
to be divided into sub-headings.

What… would those sub-headings be?

***

“Emma?!!?”

I rushed into the study. “Cole-love?”

He was literally vibrating, like a rope under too much strain. “I called and you didn’t answer and I worried about you, borrowed heart racing, thunder in my ears, what if I have hurt her?”

I ran to him, squeezed him tight. “Oh love, I am so so sorry. See, I’m fine.” I kissed his cheek in confirmation. “Let’s give the body back and then I’ll show you what I’ve been up to.”

The dispossession -is that the correct word? - is getting easier with practice. It took less than a second before I was aware of myself, sitting on a barrel, covering my face with hands which smelt very strongly of livestock.

I washed them, and my face, before finding a sun-warmed rock in the field and re-entering the memory palace. Hugged Cole again to reassure him, and listened to a long explanation of something I had already seen in full detail. Huh. That is important, isn’t it? I need a confidant.

So does Cole, I suppose, but that might be harder to arrange.

When he was done, I took his hand and led him to my new room. Of course he recognised everything in it, although I had to cut him off when it came to the screen. Too close to Friday to be dwelling on that for long.

“And look!” I said, leading him back from the study, through a short corridor - future planning - and into the Trevelyan library.

It was a precise copy in terms of layout and décor. However, instead of labels on the shelves that said things like Genealogy and Political Theory, the labels now read Kitchens and Stables and Companions. And the spines were names.

“Why are the books different colours?” asked Cole.

Gesturing enthusiastically, I explained: “Blue is for people we’ve checked, light green is for ones you haven’t questioned yet and dark green is for ones where I haven’t assessed the answers. We probably need more colours, but I thought that would make a good beginning.”

“It is very clever!” he said and regarded the shelves. “You moved them all in here. Except Solas. Why not him?”

“Yeah, you’re gonna need to move that one, love. I don’t think I can trust myself with it.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I hugged him again. “What was that for?” he asked.

“Just for being so damn accepting.”

“Okay.”
I laughed, and hugged him harder.

Chapter End Notes

Nuggalope Fact #5: Nuggalopes like the colour lilac.
A Watched Pot, Et Cetera

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I found Faye sawing planks and bossing around her colleagues, as usual. I double-checked the wording she wanted on the pamphlet, decided that I was not invested enough to argue with the post scripts she required, and dutifully repeated the locations she wanted to see pamphlets posted in. They were all good choices: Faye is an autocrat, but not a stupid one.

While I composed my thoughts, I returned to the office. Lydia immediately sniffed the air and remarked, “Why does it suddenly smell like a barn in here? Oh! Emma, is that you?”

I had no useful reply. My desk had somehow become wobbly again. I sucked my teeth and fixed it, sat, and copied the first dozen pamphlets. My mind wasn’t on the task - it didn’t need to be - or Lydia’s snipes, which were less than gnat bites compared to some of her better efforts.

I was thinking about Solas.

Go and see him? No. I’d been doing that too much lately.

   supplicant to the throne. what is it, my child

   Ugh. Exactly.

Wait to see him in the Fade? Also no. We needed to clear up an important issue first.

I got out my slate and started drafting a note. Once it was as good as I was likely to manage, I took a piece of the good vellum and my bottle of vermillion ink. I knew he’d appreciate both.

Clean nib, clean mind. Intent, distance and clarity. Grip firm but not tense. Go.

----

Solas,

You are wrong, my friend.

In the Fade you see me as a child, new-come to power. Children are so terribly vulnerable in the Fade, boundaries unmarked, easy to fool. I am not a child. Spirits are shaped by people, we know this. Same needs, same flaws, same tricks. I am no more vulnerable to such things there than I am here. Less, in truth. People are so contradictory.

And I have Cole. Not just in my ear, don’t you recall? He and I were one, and his knowing is my knowing. Did you not wonder how I knew Diligence? How I knew you? Most is not liminal, but perhaps stronger for it. I know even a few things that you do not.

But I too am wrong.

I did not notice I was in the Fade at all, and do not believe that doesn’t alarm me. I have Cole’s comprehension, but not his form. I do not know how to navigate. How to travel. To make changes. To escape. How to be me in this place where I cannot be him. You were right: in the Fade I am in danger. And I suspect I will be in that danger frequently.
If you wish to teach me, if you are willing to, I will accept. No jests about too wise. No back talk. I will be a humble and attentive student, and I will be safe.

You are not young, and neither am I. It will not be as it was.

Kindest regards.

-----

I sent it with a runner, with strong words to deliver it into only his hands, a line she’d heard more times than she could count. Distracted myself with accounts payable. Tried to. Was that pompous? I was trying for gravitas. I suck at gravitas. Fuck, fuck fuckity fuck. I am a profane and stupid -

parchment rustles in an uncertain hand. how can she see so much? how can she condemn so little?

Oh.

...

Thank you, Cole-love.

Relieved, I threw myself into the accounts. Not normally our responsibility, but we apparently have a new quartermaster arriving and we’re filling in until he takes over. I made a mental note to go check in on Threnn sometime soon - after being put aside for the second time she’s likely smarting.

Three hours later, a runner dropped a note on my desk. It felt… wary.

a smart rabbit knows the woods are full of snares, ma’da’len

I swear, sometimes knowing more just makes me more confused. Why is Solas so wary of me? What does he think I’m possibly going to do to him? Gah. I cracked the seal. It was a short note, discreet. Lettering almost aggressively well-balanced. Trying a little too hard to be neutral?

-----

I accept.

Preparations must be made, a few little days. Do not venture until I direct you.

Your friend.

-----

I bit my lip until it ached, grateful for the bookshelves that hid me.

Your friend.

Your friend.

songbird in my ribcage. hands electric. vision blurs. armour of clasps are unbinding, one by one

For the record, we are talking about me here. Right?

I love you

Yeah, that’s what I thought. Love you too, honey.
I carefully folded the note.

Put it in my pouch.

Got back to work.

Smiled secretly to myself for a long time.

***

Later, Lady Josephine and I went over the project notes.

“You did marvellous work, Emma. Meticulous and well-thought-out.” Please stop blushing, self. I won’t let us be in love with her if you keep this up.

I cleared my throat. “Thank you, my lady.”

“The Council met and we have… a few alterations to make.”

Hmm. That was one way to put it.

The ground floor was to be made in stone instead of wood. No more suites - a bidding war would begin this week amongst a carefully-selected group of proprietors to build another inn for the more prestigious clientele. (It wasn’t said outright, but clearly a significant percentage of the staff would be Leliana’s people.) No spirits, only ale served. A system of movable wooden partitions would be used in the rooms to permit the accommodation of a single person, all the way up to half a clan. All bathing facilities were to be shared.

The location remained the same. That was something, I suppose.

I took furious notes and promised a revised plan within a deadline I felt I could manage.

Honestly, it was great to have a distraction from the constant reminder that there were only nine hours until Friday began.

I worked furiously until ten. Knocked on Vanadirthavean’s door but received no answer. Oh, of course, the banquet with Lady Elise.

Robe to the laundries. Need a second one soon, please.

Then I went to bed and tried very hard to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I love you guys.
I got up two hours before dawn. Reclaimed my robe, ate a simple breakfast. Then, armed with tools I had bought, borrowed, and - in one case - simply stolen, I marched to the bathhouse.

A considerable time later I left, walking in an exaggerated hip-sway that allowed my legs the best chance to rub against each other. I have never been so damn smooth and touchable in my life.

According to Cole, the birds were telling the dawn its name, which meant it was mostly light. Panicked realisation struck.

I…

I have no idea what the fuck to do now.

Go leer at his sword practice? Pretend to bump into him? *Kick down his door?*

I hadn’t thought this far! My brain kept skipping ahead to the good parts! WHAT DO I DOOOOOO?!?

first, breathe

I did.

Now what?

breathe better

What does that… oh. Yeah. Good idea.

I walked to the garden. Sat on a bench. Listened to the sounds of the Chant. Ran my fingers through the dew on the marble and inhaled the manifold scents of the early day.

And then a massive figure sat down on the bench next to me, facing the other direction.

Oh Maker.

Maker be kind.

This.

Is.

*Happening.*
A switch was thrown and my whole body came stunningly alive. The panic evaporated. I was myself, centred and vibrant. Feminine and powerful. I was Maker-damned glorious. I was personified.

Yes.

He really wasn't ready for all I had to give. I almost pitied him.

Almost.

How quickly he’d found me, that spoke volumes. Naughty volumes that I would re-read later. (Probably often.) The set of his shoulders and the direction of his feet, the neat three inches of space between us, all communicated clearly how he wanted to play this.

I looked up, gave a polite and impersonal smile. “Hello.”

The Iron Bull leered at me, bless him. That told me more, and I liked every word. “You’re Emma, right?”

“And you’re… Bull. From the Chargers. I’ve… heard about you.” My face was very even. My tone has probably been outlawed a few places.

“I bet you have,” he replied. His tone was absolutely punishable by law in at least five city-states. Already I was quite warm. “I’ve seen you around, and you know what I think?”

“Do tell,” I purred, amused.

“I think you’re a woman who appreciates good sex.”

I blinked slowly, smiled wickedly, tasted every word. “You are correct, serah. Although generally my standards run much higher than merely good.”

His eye twinkled in appreciation of the challenge. “Yeah? Like how?”

“It depends on the lover, of course,” I said. “Like I said, I’ve heard of you. I’d be -” I bit my lip “- very much disappointed if you provided merely good sex. I would expect much more of you.”

“Expect?” he queried.

“Demand.” I don’t have to hold back. I don’t have to hold back even a little, I realised joyfully. My eye contact was searing.

And he fucking loved it. Welcomed it.

There was a pause while we smiled at one another. I’ve seen fighters give that look, when they both understand that their practice partner is a worthy one. They circle. They sometimes grin at each other companionably. They get ready for a real match.

Both of us breathed in the moment.

Oddly, I took a snippet of it to be grateful for my age. When I was much younger, I had no idea how to manage sexual tension; it would burst up like a bonfire, scorch and sear me, run amok. Nowadays? Kiln-handlers know less about how to stoke fire into heat.

I was afire, radiating fuck. But also I was perfectly, deadly calm.

He knew. He approved.
The Iron Bull and I circled each other, and both of us thought in unison, “Oh, yes.”

Voice calm, almost conversational, without lessening the distance between us, he spoke. “I will take you to my room and lock the door.” My chest is already starting to heave. Oh, mercy. “I will uncover every single way you like to be touched. Every single way you like to be kissed. Licked. Bitten. Fucked. And I will use that information to please you.” He leaned in just enough that I could feel the heat of him. “I will pleasure you again and again. Until you cannot bear another instant. Until you beg me to stop.”

I forgot how to breathe for a moment. (This man.) Then I touched the tip of my tongue lightly to my teeth and smiled mischievously.

“Mmm, that’s a fine opening offer. But I will require more of you.” His eyebrow raised. My words were slow, very deliberate. “I am not a viola, to be played upon. I will not merely receive pleasure.” I smiled briefly, cat-like, then grew intent. “I want every inch of you imprinted with my skin. My nose full of your scent. I want the taste of you in my mouth. I want, ohhhhh -” his hands flexed unseen “- to see your brow crease, to hear your breaths become desperate as you realise that, no matter how much you want to, you can’t hold on any longer.”

I paused, for maximum effect. He paid absolute attention.

“I want,” I said, “to see you undone.”

I raised my chin. “Will you give me that, Bull? Will you give me what I want?”

He did not reply.

Too real, I realised. I said words that were too real. Have I spoilt this moment, this game? Too much of the real Emma, the one who knows? The other Emma, the old one, the one I am pretending to be, she’s gone. I’ve never been much good at pretending to know less than I do.

Void with it, I decided. I let the fear, the uncertainty, the vulnerability show in my eyes. I let him choose: to ignore the slip, or to embrace it. To call off this game now, or to play it more deeply. Dangerously, perhaps. We can keep the screen of impersonality, play with the Qun’s rules, whatever he needs to justify himself. But that doesn’t mean we have to lie to ourselves, too.

Does it?

I waited, chest heaving, working not to tremble. Choose, love.

He leaned in further, mouth to my ear. Body language completely casual; passers-by waved at both of us as they left the services.

“Absolutely,” he said.

It’s official: I’m never going to be able to hear that word innocently again.

Chapter End Notes

If you ask VERY NICELY I will post the next chapter earlier than usual.
The walk was quick, courteous. We both used it to get back into character. Maybe my mask slipped a fraction there, but it was firmly reattached by the time the door was locked behind me. Emma-from-before. The one, who, quite uncomplicatedly, would climb this man like a tree.

It’s funny, the things people find sexy. I’ve never purred at a bolt being driven home before.

Then he turned around, and all moisture left my mouth. I thought of words beginning with ‘in’: intent. Intense. Inside me oh please.

“I frankly do not recall the last time I was this aroused.” Might as well be honest.

He growled his enjoyment and prowled toward me. Shoulders low. No hurry. Grinning.

“Fuck, I’m going to enjoy this.” He was doing that subterranean voice again. I am just utterly done. “I can see you, hoping I’m impatient. Hoping I won’t take this very. Very. Slowly.”

I whined. His grin got even wider. “Nah, I’m in no rush. Remember how I told you you’re gonna beg for me to stop?” He stood over me, close but not touching. “You’re gonna beg for a lot more before we get there, minx.”

A small, still-rational part of me enjoyed the fact that Friday Emma has a different nickname. The rest of me was far too busy combining anticipation and an incredibly enjoyable dread into a roiling package of snakes in my lower belly.

I deliberately ran my nails down my neck and shuddered. Then I looked up and returned his grin.

“Bring it, lover,” I said.

He smirked and sat on a wide armless chair. Patted his thigh. Once again I sat on his lap, back to his chest, although this time I hiked my skirt up enough to put my legs outside of his slightly spread ones. And I finally got to do what I’d wanted to on the other occasions: writhe ferally against the warm firmness of his chest. Grind against him to hear his noises.

He makes very good noises, for the record.

“Slow down, minx, we have to talk first.”

“What? I can do both,” I teased, but obeyed. I was rewarded with hot breath on my neck and a voice growled directly into my ears and down to my groin.

“Gooooood,” he chuckled. My nipples didn’t need to hear another word. They were set up for the next year or three. “Now, minx. You know what I need you to tell me, don’t you?”
I nodded frantically, ever so eager to please.

“Then do it,” he said simply, and put a hand on my thigh. Heavy, unmoving. Very distracting. I am in so much trouble. I cannot wait.

“My watch-word is coral,” I breathed. Please move, hand. Just a little. “I don’t enjoy being insulted, degraded, or having a tongue stuck in my ear.” His breath shifted as he nodded, told me to keep going. “No - ahh - no permanent marks. Nothing…” It is very hard to concentrate. “Hmm. No anal play without explicit consent. And…”

“And?” he murmured against my skin. I whimpered. Tried to focus.


He repeated them all back against my skin, causing yet more flutters. Then he continued, “My watch-word is katoh.”

I snorted. Cole, as promised, was being very quiet, but instinctually the translation floated up. Did he intend the definition that meant ‘ending’ or the one that meant ‘achievement’? I was wagering the correct answer was both.

“Don’t hang off my horns, especially without warning.” His hand moved, infinitesimally. I swatted him and paid attention. “Most of my scars are fine, but a couple aren’t. I’ll show you which.” I nodded. “Teeth and nails and shit are good, but leave my balls alone.”

“Orlesians?” I asked.

“Orlesians,” he confirmed. He nipped at my throat just a smidgen and surprised a moan out of me. “Fuck, your noises are great. Don’t hold ‘em back, okay?”

“Keep going like this,” I promised, “and that will not be an issue.” He nipped me again. I ground against his cock and laughed. Repeated the list. “Anything else?”

“That’s about all. This time.” While I was savouring that glorious concept, he hiked up my skirt to the waist.

Inhaled sharply through his nostrils.

“Look at you,” he said reverently. “Just fucking look at you.”

I did. From my perspective, all I saw were tan legs shading into dramatic paleness. Soft spread of thighs. One patch of extremely damp curls unfettered by smalls. I saw… y’know, me.

What he saw exactly, I could not say. But it sure did make him hard.

And then he put his hand back, in the exact same position as before. When he touched my smoothed skin, he groaned. He rubbed up against me and for the first time, it wasn’t a move, calculated and deliberate. He was just that aroused by me, by my skin, by the carefully-unspoken fact that I had prepared myself so. For him.

“Minx,” he breathed. It was praise and condemnation and plea, all in one. I leaned against him - into him - and agreed with every part.

We breathed there together.
Then he started to move his hand.

First touch was away from the skin, only ruffling the nigh-invisible hairs of my upper thigh. I wriggled, not as I had before. “Not that, huh?” he asked.

“Tickles.”

“Okay. How about like this?” This time the touch was feather-light, drawing sigils on my skin. I breathed in sharply. “Good. Very good.” I agreed. His fingers traced electricity over my bared legs, skating close to - but of course never actually near - my mound.

I made noises deep in my throat, determined to enjoy every minute of this sweet torment. The world was slipping away, and I didn't even wave goodbye.

“How about this?” Fingers firmer, assertive. Irresistible. I moaned, shivered, tried vainly to press my thighs together. He put both hands on my hips, held me immobile a moment. I moaned more urgently.

“Hands like this, yeah? Later. When I -”

There was a knock on his door. Demanding, confident, and absolutely authoritative.

No.

No.

I looked at him, startled back into full awareness. He grimaced, clearly tempted to ignore it. But then it came again. There was no ignoring that summons, and we both knew it.

“Vashedan,” he spat. I scrambled as he stood and marched at the door. I was thinking something considerably more colourful.

He took one centering breath then pulled the bolt. Opened it, enough to be seen, not enough for me to be.

“Bull, darling,” fluted in the voice of First Enchanter Vivienne. “Release that dalliance, who or whatever it is, and pack your bags. The Inquisitor demands our presence at the gate.”

Give him credit, he did try. I was aware how much effort that took him. “Ma’am, I would, but -”

“Inquisition scouts are being held hostage, darling,” she said, as if that would settle the issue.

“Sounds like the Seeker’s job, ma’am,” he attempted.

I heard Madame de Fer give an overly-patient sigh. “By the Avvar, my dear. The Inquisitor asked for you specifically; clearly those big brutes respect nothing so much as a brute bigger than themselves.”

His shoulder slumped a little. My nails bit crescents into my palms as I silently screamed, “NOOOOOOOOOO” at the ceiling.

And then he said it.

Of course he said it.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be right down.”
I moved quietly for the door. The side one; I had no especial interest in walking past her cool assessing eyes as I left.

Then I was picked up, shoved against the bare wall, and - for the first time - I kissed The Iron Bull.

I thought a lot about that kiss as I walked back to my rooms. Remembering the feel of one hand under my rear, the easy way he held my entire weight on one forearm. The other hand carded deeply in my hair. His lips. The taste of his tongue. My own panting keening breaths. My hands, scrabbling for purchase. The sheer bulk of him against me.

I latched my chamber door, leaned against it, and unceremoniously reached under my skirts. Thinking further of how desperately I had wanted that kiss. Anticipated it, in a thousand ways. How my best imaginings - and they were really quite good - had come nowhere near the reality. That kiss could only be described using the metaphor of natural disaster.

And then, when I was getting very close, I allowed myself to think the other thoughts. The forbidden ones.

See, I had regarded myself as just another item on The Iron Bull’s no doubt extensive list of potential entertainments. Higher than many, likely, but probably not as intriguing as the strapping pair of recruits with a reputation for threesomes.

Until he kissed me.

That kiss should have been good. Friendly. Mutually laughing in regret at the situation. “Aww, crap. What a pity. Sorry about that.” He should have been telling jokes, for Andraste’s sake. He should not have been growling, teeth against my lip, hands careless enough to leave bruises. Grinding against me. He should not have been tense and frustrated and kinda oh, oh fuck, frantic…

He’d wanted this. Not as a pleasant diversion or an idle fancy. Wanted me.

For one moment, his desire had exceeded his considerable control.

Yep. That did it.

***

Sometimes one must accept that masturbation is simply not going to suffice.

I knew this was one of those occasions after the first orgasm. I threw in another two anyway. (I felt I’d earned them.)

Then I washed my hands and asked Cole:

What in the Void am I supposed to do with my day off?

how is a day on? does it wobble?

So not a lot of help there, then.

I left the servant’s quarters to go… somewhere, when one of the runners stopped me. Lara. Quick feet, quick mind, and like every other messenger I have ever been acquainted with, a complete smart-ass.

“Finally,” she said, and passed me a message. “He said not to disturb you but Maker was I getting bored waiting.”
“Who’s this from?” I asked reflexively.

“Pretty sure you’ll know, sweets,” she said and walked away.

I opened it. In a big, workmanlike hand, it said:

*Same time next Friday?*

Chapter End Notes

#sorrynotsorry
I ate a second breakfast then I went back to bed. I figured that was the sanest option since I noticed myself getting annoyed at one of the builders for putting too much pepper on her eggs.

I read for a while, had a nap, read some more. Enjoyed the particular pleasure of doing nothing at all. Then, more or less back to my usual self, I got up and decided to fill the day with good deeds. If I can’t be happy, I might as well be useful.

After a quick lunch, I popped into the office. “You can’t be here,” Harden said. “It’s Friday. You don’t exist today.”

“I’m an illusion, caused by your desire to tell someone a hilarious anecdote from your youth,” I informed him solemnly.

“The Nostalgia Ghost! I always knew you’d come for me,” he replied, swooning. Lark watched us both with a placid amusement on their face.

“Either of you want to hear about the choir?” My face was bright and optimistic. They both declined, but behind me a big voice said, “A choir?”

It took no effort to recruit Gareth. Please let it be that he can stay anywhere near on pitch, because his basso will be glorious.

Then I re-re-shimmed my desk and began copying the remaining pamphlets. I started to feel queasy and tight behind the temples and I thought to myself, “Yes. A migraine. The perfect end to the perfect day.”

But as I looked up I realised I was wrong. The Commander and Lady Josephine, arms full of reports, were having a polite discussion about altering the new quartermaster’s reporting lines within the military. Looking at him, you’d think he was stressed, maybe annoyed and struggling not to show it.

Oh, the poor man.

I adjusted my plans for the rest of the day.

***

Varric Tethras writes financial documents in solitude, and fiction in crowds. The first makes sense: fewer distractions, no risk of accidentally giving away trade secrets. The second, I’m not sure. Perhaps the sound of voices adds a useful verisimilitude to his dialogue? Maybe it provides enough distraction so he doesn’t overthink it? Possibly it’s superstition.

It’s interesting, wheyer he does it. And an amazing spectator sport.

He finished a paragraph with a flourish, dropped his quill and thoughtfully drank from the mug beside him, doing the “When did this drink get so cold?” face. He noticed me for the first time.

“How long?” he asked, smiling.

“A page or so. Riveting. You could charge.”
“I tried that once. Too many suggestions from the back row.” We laughed a moment and that stupid little voice piped up with glee that the famous author and I were bonding. I choked it to a swift death and said, “Can we do some business?”

He made a graceful gesture, inviting me to sit. (It’s a pity he’s so thoroughly unavailable, I would enjoy being mildly obsessed with him if I thought I had any chance at all.) Then he did an excellent finger-steepling-desyhr impression and waited.

The first piece of business was very simple and over quickly, with only two quips to endure. Less than I’d expected, considering.

Then I lowered my voice and said, “A few templars are considering leaving the Order.”

“Not surprising,” he observed. “Imprisonment and abuse of your charges is one thing, but losing? That can really sting.”

I agreed with him. “But leaving the Order means -”

“-choking to death on the lyrium leash.” I nodded. “What’s your angle?”

I took a moment to get the words correct. “After the award, Lady Josephine gave me a certain… latitude to solve problems within the Inquisition.”

“Latitude?”

“Money. And a small authority.”

“Sure. But why this one?”

One of Chandler’s maxims: if you can’t tell the truth with specifics, tell it with abstractions. It’s useful advice.

“I think the Order is…” I fumbled for the right word. “Toxic. And the problems aren’t temporary. It takes young people and moulds them into weapons with a perfect justification for the use of force and bugger-all limitation on their power. And then people are surprised when that somehow goes badly.” I shrugged and spread my hands. “To me, anything that makes it possible for the less-damaged to leave the monster foundry is a damn fine idea.”

“You sound like the Seeker.”

“Thanks?”

He gave a multi-layered shrug. Not entirely a compliment, then. “Where do I come into this?”

“I know next to nothing about lyrium withdrawal.”

“And you think I do?”

“Well, maybe. But my money is on the Mining Caste knowing more than they’ve let on thus far.”

He gave a marvellous look of confused innocence. “How could I possibly find out?”

I saw his innocence and raised it; my face is infinitely better suited to the expression. “Gosh, I don’t know. But Varric Tethras, desyhr of the Noble House Tethras? Surely you have some useful contacts?”
“Madam, are you suggesting I have unsavoury connections?”

“Oh, no! I am stating it as fact.”

We laughed again.

“I can write a few letters. Anything in particular you’re looking for?”

“I think I need to sweep the nets very wide on this one. Data, old records, superstitions, friend-of-a-friend stories… I’m hoping, perhaps stupidly, that with enough information some previously-unseen pattern will emerge.”

He looked amused. “That’s spy thinking.”


Chapter End Notes

Due to the double-chapter posting, everything got shifted to today. We might keep this schedule for a while; it seems to give new readers a chance to bump into the work when I post on different days. Cool?
Carrying A Basket

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Varric’s price was very reasonable: enough parchment to send all the letters plus a few extra sheets for himself. Clearly, he is on the Templar-deshackling side.

I swung by the kitchens and then, laden with a basket, headed toward the rotunda. Solas was there, deep in a thick sheaf of notes. I smiled at him fondly and let him be. Upstairs, I heard a noise from a nook and remembered that I hadn’t checked in to see if the Tranquil were being treated adequately.

“Oh!” I said, surprised. For a moment I just stared, nonplussed. Then habits came to the rescue and I said, “Good afternoon, Lord Pavus.”

Dorian Pavus looked up from his reading with an exaggerated, languid politeness that said as clear as day, “I have no idea who you are or why you have chosen to address me at this time.” All noble-born are taught this expression by age seven. Usually it doesn’t bother me. Usually.

Instead of following the script, which would require me to bob a curtsy and disappear, an impish part of me put down the basket and added with brightly false cheer, “Good book?”

One immaculate eyebrow did its best to join the equally-immaculate hairline. “Hardly,” he replied. “All these ‘gifts’ to the Inquisition and the best they can do is the Malefica Imperio? Trite propaganda.”

I’ve read it, and he is absolutely correct. I opened my mouth to agree and he interrupted. Deliberately.

“But if you want twenty volumes on whether Divine Galatea took a shit on Sunday, this is evidently the place to find it.”

“Well, my l-”

“There are ten copies of The Sermons of Renata I. Ten!”

“Yes, because-”

“And fifty of Varric’s appalling excuses for literature. I was desperate enough to try one and I could feel my brain leaking out my ears by the end of the prologue.”

“You see, w-”

“And Inquisition feeding its mind on drivel and fifth-rate scholarship? Our foes would laugh themselves to death.”

“I-”

“Worst of it…” he continued.

His interruptions were getting faster each time and I could see that he knew it. Was enjoying it.
Should never have expected anything different from Gereon Fucking Alexius’ golden boy.

This pampered spoiled shit was going to browbeat me for as long as I was well-trained enough to put up with it. He probably had slaves dedicated to the task, back home.

It’s not like they’re people, memory whispered.

My breath grew thin. Damn and double damn it, I was starting to freeze like I always do at times like this. I could feel my jaw tightening.

little left finger. feel it?

I did. Warm. Tingling.

tiny worm in the weeds, wiggle and away

The creative abuse continued as I did as I was bidden. Just move my finger, I thought. That’s not hard. Just move it, just the tiniest amount.

I did.

I unfroze.

“- the more appropriate collective noun is not library. I would suggest bonfire, personally.”

In the biggest voice I have ever used, I said: “You are certainly not quiet about boasting of your manifold talents, my lord, so I am certain you are capable of reading a simple calendar.” Every time he tried to reply I simply got louder.

“Thus you realise that it has been less than three weeks since we arrived at Skyhold. If you have been paying the minutest attention to the affairs of others, something of which I am less confident you are capable, you would have been able to do some simple calculus and realise that Lady Josephine and her eight staff may have been ever-so-slightly preoccupied by arranging food, lodging and clothing for the four-hundred-and-sixty-seven civilian staff, mages, and associated hangers-on. Quite an undertaking, you may be able to imagine, and one that has left little opportunity to purchase books.

“Also, with your much-vaunted intelligence, you have noted the variety of bindings and condition of the volumes here. You did not draw the obvious conclusion; that it is because most of our donations are from members of the Inquisition. They have, with stunning generosity, given over the small number of items they managed to take with them from the destruction at Haven. I hope that your brilliantly witty evisceration of their kindness has not travelled far enough for them to overhear.

“Lastly, you may feel free to make any requests for additions to the library to Jarrah, though I demand that you treat her with infinitely more respect than you have shown me. Good day, my lord.”

Well, that was what I wanted to say.

What actually happened was this:

I yelled, “You arsehat!” directly into his startled face, stomped away, stomped back, picked up my basket, glared at him one last time for good measure, then stomped away again before he could see how much my hands were trembling.

Below me, I could hear Solas’ delighted laughter.
Chapter End Notes

Author Meanderings:

Please understand, I adore Dorian. ADORE him. But I don't believe he is flawless, and his flaws would especially relevant to, y'know, underlings like Emma.

So we have two people, both with their own baggage, both having a crappy day, and this happened? I hope it's okay.

*grins nervously, bites nails*
whatdidIjustdowhatdidIjustdo

Andraste’s mercy, I just bellowed at a magister’s eldest son. I just called him a - oh Creators, do they send assassins for that? I mean, usually they’d just have me thrown off the battlements, but -

who is how dare she her place barefaced effrontery doesn’t she know who I am such cheek

Fuuuuuck.

listen. he’s warm. first time in a frozen forever

I listened, past the invective.

Cole was right, as always. Lord Dorian Pavus, brilliant and unacceptable, has been wearing the mask of cool unconcern for years. Too many years. Armoured and trapped and so very cold. Mere warmth doesn’t reach him.

Passion would. (Clearly not on the cards for us.)

But so would…

No.

Oh no.

Please very no.

There has to be an alternative, Cole-love.

lock him in a room for a month with you?

That’s actually slightly tempting. Compared to the alternative.

He smiled.

My trembling grew into full shudders.

I’ve just found out how to help Lord Dorian.

Shit.

***

Once the adrenaline wore off and I trusted myself to stand again, I finished the walk up the stairs. Leliana was meeting with some of her agents; I gave them space and said hello to the ravens. (No sign this time of the one that had befriended me so dramatically.)

Meeting adjourned, I put the basket down on her table. She regarded it curiously.

“I know you’re concerned about the scouts,” I said with no preamble, “but you haven’t eaten anything in the last day.”

With a look of slightly exaggerated patience, she fed herself.
“You may as well tell me what it is while I dine,” she said. Spies.

I grinned, a little tiredly. It had been another long day; I seem to have more of those than not nowadays.

“May I have access to the archives of the Left and Right Hands in regards to lyrium drafts and treatments for withdrawal?”

She gave a silent ah. “The Left Hand archives… I will give you what I can.” I noted that wasn’t at all the same as what is there, but accepted it. “For Cassandra… she is attempting to help. I’m sure she would appreciate any insights you find.”

“Which should be delivered to you, naturally.”

“Naturally.” She wiped her mouth daintily. “Now I can see you are going to suggest a break, perhaps a visit to that nook that you and Chandler prefer. I appreciate the offer.”

“How many polite refusals do you know?” I asked, amused.

Her mouth quirked. “All of them. Tomorrow morning.”

I nodded.

She returned to her reports. “Enjoy the rest of your day off. And thank you.”

“It was my pleasure,” I said automatically.

“Not the one you were planning today, I suspect,” she said, face far too expressionless.

And that was the point where I stuck my tongue out at the legendary Nightingale.

***

Three deep fortifying breaths as I descended the stairs, but Lord Dorian had disappeared. Thank mercy for that.

Solas was still in place, again deep in his notes. His eyes gleamed as he saw me.

“Oh shut it,” I said before he could speak.

“By all means,” he replied. “I simply wished to enquire whether you will be ready to begin our training. Say… tomorrow night?”

Arrangements were made. Tomorrow night, two hours before midnight. Same place. If I found myself elsewhere, I was to stay calm and quiet and wait to be found.

Like the good student I had promised to be, I agreed to all orders without argument, joke, or eyeroll. He nodded his approval of my demeanour.

The entire time, his eyes still gleamed.
One of the many things I have learned since Cole and I joined: it is possible to love someone, fully understand their actions, and still want to smack them upside the head.

Case in point: Chandler.

Eventually, he had realised, Emma will have to read me in order to assess my traitor status. When she learns who I truly am, learns about the time I did the thing with the guy, she will no longer respect/like/?/love/?/tolerate me. It is easier on us both if she realises that now.

He was attempting to drive me away in order to save us (well, mostly himself) future pain. Pre-emptive rejection. Prejection, if you will.

I understood it. I even appreciated the subtlety with which he was attempting to do so while not causing me actual harm; the drunken pony ride had been the most dramatic point, and since then he’d made do with avoiding me, ignoring me, and creating distance through the set of his feet and shoulders, through words and tone and a tiny deliberate delay on his reactions.

Still, I hated it. I hated that he felt that his core was so flawed as to murder all affection. I hated that his pin-pricks were so well aimed, such a drain to endure.

Most of all, I hated the fact that I had no solution to the problem.

I had sworn not to read him, so I couldn’t know what he was so desperate to hide. But that meant that any assurances I could make about whether I’d reject him once I found out were hollow, guesses at best.

So either I broke my word to read him, which would destroy our friendship, or I kept my word and let him destroy it.

It was so damned frustrating!

“Emma? Did you follow that?”

Leliana. Lost in my manderings, I had failed to follow her last words. (Pretty sure that isn’t something that happens often.) Luckily, Cole had been listening and helped me not to look like a complete fool.

“Stay away from the mages for now. Fit the military in as opportunity arises. All your assets have been told to come and speak to me and to do as I say, no questions asked. For the record I find that hilarious. Try and get the civilian staff covered as quickly as possible.”

A nod and a dismissal.

“Tomorrow. After lunch.” Chandler said. He made it sound like an insult.

I nodded, thought of a hundred things to say. Settled on: “See you then, Chandler.”

He didn’t even reply before he turned heel and walked away.
I lost my battle not to audibly sigh after him.

***

It was correspondence day.

Back in Haven, we’d had no such thing - every day was correspondence day. But up here, we tended to receive all our missives in one huge clump and had to spend the whole morning sorting it out.

Letters to staff and others were winnowed out first and handed to the messengers for delivery. I had five letters, most of which I kissed then popped unread into my pouch for later.

Then there was the rest. Invoices, letters of marque and offers of goods went on one table. Polite demands, impolite requests, a choking amount of oblique political chicanery adorned another.

Lydia and Circe were mostly in charge of the diplomatic bundle; Harden and the unsmiling Starkhavenites took point on the mercantile. The rest of us tried not to step on each other’s toes as we scurried back and forth.

I picked up one tightly sealed scroll and paused. Blinked. And snuck into Lady Josephine’s office.

She was reading the first letters and surreptitiously eating a sweet; my arrival startled her enough that I was briefly concerned. Respected Ambassador Slain By Caramels? That would be terrible on so many levels.

Once she had finished coughing she asked politely what I wanted.

I handed her the scroll, still unopened.

“Knife on the throat, tickles when I swallow. Please, please, I have children.” My delivery held only a fraction of the desperation and panic I felt - still enough to make the hand shake.

Lady J looked concerned - for me, bless her - and unsure. “I am afraid I do not understand. Is this Cole’s thought?”

“Yes, my lady. Whoever wrote this was absolutely terrified.” Suddenly stern, she broke the seal and read, brows furrowing. “Are you both sure?” she asked. “There is nothing in this to suggest such things.”

She passed me the note and I read it. I didn’t know the specific nobles - no Ostwick ties - but it seemed to be mundane enough: small favours exchanged, all part of the Game. The writing was no more uneven than most dictation. It seemed totally normal, unless you had a cinnamon bun in your mind.

To him, paralysing dread was written between every line.

I handed it back as quickly as I could.

“We’re sure, my lady,” I said.

Brows still furrowed, she nodded. “I’ll talk to Leli about it. Perhaps…”

And then, because she is who she is, she shook her head free of all diplomatic maneuvering and stood up. She took both of my hands in hers and said, simply, “We shall set this right. Thank you both.”
I don’t regret being a bit in love with her at all.

***

After the mound of paper had been tamed, I was asked to return briefly to Lady Josephine’s office. My opinion on a few Marcher lords would be appreciated, she said for the benefit of the others.

Actually, Cole was asked to check over the other scrolls. None had strong impressions left on them. “Not even this one?” she asked, amused.

I scanned it. Outrage, vituperation, indignation and not a small amount of spittle. I smirked. “Nope. Either his scribe is a Tranquil, or…”

“…or his Lordship is posturing,” she concluded. “As I suspected.” Her eyes twinkled at me and suddenly I wanted to lean in, smell her hair.

Cole-love. Help.

the nuggalope likes eating grass, but only if it’s been cut! he thinks that way is the tastiest.

I tried not to laugh and failed. Lady Josephine wondered if she should be outraged and I held my hands up in surrender. Didn’t bother to explain.

Merci, honey.

By the time I got back, my desk had reacquired its wobble.

I rather dislike Lydia, but you can’t fault her work ethic.

Chapter End Notes

I would totes like to lean in and smell your hair. That sounded weird. Damn. I mean, I adore all of you.

You make one invalid 173% more twinkly.
The rest of the day was busy and very pleasant.

Circe, Harden and I took our lunches to the garden. It was so charming that we unanimously vowed to do so as often as possible, while making increasingly ridiculous suggestions about how to ensure that not too many other Inquisition members had the same notion.

We decided on tiny trebuchets full of poison ivy.

“Clearly our payload needs to make a noise as it flies,” said Harden decisively.

“Clearly,” I agreed. “The deterrence should be enough to drive away our foes, without needing to inflict grievous itchiness on them.”

We debated incorporating tiny bells or the moaning rocks that the Alamarri used in their slingshots.

“Unnecessary,” Circe said. “It already makes a sound sufficient for our purposes.”

What’s that, we asked.

With a perfectly straight face, she replied, “Raaaaaasssh.”

She didn’t laugh because she never, ever does, but Harden and I more than covered the deficiency.

***

Next a few meetings: progress was made on both the inn project and the unrelated attempts to convince Gatsi that he no longer has to define himself by an event that happened nearly twenty years ago. One small detour on the way back.

The cordwainer has arrived! Finally! My boots were only ever marginally comfortable to begin with, and the journey from Haven has downgraded them. My measurements were taken, a colour decided upon, and soon new footwear shall be mine. Glorious.

Then back to the office after another brief detour, this one not of my devising. The rest of the work day was devoted to writing Polite Refusals; I’m happy to leave Impolite Refusals to Circe and Lydia, both of whom are far better at it.

Later, an hour in the new servant’s hall, holding my hands in place for Serafina to wind her yarn around, letting the post-dinner chatter wash around me.

I stayed for long enough to be certain that none of my less-literate colleagues needed assistance with reading or replying to a letter. (Both are common requests and ones I have always done my best to provide condescension-free assistance with.) To my room to open my own missives.

First, unexpectedly excellent news.

She has time off because of the armistice!

Cole smiled at me.
will she come?

Yeah! On her return trip. For two days, maybe three!

and Ash?

I quickly opened the next note.

###

It’s as quiet as it ever gets. The boys will bitch, but they know I deserve it.

Make it happen, cap’n.

###

Yesssss.

come here?

I blinked, but obeyed. In the memory palace, Cole was waiting. Head tilted, intent.

“What is it, honey?” I asked.

“I just like seeing you very happy,” he replied simply.

“Aaaaggh, you darling! Get over here.”

He took one obedient step and then I watched a thought bonk him on the head.

“You could chase me!” he said brightly. “If… if you wanted to.”

I waited a moment, heart full of my dear Cole, how effortlessly and kindly he reads me. How our pieces fit together. How much we resonate.

Then I picked up my skirts and grinned.

***

Mental projections don’t actually run out of breath, but after a while long-held beliefs about myself became convinced that this was the time when we should. I slumped in front of the fireplace and Cole joined me.

“So, a new door has appeared, I see,” I said. I'd noticed it while we were running down the corridor to the library, whooping like idiots: a tiny little thing, more like a cupboard door than anything else.

Cole stiffened. I continued, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but it looks to me like you made yourself a room." Tiny nod. "One you'd like to keep all to yourself." Even tinier nod. "I'm glad you have a place, honey," I said. All the tension left in one whoosh and his smile was sweeter than he was, almost.

He curled up next to me. I removed That Hat and stroked his hair, his thin shoulders.

“Do you miss the buckled shoes?” he asked.

For a second I mentally answered that question literally. Heck yeah, those shoes were amazing.
“What, honey? Being a child?” He nodded. I made the comme-çi-comme-ça gesture. “I was a different person then, love. Simpler. Sometimes I think that simplicity sounds attractive, but I kinda like the person I am now.”

His eyes met mine.

“I like her too.”

I booped his nose.

Of course that necessitated five minutes of explanation.

I was happy to oblige.

Chapter End Notes

Have I mentioned that ya'll are the best? Pretty sure I have.

One of the MANY reasons is that you use terms like Agape in your comments, which is a) exactly what I've always been aiming for in the Cole/Emma relationship, and b) I adore having readers who use Greek philosophical constructs to correctly describe it.

I have always, always been writing this with myself as the audience - it's one of the main ways I entertain myself during the many hours I am confined to bed. I am forever humbled and grateful that this entirely self-indulgent creation makes other people happy, too.

*hugs*
Starting To Get A Smidgen Nervous, Which Is Problematic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After extra chat and snuggle, I left the memory palace and opened the remaining letters.

1. A long one from Cumberland, who had spent a week with the Bosun. She did an excellent job in catching me up on everything without making me abominably jealous.
2. One from my parents, with “Not To Be Opened Before Satinalia” written firmly on the outside. I could feel the outline of the usual three silvers attached inside it.
3. One from Kingsley, full of Ostwick gossip. It made me homesick.

The Satinalia one went in my desk and I penned replies to the others. I wrote a few more letters, bound for Ostwick, Tanner’s Creek, and Clan Elvalaslin. And then it was nearing ten bells.

Strip and into bed.

I focused deeply, remembered earlier that day, on my way back from meeting with Gatsi.

###

“Emma.”

I turn, blinking. “Solas? Hi.” My goodness, he’s found me for once. This is new. (The jail cell definitely doesn’t count. Neither does the healer’s tent after.) “Can I help you?”

“I suppose it is possible that you could,” says the smart arse, “but on this occasion I am here to give you instruction.”

“Before…” I cough delicately.

“Even so.”

“Neat!” I gesture and we both start into the garden. It’s almost empty at this hour, and we walk around the peristyle as we talk. We find one perfumed and pleasant corner, hidden from sound and sight, and stop. He puts his hands behind his back and I pick a bundle of meadowsweet.

I stand up, hands full of herb. I begin binding them into a bouquet and indicate my readiness to begin.

He very deliberately ignores my hands and asks, “Do you know why you were in Diligence’s field?”

“Cole says that Skyhold is slippery, sends dreamers elsewhere. Why that particular elsewhere I’m not sure. Is it random?”

“It is not.”

I nod, unsurprised. “The determining factor is probably me, then.” He indicates for me to continue the path of reasoning.

Hmm. Start with the circumstances immediately preceding my journeys. First time was after spending all night watching over Chandler, then helping Leliana and offering to copy a dozen pamphlets for the Sing-quisition. Second was after a long day finalising the inn project draft and
visiting Vanadirthavean.

Both times, I’d ended up with Diligence. Ah.

“Normally, I would awaken in Skyhold. Since I cannot, my destination is determined by my state of being as I go to sleep?”

Cole is impressed. Solas frowns.

“Why do you use the word ‘awaken’?”

I shrug. “That’s what it feels like. First I went to sleep, then I woke up. Is that not what it’s like for you?”

Brows furrowed, he does not answer. He looks concerned, but I do not know for whom. I don’t ask Cole.

“You were correct. Your location is determined by your thoughts and emotions. You will find yourself in the most proximate location that mirrors them.”

“Shit.”

I recall some of the things that had been on my mind lately.

“Oh. Shit!”

“Indeed,” he says drily. “You have been lucky thus far, but that luck may not always hold.”

“Can I ensure I’m not… ah… imperilling myself with my drifting-off-to-sleep thoughts? Please say yes!”

“You may try, and most often you will succeed. However, I thought it prudent to visit you now and teach you how to immediately leave the Fade should stray thoughts send you to a less salubrious location.”

“Oh, good. Thank you.” I finish tying the bouquet and lay it on the stonework. “How do I leave the Fade at will?”

“At will is the correct phrase,” he says and then waits. Oh, he’s that kind of teacher.

I do my thinky face - not very attractive, but it helps - and talk it out. “Will. Like… the Tranquil? They are passive, and they cannot reach the Fade. So does one cause the other? Is sending one’s… consciousness? Is that the right word? One’s… self? Soul? I mean, do you even send anything? You must, at the very least you project your awareness. I really don’t think this is one of those times when it comes to you. So you project some part of yourself, whatever the label is, through the Veil into the Fade. And doing so is an act of will. Yes, that feels right.”

Solas watches, fascinated. I think he’s enjoying watching my mind work. I continue. “Okay. If you will yourself to project your Whatever through the Veil, you can will it to return. Is there a tether? I hope there is, because the idea that one part of you can just detach itself and go wandering? Fucking terrifying. I’m pretty sure that there is, at least, a very strong bias toward returning to your Self. A…” I hum a scale. “Rather like a resonance. Mythal’enaste, I want to believe that never goes awry, but I don’t.”

Solas, still blinking at my accidental oath, asks, “Why not?”
“Because you had to stitch me back together,” I reply. He nods, approving of my logic. Also probably of me being able to say it without visibly shuddering.

I gesture, shaping the thoughts, “So people can get lost, scattered, or unmade. Which sucks. But under normal circumstances - or at least, less abnormal ones - I am able to return to my Self reliably? With an act of will?”

He smiles. Old, untrustworthy habits thrill - I’ve impressed the teacher! “Correct. In time, I am confident you would be able to decipher the precise methodology required, but -”

“- time is an issue when you’re riding piggyback on a Pride demon.”

“Exactly. Speed is of the essence.” He asks, “Tell me the first image that occurs to you to describe instant movement.”

Dark purple night, breathing the storm. Watching the show and listening for the thunder. Spray and rain misting under the awning. “Lightning. Lightning over the ocean.”

He nods, still pleased. He patiently guides me through the ritual. The ingredients are a rock-solid image, a desire, and a trigger. I link them all to the feel of lightning.

Then a word to release the momentum: bolt. (He doesn’t smile at the pun. Such a waste.)

I practice with his guidance. First, it’s slow: see it, feel it, home, BOLT. Then faster: seeitfeelithomeandBOLT. Instead of four thoughts, it’s starting to become one more complex one. It’s still not fast enough, I fret. A lot can happen in the space of those few moments.

A new habit will be locked in by tonight.

“Should I attempt to control my arrival point?” I ask. He says no, but doesn’t explain his logic. He merely reiterates that I should stay calm and quiet and wait to be found. I promise again that I will do so and he turns to leave.

I present him with the bouquet.

“What is this?” he asks.

“Meadowsweet. Also known as queen of the meadows.” A beatific smile. “It’s a strewing herb that will make your poky cupboard smell delightful.”

“And?” he asks, suspiciously. It’s like he’s starting to know me.

“And... it’s beneficial for headaches and stomach upsets,” I add cheerfully.

He doesn’t want to laugh, but he does.

###

I smiled at the memory, and checked my escape plan. I’d worked diligently (a good sign?) for the rest of the day and now it felt solid. Lightning-fast, literally.

Now, honey.

It’s very odd to feel so vibrantly awake when getting comfy under the blanket. I waited for the sleepiness to kick in and wondered. How far has Diligence gotten in their ploughing? What happens when they finish the field? Do they just go back to the beginning and start again? Surely not, that
would make their efforts pointless. Perhaps they sow seeds next. Which ones? Carrots or parsnips or…

Oh hey, there it goes.

Chapter End Notes

You could ask me how I knew that about meadow-sweet, a herb that does not grow on this continent, and you would receive merely a shrug and a guess. I presume I read it somewhere.
I awoke, and really that was exactly what it felt like, in a place far from Diligence’s field.

It was a colonnade of old old stone, carvings archetypically Elvhen. Far above, tree branches shaded the light.

Every single surface was covered in interesting things.


I took one unconscious step closer to the fascinating display, then I remembered Solas’ directions. Stay calm and quiet and wait to be found. Damn.

With a longing sigh I sat on the flagstones. What had that book on meditation said? Let thoughts pass by like leaves on a stream. Observe them from the river bank. Just observe.

I half-closed my eyes and did so for a time. Then my awareness - or more specifically, Cole’s borrowed awareness - pinged. Someone was coming.

That someone turned out to be a young, wide-eyed Chasind boy with an enthusiastic smile.

Oh no.

“Why are you here?” he asked. I smiled apologetically but did not answer.

“What’s your name?”

“Did you see my spear? Do you know the story of the Boar Undying?”

“What made your hair that colour?”

I began to silently giggle as the questions flooded out.

“Why is this funny?” he asked.

Another presence. Thank the Creators for that. I threw a pleading look at Solas, who sighed and rolled his eyes and said, “Very well.”

“Hello, Curiosity. I’m Emma.”

I cannot accurately record the conversation any more than I could describe the inside of a hurricane. Both of us talking simultaneously, on up to seven different topics at any time, in an increasingly dense shorthand, with increasingly florid gesticulations.

In addition, I was very much occupied understanding half of what was being said, because Curiosity answers every question with another question.

For example, having fun throwing all sorts of idle curiosities at him, I asked, “When did Kingspeak became the common tongue in Orzammar?” and he replied, “Why did the single voter abstain?”
That makes perfect sense, if you once read a highly speculative book about the Paragons which mentioned that the only near-unanimous vote was for the first Aeducan. (Supposedly, the sole abstainer was literally torn limb from limb by the others. Dwarven politics is intense.) So the answer was the First Blight, during the stage when Aeducan was forcing Orzammarans and refugees to work together.

That was one of the easier ones to translate.

Most of his replies were squirreled away for later cracking when I had some time and attention. Y'know, when I wasn’t being simultaneously counter-interrogated by a spirit with no conception of sticking to one point. He once asked, in one chain of queries, about the cause of the smell of the ocean, Marthold’s theory of linguistic drift, and why I like being held down during sex.

Oh, yes. Also Curiosity is gloriously unencumbered by ideas like appropriateness and tact.

The first time he asked one of Those Questions? If my peripheral vision was a person I would have sent it warm raisin bread in thanks for allowing me to watch Solas’ face.

From “Ah ha! now it is Emma’s turn to be flabbergasted! I will admit that I have been looking forward to this!” to “Wait, she’s answering him.” to “Mythal protect me, she’s using hand puppets.” to “Okay, that one does sound kind of - fenedhis, what is happening to me???” to “Ah ha! Finally, a topic that she does find embarrassing! Let the flabbergasting commence!” to “Damn it, she just finds her own embarrassment… amusing? Seriously?” to “...aaand now they’re discussing the likely cultural explanation for it. Who is this woman.”

Flummoxing Solas is quickly becoming my favourite hobby.

In between feeling rather smug about myself, I did manage to ask a number of actually important questions:

1. What causes lyrium withdrawals?
2. Can they be alleviated?
3. How?
4. Is there any cure for an illness where the patient has a racing heart but cold limbs?
5. If so, where do I find it?

I was attempting to decipher what Curiosity meant by “doubled dischord” and also answering a query about why I like choirs even when I don’t always like their song selection, when it happened.

“Why haven’t you manipulated Solas yet?”

My knee-jerk response was absolutely furious. It was instantly muzzled by the second thought, which came to remind me that this was not about me, not at all.

I smiled, a rather tight sad smile, and turned to face the progenitor of that particular piece of curiosity. He appeared focused and grave and only vaguely interested. Suuure.

I paused, long enough to give him a chance to stop me. Tone neutral, scientific. “When you look at someone counting a pile of money, does it occur to you that you could steal the coins?”

“No. Not usually,” he replied.

“Although logically, you are aware that you could do so?”
“Certainly.”

“Then why does the thought not appear?”

His brows knitted. “That… is not who I am.”

My smile grew sunnier. “Yeah. Exactly.”

He was silent for a long moment. Looked away from my face. Cleared his throat a few times, despite that being profoundly unnecessary in the Fade. I put all my efforts into not being too visibly considerate.

Curiosity watched with fascination. (Naturally.) We were both pretty interested to see what would happen next.

“I think we are done for now.”

Good students do not argue at times like these. Neither do good friends.

“Yes, Solas. Thank you for the lessons.” He nodded but did not reply.

I immediately turned to Curiosity, feeling the odd shift between two very different conversations. From grave and kind to wildly enthusiastic is a jarring transition. I split the difference and went with quieter but warm. “Chalice in the apse, my dearest.”

He replied, “How soon is soon?” and I promised my best efforts in that department. He grinned and jumped up and down a few times. I grinned back. He is a darling.

And now, time for a magic trick!

_Bolt._

Chapter End Notes

I could write a zillionty words that is just Emma meeting spirits and enjoy every one of them.

Side Note:
One of you astute darlings pointed out that I had let a few instances of 'hell' sneak by the filters, which is a word that doesn't exist in Thedas. While fixing that, I also snuck in a few retroactive French swears care of another one of you.

_I HAVE THE BEST AUDIENCE EVER AND I WILL FIGHT ANYONE WHO DOES NOT ACKNOWLEDGE THIS._
Diplomacy is extra difficult before breakfast.

I’d awoken at dawn to find that my courses had begun. Reflexively I’d gotten grumpy about it before realising that meant they’d most definitely be over before next Friday, whereupon I cheered up considerably.

Where shall I read this morning? Two pages of Elvhen then start that spicy Antivan novel that Merewether leant me? That’ll be -

gasp and sigh. he’s ready

Thank mercy for that.

Instead of reading, I went to the kitchens. Luckily for me, Cook was generally content to leave breakfast to lesser beings and I made a beeline for the softest heart among them.

“Look, I’ll do the onions!” I said. Gildren hates arsonists more than chopping onions, but not by much. “And I’ll pay you two silvers!”

He wasn’t convinced. Two silvers is all well and good, but one dwarf versus three hundred meals is a much more pressing reality, in his opinion.

Time for a different approach. “Please, sweetheart.”

The obvious sincerity got a Look. “What’d you need it for?”

I told him.

Silence.

“Well, you have to chop the onions.”

“I said I would!”

***

To the healer’s tent, careful not to spill. Place the bowl down on the side table. Pick up a limp and discolored hand. Sit. Wait.

A month since Haven. Three days since the healers admitted they had nothing left to try. The pain was just phenomenal and for a long time, that was all there was.

Then Stephan’s nostrils flared and the pain had company. A hundred blustery autumn days, hearing the drum of raindrops on the slate. Rough hands, chapped and raw, clasping his shoulders affectionately. A hummed tune that I picked up and echoed. The sound of a brush as he carefully polished his boots like the sergeant taught him.

The pain was small and nothing in comparison. For the first time in a month, his breath came easy. Encrusted lips smiled.
It was heartbreakingly beautiful. And then it was done.

I left the bowl of turnip stew behind when I left.

***

To the garden, to let that sit and settle. I breathed out and out and out again.

thank you

My pleasure, honey.

And it was. Bittersweet and cherished.

A butterfly dived toward my knee. Today was going to be a remarkable day, I decided.

***

Fourteen hours later, I laughed at that thought.

Long.

And bitterly.

Most definitely, it had been a remarkable day.

Now I just wanted to go to bed and do my damnedest to forget all about it.

The corridor in the servant’s quarter was quiet, although sounds reverberated from further down. I was in the exact right mood to find other people’s merriment irritating. By the time I reached my door I was making dire predictions of myself in about fifteen minutes, with my pillow over my ears, muttering very bitchily. My hand reached out and -

  go. now. to Leliana

  What? No. I don’t wanna. Whatever it is, I’m sure it can wait until morning.

I put my hand on the latch, trying to pretend I wasn’t being petulant. To the voice in my head.

Then suddenly I was halfway back down the corridor. Or more accurately, Cole was. He’d possessed me so swiftly and absolutely that I couldn’t even respond until he/I were halfway up the stairs toward the Great Hall.

  Cole? Cole? What the fuck is going on?

He didn’t answer. He just marched me (briskly but very very quietly) via the shortest possible path to the rookery.

Leliana was at prayer in the little niche. Her response time from contemplative to utterly terrifying is impressive.

  With no preamble, Cole said, “There are two men in Emma’s room. Waiting in ambush.”

Chapter End Notes
Author Meanderings:
Whoo BUDDY there's a lot going on in this chapter.

1. People menstruate in this fiction!
2. I love the turnip stew bit and it made me happy to write.
3. *deep breath*

It's gonna be dark for a bit, lovelies. There will be discussions about violence and sexual abuse, in a few aspects, over the next chapters.

The discussions are in line with canon approaches to the topics and are not more explicit than, say, that bit with Gardener. There's one slightly graphic paragraph (which I will be very specific about warnings with), but the rest is abstract and analytical.

I thought long and hard about including this, because it's a hard topic and one even harder to use well in fiction. But I could not pretend, especially with Emma soul-reading everyone, that there are 700 squeaky-clean good guys (plus Lydia) in the Inquisition.

Bad people exist. At least with Emma and Cole they can't bloody well hide.

I'll use appropriate warnings for each chapter, and I'll add an allergen-free summary in the end notes so you can make an informed decision about whether to read the chapter in its entirety. The summary will also ensure you're not missing out if you decide to skip it.

I love you all and am always willing to accept feedback.
Chapter Notes

No specific warnings here, save for one small freakout. Summary at the end, as promised.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“- as we decide.”

“We should ask Emma’s opinion before any decision is made!” said a voice. Lady Josephine. That is Lady Josephine, I realised. She is protecting Emma. And Emma is my name.

“My opinion about what?” I asked, politely. Always be polite, manners cost nothing.

The other person - who is Leliana, right - turned to me and said, “As we were saying. Your room has been destroyed.”

I wondered, muzzily, how one destroys a room in a subterranean fortress. Gaatlok? Dwarves? Then a few extra thoughts caught up and I realised that she meant that all the items in the room.

But my Satinalia letter, my brain said.

“Oh,” I responded.

Lady J hurried to add, “You may stay here for tonight, Emma.” I looked around and it dawned on me: I’m sitting on a bed in one of the guest suites. When precisely did I get here? “And we can move you to a new chamber tomorrow.”

Leliana, looking coolly unconcerned, “Unless you want your old room back. It will take a few days to clean and repair.”

Slowly, through the roaring in my ears, I deliberated. A new thingy or the old one. Three doors down from the bathhouse. With that one squiggly mark on the ceiling I’d started looking at while drifting off to sleep. Across the corridor from Circe.

Easy decision, really.

***

Lady Josephine tried, with all her skill, to make me feel better. It went about as well as you’d expect; diplomacy often fails in the face of the truly ugly.

Eventually, Lady J gave up, with weak advice about getting some sleep and not needing to go to work tomorrow, unless I wanted to, in which case I should do that and I was very strong and she knew I would be alright. I smiled faintly and nodded.

Leliana, infinitely more accustomed to situations of this sort, matter-of-factly gave me instructions about what grist would be fed into the rumour mill and confirmed what I already knew about the identities of the men.
She never made eye contact, and her movements lacked their usual lazy grace. I lacked the drive to investigate. Everything was still vague and I was smart enough not to make that go away before I absolutely needed to.

The door had barely snicked behind her before there was a knock. Opening it revealed Chandler, with a basket and a concerned face.

I felt a painfully exquisite anticipation of relief, a twisting in my chest.

“Pet, what a day you have had,” he said, with ironic sympathy. His brow was furrowed, head tilted, mouth sad. I wager he spent a few minutes adjusting everything into the absolutely perfect degree. The calculus of consolation.

Maker. Fucking. Damn it.

It wasn’t really Chandler before me, armed with food and all the right things to say.

He’d sent the Performance.

Sigh.

Gently, inexorably, I closed the door in his face.

***

Once alone, I wandered around the suite, picking up objects and putting them back down again.

In time we would have lodgings finely graded to the station of the guests, from Imperial Highness to Right Honourable, but for the moment most of them were unimpressive.

Of course, ‘unimpressive’ by the standards of the nobility meant that the bathing room was five times the size of my entire chamber.

You could hide, like, lots of people in here.

One fractured moment as the last clouds of beautiful vagueness wisped away. Reality, cudgel in hand, made her approach.

There were people.

In my room! And they…

They were going to…

I ran.

Blindly. Messily.

My mind goes much faster than my legs do. As much as I tried, I could not outrun the thoughts. But I tried. I tried very, very hard.

Then I was in front of a door I had never seen before.

knock

Sure, why not?
I knocked. Pounded, really. Waited, limbs starting to tremble. Breath hot and unpleasant in my mouth.

The door swung open.

“Oh. Thank Andraste,” I wailed, and fell into Blackwall’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

It's half an hour later and Emma is in one of the fancy guest rooms with no real memory of how she got there.

Leliana and Josie are also present, being pragmatic and kind, respectively. She'll stay here for a few days because her room has been trashed.

Chandler visits! Except as the spy instead of the friend. Emma doesn't have the energy to deal with it and closes the door in his face. Gently.

She looks around the room until the comfy fugue state goes away. Then she panics and runs.

Cole directs her to knock on a door she's never seen before. Blackwell opens it. Emma falls into his arms.

***

P.S. Summarising your own work is HARD! Especially when you've managed to write a phrase as elegant as "the calculus of consolation" and you want to tell people and so you apparently sneak it into a postscript like a big cheater.
Embarrassing Conversational Openers

Chapter Notes

Warnings for a very non-specific discussion about what Emma believes would have happened if she opened that door.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Luckily for me, panicked civilians flinging themselves into your arms? Pretty common occurrence in the life of a Warden.

He has a whole process and everything.

Step One: Assess Threats. Ask the panicking civilian if they are in danger. They will not be able to respond verbally, but wild head-shaking is a sufficient answer.

Step Two: Let Them Lose Their Shit For A While. He’s even nailed the advanced technique where you comfort the panicking civilian without touching them too familiarly, and where their heifer-like braying is safely directed away from your ears.

Step Three: Water Treatment. Once the panicking civilian has subsided to hiccuping and feeling terribly self-conscious, offer them a washbowl to clean their face. Put on the kettle. Change your shirt.

Step Four: Find Out What The Void Is Going On Here.

Blackwall handed me a mug, milky and very sweet and not so full that I’d spill it. I smiled reflexively and drank it, handed it back with a child-like ‘See? All done’ gesture. He smiled gently in return, led us to the chairs in front of his fire. Sat, waiting without impatience or expectation.

The fire crackled.

I opened my mouth and closed it a few times.

“Can we walk?”

***

I wore his cloak.

He insisted.

“All that adrenaline will wear off soon enough, my lady, and cold will follow on its heels.” It held the comfort of too-large, man-smelling warmth, and since Cole assured me that Blackwall was fine in his jacket I snuggled in with gratitude and a lot of wrangling of the length when we took the stairs.

All my woes seem to end up on the battlements. They remind me of home, for some reason.

mountains are always old. the ocean is always young

Mmm.
“There were two men in my room tonight. Y’know, lying in wait.”

Cole, being Cole, had responded to that news with protectiveness. I vaguely recalled Leliana, cold and decisive, like an arrow from the bow.

Blackwall’s reaction was instant, terrifying, snarl-clawing fury. It reminded me of… me, actually, as I hugged Chandler in the snow. HOW DARE THEY.

Hand of mercy, it was exactly what I needed.

“They didn’t get me,” I said reassuringly. “A friend heard them and warned me in time. but, like, only just in time, like, my-hand-was-on-the-latch in time, and, and, I know they’ve been arrested and all of that, but - they destroyed my belongings while they waited, which, ha! joke’s on them because I own pretty much fucking nothing after Haven,” - my voice was speeding up, I could hear it, but I was going to get through this fast or not at all - “and the room they put me in for the night it just felt too big, much much too big, and I started to thaw and then I started to run and, and-”

His arms, firm on my shoulders. Sympathy in every line. I was hiccuping again as I finished.

“-and they were men I knew. A little, at least. They knew me. And they - hic! - they, they were going to… going to…”

My hand was in my hair, cloak starting to slip down one shoulder. It swooned to the cobbles and we ignored it.

Five soggy breaths with control on the exhale and my diaphragm calmed. I looked up into eyes, dark in dark.

“They were going to hurt me,” I say quietly. “Beat me. Rape me, I think.” One vicious shake of my head. “Not think. I know they were. They thought I had something to do with - you know what? It doesn’t matter. That isn’t the worst part.”


“Guldebrandt.”

“That one of those bastards?”

I nodded, made a horrifying sniffling noise and then a wry face about it that got a quiet laugh. Somehow he knew that would help me feel more normal. “I did the paperwork. When he joined. I don’t know if they made you do it when you signed up - that’s an amusing thought - but it takes at least fifteen minutes of that appallingly intimate bureaucracy dance. You know?”

“Asking you what colour socks your pa was wearing on the day you were born?”

“That’s it, yep. And my attitude to this kind of job has always been, ‘Hey, we’re both stuck here, let’s make this as pleasant as we can,’ you know? I put effort into it.”

Blackwall could clearly follow the track of my thoughts, and also clearly had decided that I needed to say the words. Don’t argue with the experts. I picked up the cloak - he was right, I was starting to chill now - and rewrapped myself. He stooped with me. His hands stayed always, firm and reassuring, on my shoulders.
“It. I was… I was polite to him. Warm. Maybe even” - sigh - “a wee bit charming? Polite and warm and he was still in my fucking room and how does someone even do that, hero? How can someone think, ‘Emma? Sure, I remember her. She laughed at my jokes that time. But…’ But what? What possible fucking series of thoughts leads from that to… Was I never a person to him? Is that the trick?”

I was crying again, to the surprise of no-one. “Is it just incredibly stupid to not feel safe now? After the dragon, and the army, and the world nearly blowing up? Am… am I maybe a terrible person for that? Because…”

“No. No. Absolutely not,” he told me firmly. “Before, there was an entire army between you and the danger. Not just one door.”

“Shit, you’re good at this.” I wiped my face. “It’s ridiculously attractive, I must say.”

He laughed, low but sincere. I felt admired. Admireable. Ah, hero.

“So Guldebrandt and his friend were going to try their damndest to ruin me tonight, for stupid shitty reasons, and I hate it and I think I’m going to be really, really angry about it soon. But right now I just feel…” I gestured helplessly.

“Unsafe?”

“Yeah.”

“I can help, my lady, if you wish me to.”

“Sure. Okay. Yes. I mean, thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said, and led me away.

Chapter End Notes

Blackwall engages his Warden-fu to be a good listener.

Emma is especially upset at the fact that one of the jerkfaces is someone she's acquainted with.

Blackwall offers to help her feel less unsafe and is generally the best.

Author Meanderings:
Writing a breakdown is an interest challenge, creatively. This is all in the first person, but who wants to hear it written as it was experienced at the time? Luckily, because this is past tense I have the space to write it as Emma would tell it, much later. Which is much funnier, imo.
“You must’ve been drowning in grateful widows and farmer’s daughters.”

Blackwall choked.

During one of Skyhold’s many incarnations the massive structure behind us had been a granary, but rock had cracked and a rivulet now ran through the storehouse. At some point one of the Acolytes of Gatsi would get around to fixing the leak, but until then the small courtyard in front of the granary was empty except for a few barrels and one sorta-Warden looking at me with a lamp in his hands and a startled face.

I’d been ramble-blathering for some time, which is probably a common reaction to shock? He’d made the right responses, but mostly wasn’t paying much attention. Until now. Now I definitely had his perplexed focus.

“Look, most people, especially most men, when a short helpless woman looks up at them with big eyes,” - I suited action to the word - “and tells them ‘I do not feel safe’, you know what they say?” I shifted into my flexiest stance and patronisingly intoned, “‘Don’t worry, little lady person. I will make you feel safe.’”

He was grinning now. “But you, hero. You offer to teach me how I can make myself feel safe. Are you kidding. There’s this handsome protector, all swordy, and it’s one of the worst days of my life, and here you are saying exactly the right things.” He was starting to chuckle. “I’m just saying, you must have been up to your elbows in grateful widows. And I wager most of them waved you off with a basket of baked goods, to boot.”

Blackwall roared with laughter, closed the mantle of the lamp and shook his head. “My lady, you are unlike any woman I have ever met.”

I wrinkled my face, sceptical. “Is… is that a good thing?”

He made an immaculate, courtly bow. “Very much so.”

I fluttered an imaginary fan and my eyelashes in return. “Flatterer.” He smiled, made to turn back to the lantern. “But seriously, all babble aside. Thank you, hero. I already feel… myself-ish again. And Andraste’s shoelaces, did I ever need that.”

“You are welcome, lady.”

The courtier was replaced with someone sterner.

“Let’s begin.”

***
I was feeling an almost over-riding urge to stand at... what’s that called again? Ah, yes. Parade rest.

“You don’t feel safe, right?” said the Captain. “That means you don’t believe that when a threat comes, you’ll be prepared to respond.” Yep. “Let me guess. You freeze.”

“Like a startled nug,” I sighed.

“Right. So we teach you a different response. A better one.”

“What, like a fighter’s stance?” The mind boggles.

“No, a ready stance. So you can fight, or run... or maybe talk a fool down from his foolishness? Sounds more your style.”

Oh, Maker.

“I am feeling an almost over-riding desire to bake you something, hero. A pie. Void, two pies.”

“Am I saying the right thing again?”

“Fuck yes you are,” I said reverently.

He laughed. “Most farmers have called me an idiot at least twice by this point. Seems I’ve found my audience.”

***

The ready stance.

Right foot back, knees unlocked, weight evenly distributed. Left shoulder up and turned slightly inward, right shoulder down and back. Head up. Jaw slightly open, tongue relaxed.

Simple enough? Sorta. But it’s all in the details.

And in being willing to fine-tune those details, with endless and unruffleable patience, over and over and over and over, while one (sometimes very snarky) woman who is not much good at almost any task requiring proprioception screws it up in a thousand creative ways.

And then in being willing, once the enthusiastic but dense woman starts to show signs of grasping the idea, to demonstrating it in reality. Over and over and over and over and over and over again.

Drill, they call it. I really could understand why.

After some number of hours, I was starting to finally get it, to be able to feel when I had it right. Blackwall, being the kind of teacher who isn’t stinting with his praise, said, “Good work, Emma. Take a break now.”

I luxuriated in the stone bench. He returned with a water bucket - yes, please - and some food. My stomach got one whiff of beef stew and firmly said Nuh-uh. Unsurprised, Blackwall gave me a dry roll instead and ate both portions of stew. Considerately downwind.

(So. Many. Pies.)

Roll dutifully eaten, I spent some time cracking every joint in my upper body, then stood up while that was still an option. My teacher showed more reluctance to begin.
Ah.

I touched his shoulder and he looked up, barely making eye contact.

“Seen that look before,” I said. “I call it the Battlefield Surgeon. ‘I'll do what needs doing, same as I have a thousand times before, but it doesn’t mean the screams don’t hurt my ears.’ Yeah?”

He made a shrug that didn’t quite make it as far as agreement.

“Oh hero, I can do the math. There’s absolutely no point in learning this stance if I can only do it when things are fine, is there?”

“No,” he replied. Deathly quiet.

I touched his cheek and smiled.

“C’mon, handsome. Let’s do this thing.”

Chapter End Notes

I have never quite forgiven Blackwall for breaking up with my first ever DAI character with a post-coital Post-It propped up against a damn hobby horse (griffin, whatevs), but I still rather adore him.

Chapter Notes

Maybe warning: in the first four paragraphs, Blackwall makes Emma use her near-miss to freeze so he can teach her to move past it. (With her full consent, of course.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Voice not cruel but hard. Relentless.

“What happened to you tonight? Tell me.”

“I… I went to my room and there. There were tuh.” I was starting to breathe high and tight, behind my collarbones. “Two men in. In. In.” What word came next? I… I…

“Ready yourself,” said the Captain.

Ha.

HA.

Now kind, infinitely patient, the instructor took over. “You’ve frozen and you think that means you can’t move. You’re wrong about that, my lady. It means all of you is moving.” I heard these words but they didn’t mean anything. “Your muscles are working against each other. Soften this one” - he tapped my shin - “and your foot will go into position. Soften this one” - tap - “and your shoulder will go into position.” One by one, he touched muscles, repeating himself.

Soften. Funny word. Does anyone pronounce the ‘t’? What does soft feel like?

And suddenly I did it. My arm moved. Shaky and jerkily, the rest of me obeyed and voilà! I was stancing.

I looked up, eyes shining, convinced that no-one could be prouder of me than I was, not even Cole. Blackwall didn’t outstrip me, but he did require a bunch of judges to come out with measuring tape to be certain of it. (Apple. Apricot?)

He ordered me to shake out the tension and I obeyed, still drunkenly grinning.

“That was terrible but also amazing! I did it, hero!”

He nodded. “And now you’re going to do it again.”

Oh. Bugger.

***

Sometimes I unfroze quickly. Mostly, I didn’t. But every single time, with Blackwall’s patient tutelage, I got there eventually. I did it. I did it. I Maker-damned unfroze, do you understand how big a deal this is for me?

Some time later (an hour? two hours? seven months?) he ordered a break. I drank water and sat,
weary and rumpled and triumphant. Blackwall sat next to me, seeming almost as worn out as I was. Words suggested themselves, but they were hollow. Clumsy. Superficial. Instead, I reached out a hand. He took it. We did not talk. Didn’t move. Didn’t look at each other. We simply sat, in the quiet courtyard, holding hands. ***

“My lady, we must finish now.”

Took me a bit to understand. I was deeply into my fifth wind, the one where everything becomes darkly hilarious. Added to the pyroclastic triumph at how little effect remembering last night was starting to have, and I was feeling giddy and terribly slow on the uptake.

“Oh?” I managed.

“I’m due in a few minutes. New recruits have to be taught how to make a decent shield wall.”

You could hear the noises as my brain assembled thoughts. Like a child with wooden blocks. Got there.

“I have kept you awake all night! Again!” He nodded agreeably. “Fenedhis, I am so sorry.”

He reassured me that it was his pleasure. He even sounded sincere, the weirdo. I unfastened his cloak, re.attached it to its rightful owner, and wiggled irresistibly in under his arms. All the tension I could feel was nothing to do with me and so I decided to pretend it didn’t exist.

I looked up. Stopped the first reflexive words, which I had said so many times this night they’d lost all meaning.


The best reward I could ask for: for just one minute, with me shining up at him, he forgot to hate himself.

Chapter End Notes

That image, of two wrung-out people quietly holding hands, hits me right in the feels every time.
Gah. Just… Gah.

Chapter Notes

No warnings here, my darlings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The rumour mill was operating with its usual devilish efficiency.

A hundred workers, heading off to early jobs. When had they managed to hear about last night’s attack? Damned if I know, but the turned heads and sudden whispers made it clear that they had.

Walked with Blackwall to his small training ground, where two dozen recruits that I would describe as ‘inordinately gangly’ were waiting. He gave me a small bottle of potion that he promised would make the muscle aches more bearable, and we shared a bittersweet getting-old smile.

I began toward my too-large suite, thought of the extra hundred faces I would see on my trip through the Great Hall, and decided that I would watch the drill for a minute. If fate decided reparations were in order, maybe that big blonde would take his shirt off.

Here is a nice corner, out of the wind and out of the way. Would I be less tired if I started exercising? It’d probably help I guess.

Suddenly I realised I wasn’t the only occupant of this recruit-watching nook, and the other person was talking to me. Reflexively I said, “I’m terribly sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. What was that?”

And I turned to face… Lord Dorian Pavus. Looking less than thrilled to be ignored.

Bloody shitting fuckery.

***

“I would wonder why you could possibly have been so terribly blind as to miss me, but considering your state of dress and the overpowering odour of thug hanging about your person I can certainly venture a guess. Blackwall? Surely even you must have some standards.”

Three reactions happened.

First, I realised that I was stancing. Hey! Look! I’m doing it!

Second was burning fury. Not for attempting to insult me, that barely registered. But throwing contemptuous words about Blackwall? The man who had just sacrificed his sleep in unpleasant and arduous labour so that a woman he’d met twice would feel safe after a near-miss with harm? Damn you, that man merits far better description!

Third, I slapped Lord Dorian Pavus.

Right across the face.

WHAP.
It took him utterly by surprise. (Void, it took me utterly by surprise.) And apparently one of the many benefits of the stance is putting all the power of leg and hip and arm behind a slap with no extra thought required.

So… umm… I knocked a magister’s son on his perfectly shaped arse.

And then I nodded in satisfaction and marched away.

Behind me, I registered a thousand whispers, laughter, a smattering of light applause, and Blackwall using his beard in a rearguard action against betraying his amusement.

***

A guard saw me staring befuddled down the corridor and courteously mentioned that the room I was in was the one she was guarding. Appreciated.

My robe was sent to the laundry and I numbly tumbled into bed.

What in the fuck did I just do, honey?

shield hand, fierce defender

Is that… good?

Cole, as always, was useless at judging moral qualities.

I hope I didn’t hurt Lord Dorian.

he bruised his bottom

I couldn’t stifle the giggle.

No, I meant his feelings, honey. Plenty will use this as a chance to mock him, and I regret that.

you wish you’d slapped him in private?

I had no idea how to begin to answer that.

The potion tasted both bitter and sickly sweet.

I managed a couple of hours of sleep before the nightmares came.

Chapter End Notes

I regret nothing.
The Benefits Of Expensive Sheets

Chapter Notes

No warnings here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was no point in attempting to sleep again right now. Might as well address a few of the other reasons I felt like twenty pounds of offal in a ten-pound sack.

The clothes I’d been given were especially terrible so I improvised myself a swaddle from one of the blankets and stuck my head out into the corridor. The courteous guard was gone - damn - and another had taken her place.

Ah, fuck it.

“Hello?”

A turning helmet revealed a male elf, with a plain face enlivened with deep blue eyes. “Is there something you need, madame?” he asked gravely. Western Orlesian, for certain.

“What would you be willing to fetch a bucket of warm water so I can wash?”

I fully expected the usual response from guards when asked to do… ugh… menial labour. The big armoured snobs.

Instead he said, “Would you prefer a bath?” and blinking, I said Sure. He nodded politely and left.

Well, neat. Now do I wait for him here in the corridor? No. Lurk next to the door, awkwardly waiting for him to return? Would rather not, but what other option do I have?

when is a door not a door?

I mentally slapped my forehead and left the door a wee bit ajar.

A surprisingly short time later, the guard returned carrying two of the big buckets, the ones that always remind me of milk churns.

Considering the ambient temperature and the number of staff we have, it takes nearly two cords of wood per day just to make our bath water lukewarm. I understand and don’t complain about it.

But I will freely admit that I saw the tiny wisps of steam coming from the top of those buckets, I nearly groaned out loud in anticipation. A really hot bath was not sufficient recompense for the last day or so, but it was a damn fine start.

I followed the guard into the bathing room and watched greedily as he poured the hot water into the bath.

“I’ll be back with another two,” he said. “That should be enough.”

“Lovely, thank you.”
He was back in practically no time at all. Two more long pours of liquid heaven, then he put the buckets down.

“...I noticed you don’t have any bathing things here,” he said courteously. “I talked to one of the lady’s maids.” He then handed me a bar of fine violet-scented soap.

“That was very, very kind of you,” I said simply. “What’s your name?”

“Gabin.”

I made my best, warmest eye contact. “Thank you, Gabin.”

He replied with the same grave earnestness, “You are welcome. Enjoy your bath.”

Damn right I will.

***

One jug of water poured into the washbowl and the lovely soap so I could get most of the sweat and mank off before stepping in. My courses at least were behaving with propriety, and I once I’d changed my sea sponge I was pretty confident the water would stay clean.

One foot. Oh mercy, it’s almost boiling, hooray and huzzah. Slowly, wincing with pleasure, I eased myself in up to my neck.

Fuuuuuuuuuck. My hair can wait, this is too good.

Ages passed while I broiled dreamily, letting the aches relax. Then I washed my hair and broiled some more.

Two uncommonly helpful and courteous guards on my door. Leliana has the subtlety for it, but it felt much more like one of Lady Josephine’s grace notes. That must have been an interesting conversation.

“Commander, I need a rota of extremely kind guards.”

“My lady? Not sure what I -”

“One of my people was attacked, and her guards need to be very, very sweet and courteous. See to it.”

“Yes, Ambassador.” She leaves and he stares at his piles of paperwork, thinking with dread, “Nothing I have done has prepared me for this day.”

Hah!

I decided that I was going to stay in here as long as I could physically manage it. There was drowsing. There was humming. Splashing of the toes. Perhaps if I stayed long enough I’d be able to go back to -

axe swings. rope is cut. the log pile tumbles!

Umm. What?

Chapter End Notes
Love to all my readers, especially the ones who never comment. You are splendid and I hope your day is treating you kindly.
After Narrowly Avoiding Another Slip-Related Demise

Chapter Notes

No warnings here. We're nearly through this part!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cole’s message made little sense to my exhausted mind but I was infected by the urgency in it. Panicked haste plus sleep deprivation is a hilarious amalgam.

Jump out get dry okay dry-ish no comb bugger bugger use my fingers it’ll have to do shirt is ugly but fine whatever I admit the way it’s currently sticking to me is not terrible? the drawstring on these breeches is stunningly untrustworthy please I beg you do not fail in a cataclysmic and amusing fashion today is that too much to ask of an uncaring universe ow that’s gonna bruise why am I rushing so much I didn’t even understand what Cole was so excited about -

Knock knock.

I bumbled to the door.

Ah.

Crusted in mud, reeking of stagnant water and less pleasant substances. Scarred and armed and flawed and so very dangerous. The Iron Bull.

Oh lovely, I have missed you so - it’s impossible we’ve only been acquainted for a month. I’m already weirdly dependant on the version of you in my head: not only because you are one of the teensy handful of people I can talk to about my weird new life, but because all of the them you are by far the most self-aware and non-judgemental and that is a combination that is unquestionably spectacular and I wish every single person I met had it; it’s also the single most attractive quality you have, which is a difficult choice to make because you are unfairly crammed with attractive qualities. You radiate self-confidence without arrogance and I don’t think you understand just how painfully exquisite my appreciation of you is.

What I said was, “You smell dreadful.”

He observed more than he should be allowed to about my current state, paused just to make the point, and then replied, “Hey, kitten.”

“Bath’s still warm if you want it.”

He nodded, said sure, went in.

I had a brief chat with Gabin to the accompaniment of a shipwreck’s worth of splashing noises then walked next to the open doorway. The uproar had subsided to scrubbing and grunts of pleasure, which I heard with no extra thoughts whatsoever, thank you kindly.

Voice raised a little, I asked, “How was the fen?”

He gave a disgusted sigh. “Wouldn’t have picked you for one of those Southern prudes, Emma.”
I threw a raspberry and walked in. “I’m not, thank you. I am also too polite to make assum-”

Naked, The Iron Bull is some sort of monument that should be preserved for future generations to admire. I mean, I always knew he would be. Friday Emma also got to breathe a sigh of relief because the water was shallow enough to note that he is indeed generously proportioned, though to guess barely half an inch more than previous experience has proven I can accommodate with comfort.

But he had a clump of suds on one horn.

All the lecherous speculation was swamped by a wave of infinitely more forbidden tenderness and I forgot how to make words as I did my best to smother my feelings before they said anything very stupid.

Either he missed this - unlikely - or decided to deliberately pretend it wasn’t happening, as if he was some sort of keeper of illusions or something. His grin and appreciative eyebrow wiggle didn’t appear false, but they never would, would they?

I rolled my eyes in reply and said, in a passable impression of Chandler, “Yes, yes, you’re stunning. Congratulations. Now kindly answer the question.”

“Fighting stinking-wet corpses -”

“Eugh!”

“- and weird magical crap. Got to go up against one of the big guys, though.”

“Was he a challenge?”

“Yeah!” The Iron Bull was midway through a damp re-creation of the affray when there was a polite knock. I held up a one-moment hand and came back a minute later, panting fiercely as I carried in one of the butter-churn buckets. Those things are heavy, dammit.

I ordered him to lean forward and was rewarded for my efforts by his long pleased groan as steaming water was poured on his back. Cole and I did our best to aim for the sore spots, which was… most of them. I tried not to think about it too hard.

The Iron Bull thanked me sincerely, finished his tale of epic conflict while scrubbing his feet with what looked exactly like a horse’s bristle brush, and then added, “And because I know you’re thinking about it… yeah, the scouts are fine. Banged up, taking their time coming back, but they’ll be okay.”

“Splendid!” And it was. Their timing sucked, but that wasn’t their fault, after all.

He opened his mouth again, this time to ask the question we both knew was coming, and I forestalled him. “Food’s coming,” I said gently. “You haven’t eaten since before dawn, and I’ve only had one dry roll since this time yesterday. After. After, I promise.”

He regarded me searchingly, then nodded. I asked, curious, “How did you even know I was here, beautiful? The gossip apparatus is marvellously efficient, but I have the feeling you barely had time to get off your horse.”

“Oh yeah, that. Top left pocket.” He pointed at the correct saddlebag and continued scrubbing.

I unbuckled the pocket and pulled out one very familiar square of fabric.
Chapter End Notes

MY CUTIES
To say that I laughed would be to say that the ocean is on the damp side.

Uncontrollable, slightly hysterical, cleansing laughter. The kind that isn’t merely a full-body experience, but also takes over your mind and spirit. Cole was alarmed by the whole process, and that of course made me laugh even harder. I roared, slumped, held my sides.

Then my foot moved through a puddle and I slipped. Of course I bloody did. I saw I was aimed toward the massive war axe propped against the wall, over-corrected, and fell on my hip instead.

The pain was enough to make me stop laughing for a moment. I’m going to have a bruise that likely resembles the one currently being sported by a certain Tevene. (That thought brought the laughter back full force.) Oh mercy, the unreliable drawstring on these stupid breeches has snapped. I am sitting in a puddle of pants and water and The Iron Bull is watching me very carefully, and I probably need to stop soon.

Slowly, I tapered off into giggles. I caught my breath. I was trying to figure out what to say.

“Feeling better?” Hooray for spies.

“Yeah, a little. I suppose you’re wondering why I found a handkerchief so fucking hilarious.” I stood up, kicked out of the stupid breeches, and decided that the over-large tunic was long enough to cover my modesty, such as it is.

“It crossed my mind.”

Might be helpful to talk it out.

I mean, with someone else, Cole-love.

he’s very smart

I held out my hand for the bristle brush and The Iron Bull gave it to me.

As I vigorously scrubbed his back, I related the history of Chandler and I. From the Day of the Chicken - ah, parallels - to the current dilemma, eliding only other people’s secrets. “So on one hand, he’s putting on a one-man play titled We Are Not Friends, You Understand? I Do Not Care Even One Whit About You. And his performance is as impeccable as always. But then he does things like, oh, probably ambushing you as soon as you arrived and ordering you to visit the person he doesn’t give a damn about. It’s almost as if” - said with maximum irony - “he doesn’t actually want to succeed in driving me away.”

The Iron Bull, who had been silent through the entire oration other than occasional noises of understanding and appreciation for my swabbing technique, turned his head toward me a little. “You
have any relationship right now that isn’t complicated?” he asked sympathetically.

“Does Cole count?” He snorted.

There was another polite knock at the door.

“Ah, food,” I said enthusiastically, rinsing my hands. “Join us when you’re ready.”

When he appeared, in clean pants, I was just putting the finishing touches on the repast. “Carpet picnic!” I told him cheerfully. He eyed off the very fragile dining chairs and approved.

We ate, me with the careful discipline of a very empty stomach, him with a gusto that was delightful to watch. It was… surprisingly ordinary. We told normal, not-being-interrogated stories about the food we miss from home and people we’d met and books we’d read.

I was just finishing the last spoonful of soup when I got it. “Aww, beautiful,” I said, accusingly.

He didn’t bother denying anything. What would be the point? “You needed to be calm,” he said.

“Yes, sure, okay. But why did you have to use… this?” Suddenly I was back on the edge of tears again. “Cruel. That’s cruel.” I could feel his startlement; he certainly hadn’t intended to be. It should have mattered, but I was sobbing again and trying to explain. “Can’t I have anything that just is, without it having a fucking agenda? One meal? One friend?”

He pulled me onto his lap. “I’m sorry, kitten.”

“I know that’s your training and it’s hard to tuh-turn it off, but -”

He said firmly, “Stop making excuses for me. Shh.” I did. “You’re smart and self-aware and sometimes it’s easy to forget you haven’t been doing this spy bullshit for long. I’m sorry. I wasn’t pretending to enjoy your company.”

I nodded against his chest. He passed me a napkin and I blew my nose, but didn’t move to the point where he could see my face.

“Go on,” I said in a small voice. “You might as well ask the question.”

“Why were those assholes in your room, Emma?”

Supported by two complicated men, I took a deep breath and finally said the words.

Chapter End Notes

Here we are, my darlings. One very heavy chapter to go and then we're through it.

It's been a massive challenge to write, and especially to try and write WELL. Not simply in terms of being cognisant of the issues being discussed and handling them with the sensitivity and respect they demand, but also trying to make readable fiction out of Emma's reactions. "And then I cried for a very long time" would be true, but boring to read.

I am honestly impressed with how many genuinely funny moments I've managed to get
into these chapters without it feeling forced or dissonant. It's positively Shakespearean.

Thank you to all of you. I have been as sick as hell, and it would be super duper easy to listen to the voice that says, "This is stupid and a waste of your time, why bother." But that voice has no chance at all against the comments and kudoses and upwardly moving hits. Apparently I am making a number of people's days a bit better with this delightfully silly thing, and there is not another damn reward I need to keep going even when everything hurts.
A Remarkable Day

Chapter Notes

Here's the big one, darlings. Trigger warnings for sexual abuse and child abuse.

I have added a bunch of carriage returns at the end so if you skip to the summary you can do so safely.

Love you all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Leliana was so angry. You know that weird sleeping pattern she has? I thought you might. An hour every six, except not precisely six because I guess that’d make her too predictable. And no-one knows where her quarters are.

Except Cole, of course.

So she was still waking up and her hair wasn’t brushed and she was so angry...

I’m getting ahead of myself.

Chandler and I spent that afternoon meeting staff, and I don’t have a terrible family so there’s really only so long I can manage to pretend everything’s okay when it isn’t okay, and the day had started so nicely, too.

Well, not nicely. But good. Things were good. And even with Chandler pretending he’d gone just a little bit deaf every time I spoke, it was a bright day, not windy, and we were outside and someone was whistling and Cole was enjoying it. I’m sorry, I know I’m going the long way around. Thanks.

They were cutting back brush. Guldebrandt, Martin, Francis.

And Willem.

Is there another napkin? I think I dropped the handkerchief. Cheers.

They were taking a break, tea and doorstop sandwiches, and Willem was elated. His family was coming, he said. Finally. Took the fuckin bureaucrats long enough to make it happen, he said, which. Y’know. Professional pride a little bruised. But I congratulated him and shook his hand.

I shouldn’t have shaken his hand.

But how would I have known? Cole thinks there was no way I could, he’s probably right.

Huh? Oh, it’s… it’s happened a couple of times. Strong emotion plus skin contact seems to… bypass the filters Cole keeps up to protect me from the barrage of need.

Well, he is thoughtful.

I had a scribe’s desk, one of the little ones that rests on your wrist. I think I flung it somewhere when I ran. Chandler gave it back to me when he caught up. Which wasn’t far. Should I start exercising? I
think that’d be a wise idea.

I don’t know, but I do know. I know that Guldebrandt and Martin and Francis went out and got drunk. Drunk and furious. They wanted to know where Willem had gone, you see. That’s why they went to my room. To make me tell them. I think Francis wasn’t willing to join in, but he didn’t warn anyone either. Or maybe he just passed out. I don’t know.

I managed to tell Chandler and Leliana without ever saying the words. Spies. You guys are so handy for reading between the lines!

Why? Why do I have to say it? You know, you all know. Willem is gone into a deep subterranean dungeon somewhere, maybe even in the cell I was in, and his family is safe, and isn’t that all that matters, beautiful? Isn’t it?

I just want to forget all about it. Cole could make me, you know. Wipe it all out. Maker, I want him to.

No, you don’t get it. You don’t. This isn’t like normal, when Cole whispers to me. You don’t understand how fucking intimate it was. Is.

I didn’t hear his thoughts. I thought them.


Of course I know it wasn’t really me. Of course I know that. Logically. But.

Where’d that napkin go? Block your ears, lovely.

Fenedhis, I’m tired.

I did, for a bit. Couple hours? Nightmares. Hah, no. Spent all night with Blackwall teaching me how to assume a ready stance so I can feel safe. He’s marvellous, y’know. We weren’t! We’d only met once before. He’s just…

Of course it was Cole’s idea - I was too busy having a panic. Drove me like a cow in the chute, right to his door. Yeah.

You… you promise? I know that you know your job, but…

Oh mercy.

Okay.

Tell me I’m brave.

Thank you.

Aster. Her name is Aster.

She’s nearly ten.

He started when she was four. Touching. Then more than touching. At least twice a week. He misses her, he… Ah, mercy. No-one does it for him like she does, that’s what he thinks. I hate him so much. He reeks, he fucking reeks with complacency about it. Believes he has every fucking right in the world to do that to his child if he wants to, and I hate him, and this hurts so much, and I’m still
Maker-damned glad I had to go through this because they were only two hours from the gate, beautiful, only two hours away and I would go through all of this a hundred times over, terrible thoughts in my head and terrible men in my room, I’d do it all again to make sure that he never, ever, ever gets anywhere near them again and there, I said it. I said it.

Is it done now?

Can it stop now?
Chapter End Notes

Synopsis, in much more sensible order than Emma managed:
1. There was a man named Willem who has been abusing his daughter Aster for many years.
2. Emma unluckily shook his hand while he was gloating about his family rejoining him.
3. Emma freaked out and bolted, leaving Willem and his friends confused.
4. Emma and Chandler went to Leliana.
4a. (Adorably, Leliana sleeps on a complicated rotating schedule that allows her to always seem present, and was not pleased that Cole can find her hidey hole.)
5. Since Willem's family were only a couple of hours away from being reunited with him, Leliana took decisive action. Willem was Disappeared.
6. Willem's friends, drunk and confused and angry, decided to go question the person likely to know what had happened. You know, the woman who had shaken his hand and then panicked earlier that day.
7. Emma has managed to thus far not actually say almost any of this out loud, and was doing her best to pretend none of it had happened.
8. Cole and Bull were quite clear that wasn't an optimal strategy.
9. And now it is done.

Author Meanderings:
Ugh.

I've said before that that subtitle of this work is HUG ALL THE PEOPLE, but the sub-subtitle is ALSO PEOPLE ARE OFTEN TERRIBLE, WHY THE FUCK IS THAT?

Actually attempting to render the internal narrative of such terrible people is an interesting challenge, but not a fun one. I know I've done a decent job on the Willem stuff because it makes me squirm every time I read it.

There will be consequences from these actions, of course, but this is the end of the warnings for the foreseeable future. And there are many, many very sweet and comforting chapters coming, I promise.

I love you all so much.
Many Hours Later

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

I woke up to find The Iron Bull ensconced nearby, reading the spicy Antivan novel Merewether had leant me. I kissed his forehead on my way to the privy.

Courses already beginning to end, splendid.

there is -

Yes, Cole-love, I know I need to drink at least two glasses of water, just let me wash my face first.

sun on the daisies, warm and wide!

Poetic I told you sos are still annoying, honey.

He knew I wasn’t really mad. We were both too happy to see me feeling better.

Hold on a second. “Beautiful,” I said as I walked back into the room, dutifully finishing the second glass of water, “as pleased as I always am to see you… why are you here?”

He grinned, unfazed. “Had to ask the kid something.”

“Wait. WAIT.” I nearly dropped my drink. “That actually happened? You and Cole had a private conversation? Without me. I thought it was just an odd dream I had!”

He nodded. “He asked. Said you could wait outside the ears, or some shit. You were pretty out of it but you agreed.”

“Andraste’s dirty underthings. How’d it go?”

“ Weird,” he replied promptly. “Not sure I understood more than a third. Still…” one shoulder moved in an understated gesture. “I can kinda see why you like him.”

I grinned and kissed him again, this time a child’s enthusiastic approval. “That’s the most fucking adorable thing I’ve ever heard. Let me get dressed and we’ll get started.”

He settled back in his chair in the pose of someone ready to enjoy the show. I gave a rude gesture and went behind the screen.

“So I was right,” I heard him say.

“Of course you were. Is there a word in Qunlat that means, ‘Thank you, but also stop being so damn smug about it’?”

He rattled off a phrase that was actually an invitation to perform intimate acts upon his person and I giggled so hard that I fouled my laces. The real kind of laughter. Of course he was right; I felt bruised but myself again.

I reappeared, still giggling, and his expression snapped back into his habitual easygoing smirk. What had it been before? Damn spies and their incredibly fast reactions.
Cleared my throat, sat down on a chair at a polite non-threatening distance.

“Ready, beautiful?”

His face clearly said that he believed it was impossible to be ready for this weird crap, but sure, go ahead.

Cole-love?

And there I was in my suite. I told Cole I loved him and went for the door, out into the memory palace proper where I wouldn’t be able to eavesdrop.

As I closed the door I heard Cole say with my voice, “Hello, The Iron Bull!”

***

I spent the time sorting through our traitor files.

There was a strong undercurrent of that herznjilkusspun feeling as I worked. After puzzling through it for a bit I decided that Cole was probably using my memories to perform a rough kind of translation.

“Emma!” He ran in, face alight. Ah, sweet boy.

“It went well, then?”

“He likes me,” Cole replied simply. I hugged him and was joyful.

***

The Iron Bull’s face, displaying a sick fascination with the whole process, was my first sight as I took the reins again.

“Hey.”

“Hey, kitten,” he said, distantly. I smiled kindly and waited; he was doing very well, under the circumstances. Then he gave a massive shudder and pretended that nothing had happened. (Bien sûr.)

“So you’re good?” he said, and began to stand.

“Umm.” My tiny voice stopped him. “Can I ask a small favour?”

“Sure.”

“Could you repeat the things you said before? Y’know, when I was done?”

His gaze was compassionate enough to make Cole sigh happily. The Iron Bull dragged me onto his lap, looked me firmly in the eyes, and said, “You are a hero. You saved that kid. Scars and shit are just the reminders that you are a hero. They hurt, but who fucking cares? Not you, because it was worth it. You saved the kid.” He leaned in and intoned the word Hero into my brain, indelibly and inarguably.

He held me for a minute, ruffled the Cole-spot, and then left.

We both adored him as he went.
I love Bull and Cole's interactions. What could they possibly have been talking about this time?
I re-entered the world (greeted by yet another incredibly thoughtful guard on my door) and went directly to the kitchens.

“Oh, hi Emma. How… how are you doing?” said Clive.

Fenedhis, here we go. Be calm but not overly composed, happy but not manic, self-assured but not angry. Remind yourself that this is Clive, who likes you and is probably sincerely concerned about the rumours he’s heard.

I smiled just a little and said, “Tired but improving. Thanks.”

His voice got even more awkward. “Did they… umm… catch the guys?”

“Oh.” Oh, bugger, I recognise that face. “Before they did anything.”

Clive sighed in relief and said some more awkwardly kind things and I made some very careful responses and oh mercy this is going to be me for the next entire damn week, I can tell. Worse, this is going to be one of the easier ones.

My meal tasted like incipient drama. It was good to get out of there.

Now what?

    Is he…

    asleep

    Dang, of course he is.

I got a piece of parchment and my wax-wrapped charcoal from their pouch, then thought better of it and started toward the office.

    why ink?

    It occurs to me that he might like to keep this, honey. Charcoal smudges too easily.

    thoughts skip out like stones, lightly skimming to reach afar

    Thank you, Cole-love.

Writing elegantly by the wavering light of a single candle is tricky, but I was up to the challenge. It was much harder to compose words the recipient couldn’t argue with.

###

Hero,

I’m up and about, far sooner than I would have expected.

My mind keeps trying to ambush me with reminders of what nearly was. I counter with the reminder
of your kindness. It’s working rather well.

Baked goods await at your word.

Much love and respect,

Emma

###

Cole approved of it, both in the general sense because he approves of absolutely everything I do, and the specific (“Blackwall will like it, too.”). We delayed for a while in the garden, which was eerie and beautiful by half-light, then popped the note under his door.

Again, I thought: now what?

***

“Yes.”

The first thing I noticed, probably typically, was the paperwork.

At a guess, maybe half of Lady Josephine’s mound of Correspondence Day bounty was on the desk, along with the usual reports about staffing and finances and guests. The Commander and the Nightingale had added a comparable amount of parchment.

It’s easy to forget just how new the Inquisition is; we really are making this up as we go along. Lady Josephine is splendid at her job, but her rôle is to follow established protocol, not set it. Every new player has to be assessed, categorised by a dozen criteria (political leanings/utility/probability of betrayal, etc etc etc) and a relationship decided upon.

For most new organisations, it would take less than one cup of tea to manage the teensy handful of military, political and financial powers reaching out. But when you fix the hole in the sky everybody wants a piece of you.

This makes the politics exponentially more complicated, of course.

Lady J had done all the background (assisted ably by Leliana, I am sure) but it isn’t her responsibility to decide. It isn’t Ser Cullen’s or Leliana’s, either.

All of the decisions came to one very crowded desk.

Vanadirthavean’s face was still unreadable, but the violently careless disarray of the dispatched writings spoke clearly. Frustration. Exhaustion. He was utterly sick of the process, the further it went along. And he was clearly not best pleased about being less than a fifth finished with it.

Also, he was…

The Iron Bull had been muddy and reeking, but the mud had few places to really take purchase. He’d have to spend an hour or two on his leatherwork, but that was the most of it.

Vanadirthavean, on the other hand, had hair. A lot of it.

His beautiful chaotic mane was encrusted with mud that had dried in place. I could see a comb buried under panderings, and one half-undone braid. Either the thrill of paperwork had distracted him, or he’d just given up.
Oh, dear.

I am about to do something very stupid.

Chapter End Notes

This is your regular reminder that I adore you. Be kind to yourself, jellybean.
In An Awkwardly Quiet Room

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The comb wavered a little as I held it interrogatively.

I tried to look calm and detached but miséricorde was I ever nervous. This was a massive leap of intimacy. Touching anyone’s hair is, I think, but Vanadirthavean’s mane was… I don’t know, significant.

He regarded me deeply, almost challengingly, before giving a tiny nod and returning to his work. Phew.

Never felt performance anxiety about grooming before.

It actually would have been slightly easier if this was the Void-damned mud I’d scrubbed off the infirmary floor, because that stuff was clay-ey and set rock hard. This stuff was dried out but mucky, sticky. It got attached.

I made a few very gentle experiments before concluding that the best approach was simply to get the hair to a state where it could be properly washed. Also: try not to hurt the Lord Inquisitor’s scalp.

Most of the left side went quickly, and I fell into an oddly familiar rhythm. Why does this… oh, of course! The gorse bush.

How long did it take me to get the brambles and leaves and crap out of Ash’s hair? It felt like hours. I smiled at the memory, of her mulish little face as she refused to admit that the entire thing was her fault.

Creators, I’ll have to remind her of that when we see each other. If I get time after telling them all the other events that have happened since last we met, of course.

The Breach. And Cole. And being imprisoned, yikes. And…

And the last few days. My throat closed just imagining telling them about that.

Scars. Scars because I was a hero. Scars don’t matter.

I closed my eyes for a long moment as I recited this to myself. When I opened them Vanadirthavean was staring at me.

“What are you upset about?” he asked.

On the face of it, this was a perfectly civil query. And he was in the weird position of being too important to hear the gossip, so he probably hadn’t been informed. It was nice that someone was still ignorant.

I could have told him. But what I asked instead was:

“Do you actually want to know?” My tone was open, non-judgemental. I used to think I was good at that before Cole, but back then I was actually two steps above abysmal. Now I was good at it.

He paused, face neutral. Scrutinised me. Tried out a few words before replying, “No. Not
particularly.”

Whatever reaction he’d been expecting, it clearly wasn’t the one he’d gotten. “Why are you smiling like that?” he said, and this time the curiosity seemed sincere.

“I’m pretty sure that’s the first truthful thing you’ve ever said to me,” I informed him. “It’s rather flattering.”

He made a face like I’d just told him that two plus three equals duckling, shook his head, and went back to work.

So did I.

***

Once I had successfully unwrapped, untangled, and unknotted his hair, Vanadirthavean nodded thanks and disappeared into an adjoining chamber. A waft of steam rolled out, followed by vigorous cleaning noises.

I decided to be kind to Birgid’s knees (and also distract myself from pondering the probably gorgeous nakedness only yards away) and used a report as a makeshift dust-pan, cleaning up as much of the flaked mud as I could manage.

While cleaning off the paper, I caught a phrase. Frowned. Read the entire report. Shoe leather? Oh, for fuck’s sake.

Shouldn’t. Probably I shouldn’t. He’s only permitted me in here thus far because I am so clear in respecting his boundaries.

But, seriously. *Shoe leather?*

I began to rummage.

***

When the suite’s owner reappeared, glowingly clean, I was just about to finish sorting the last parchments into one of five piles.

His Worship silently demanded an explanation. I picked up the first massive pile and handed it to him. At the front was a note.

###

Commander,

Thank you for confirming the rumours about Knight-Commander Meredith’s management style.

In future, feel free not to report on any of these unless the variance exceeds 10%.

Regards.

###

As he read, I held my breath and tried not to imagine how many bruises I would receive if thrown down the stone stairs.
Paperwork jokes! This fic has everything.
Vanadirthavean made no response.

I did not squeak. Barely.

He moved silently to the second massive pile of parchment, and the note on top.

###

Ambassador,

I am aware that the Council preferred to keep as many diplomatic decisions in their grasp as possible. Unlike them, I have not spent the last centuries becoming intimately acquainted with every power in Thedas.

I propose we schedule a meeting to discuss the principles on which the Inquisition’s diplomatic relations should be founded, and begin the move toward granting you plenipotentiary authority to execute such decisions in future.

Regards.

###

At this, his eyebrows rose, but he still said nothing.

The third, still chokingly large pile, was gathered under a note which read:

###

Dossiers. To be memorised?

But probably not now.

###

His mouth twitched and I decided that I probably wasn’t going to be murdered for my impertinence.

He looked over the other two piles, which I hadn’t bothered to label. One contained all the important reports from the Inner Circle, including a few adorably awkward ones penned by the Seeker.

The second was requests for help. I had tried to be very ginger in touching those, because a lot of them were very desperate indeed.

The two piles comprised about 15% of the total. Even when I had been second-guessing myself, I was pretty smug about that.

Vanadirthavean looked… rueful. The expression of someone who is usually the canniest person in any space, and doesn’t appreciate reminders to the contrary. Suddenly I was nervous again.

“I despise not knowing how best to accomplish something,” he said. My smile was comprised of
perfect me-too sympathy tinged with relief. He’s being honest again, that seems to be a good sign.

(I did not mention that Lady Josephine had offered to provide assistants to him on at least four occasions that I know of. My time among the diplomats was paying dividends.)

“I could demonstrate my knife-throwing skills, if you like. And dare, possibly.” His mouth twitched again, acknowledging the point.

“Good night, Emma,” he said.

I took a moment to adjust to the sudden change in conversational direction, then replied, “Good night, Vanadirthavean,” and made to leave. Paused.

“Oh, could you do me a favour?” He half-turned his head and waited. “Could you stop playing hot-and-cold with Lord Dorian? It makes him all insecure and fidgety, and he takes it out on the staff.”

He turned his head and said a lot of nothing.

I curtsied and left.

***

It was quiet, this late. I didn’t especially want to go back to bed just yet.

Any options, honey?

always

The bakeries were warm, and that wasn’t why I was there, but I admit it was a pleasant side benefit as I listened to Quinze talk about how his sister was pregnant again and - after a lot of encouragement - how he was afraid she’d die young and worn-out, like their mother had. His forearms were corded and immensely strong as he talked and worked the dough.

Then a wee visit, rocking a very colicky baby. His mother wept with exhaustion and relief as Cole and I uncovered the exact combination of humming and movement to bring the infant some ease.

you’ll like this one

I like all of them, Cole-love.

yes. but you’ll like this one more

Intrigued, I followed his directions and ah.

As always, Cole is correct.

Chapter End Notes

And now we learn that Emma wasn't the only person having a crappy day when she and Dorian met. Flirting heavily with him and then leaving with no word and VIVIENNE? Brutal, Inky.

Am I the only one who tended to bring their romantic choice along on every mission
because I was worried they’d feel left out?
“Yeah?” came the reply to my knock.

“It’s me. Can I let myself in?”

A mildly exasperated silence. “It’s locked.”

“Cole says locks want to be open,” I replied.

There was a series of annoyed noses I took to be assent, and we let ourselves in.

Lying on his bed, doing his best to glare, lay The Iron Bull. It was the glare of someone who has been caught doing something they knew was stupid, and is attempting to bluster their way out.

“As much as I want to know who it was that tempted you so much, I shall be polite.” My grin was seriously impudent. “Turn over, beautiful.”

I could see him considering whether to lie and my smile got a little more mocking. He gave up, and very gingerly turned himself over.

First I used his pillows and a few improvised bolsters to make him comfortable, or at least able to breathe properly. Then I brandished my secret weapon: an oiled waterskin full of boiling water. I placed it gently down on his lower back and he hissed in pleasure.

While I waited for the heat to do its work, I lay down next to him. And waited.

“Aw, fuck, get it over with,” he muttered. I was on his blind side, but he didn’t need eyes to read me perfectly well.

“Beautiful, you know very well it’s best to avoid strenuous activities when your back is twinging like that. I hope they were worth it.” This was delivered in the primmest tone I could manage.

My only response was a grunt. I grinned and kissed his bicep.

I spent the rest of the wait monitoring his back muscles and trying not to think a whole variety of thoughts.

When it was time, I moved the still-warm water further up his back - merely sore, not murderous - cracked every joint in my fingers, and climbed into position.

Then Cole and I went to work.

We had a sceptic under our hands (and thighs stop that) for only as long as it took to jam a thumb on one spot as hard as possible and edge it a fraction sideways.

The relief was so exquisite that The Iron Bull lost all capacity to make noise. That felt just as delicious as you’d imagine.

I ran out of my strength in my fingers before points to apply it to, but by then we’d nudged, bullied and finessed the worst of it away. The Iron Bull rolled onto his back much more easily this time. He
then picked me up with effortless strength, draping my back along his chest. Once I got my hair out of his face we were both very comfortable.

Once settled, he picked up my right hand and massaged it.

I started making appreciative noises of my own.

“I hear you had a run-in with the ‘Vint,” he said conversationally.

“Of course you fucking did.”

“Didn’t think you had it in you, kitten.”

“That makes two of us!” I groaned as his fingers dug into my wrist. “It happened so fast I’d already slapped him before I knew what was happening.”

He rocked in surprise. “Wait. You slapped him? I just heard you called him an arsehat.” His careful mimicry of my accent was very charming.


He started to chuckle, which is a tectonic phenomenon when you’re lying on it. “And now you gotta tell me what happened.”

I gave the précis: Blackwall’s kindness, Lord Dorian’s mockery. “I blame the ready stance. Before I knew it, he was on the ground.”

The laughter was creating the strong impression of being astride a galloping horse. The Iron Bull choked out, “You knocked him over?”

“Right onto his arse,” I said, not without some satisfaction. “There was applause.”

He put one hand over my stomach, without which I might very well have been projected off at dangerous velocity. I responded to that consideration by ensuring none of my thrashing limbs impacted anything sensitive.

And he laughed until he ran out of breath.

Wiping a tear from his eye, he said, “Shit, kitten. Sometimes you still surprise me. I wish I’d seen Dorian’s face.”

This time I was the one to start laughing.

“What’s so funny?” he asked suspiciously.

“You are, beautiful.” I got myself poked in the ribs for that. “Aww, c’mon, it’s sweet! At least three of the reasons you fancy him so intensely are very ki- ow!”

Hint received. I subsided and let him finish my hands.

“Kitten.”

“Mm?”

“You can’t sleep here.”
“Dint. Sor. ‘Mgoin.’” I yawned, rolled, stretched, smiled blearily, and stumbled off to my bed (Gabin again. Patted his shoulder inaccurately) and into immediate sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Writing interactions between these two is always a joy.
Even Impatient Door-Knocking Sounds Fancier Here

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Morning, honey.

hello!

Still great.

I’d slept in my clothes. Both they and I were wrinkled, but at least it made it a lot faster to respond to the pre-dawn summons.

Besides, in the secret underground dungeon the dress code is quite relaxed.

***

You know, I’d been rather looking forward to walking, unchained and unhooded, down these stairs again. I had visions of the guards, mumbling apologies, as I triumphantly descended.

I was too busy to enjoy it.

Dammit, Cole-love, what if you’re wrong?

we aren’t

We? Oh for shit’s sake, you and The Iron Bull are a bloody conspiracy now? Look, you’re both brilliant, I’m not arguing that.

you are arguing

You know what I - argh.

I projected a clear image of a surgeon looking at a gangrenous wound and pronouncing, “Nah, it’ll be fine.”

That’s what you both sound like.

He comforted me but still refused to erase Willem’s thoughts. Shit.

They’d held him in the cell across from mine, about which I was glad. (I had a few fond thoughts of those bars.) The cell door stood open; sounds from past the half-opened wooden door suggested he was being restrained out near the waterfall.

Leliana and Vanadirthavean were present. I gave both a respectful nod then essentially forgot about their existence as I regarded the other two people.

The woman was a study in faded browns: hair, eyes, skin. The look of someone whose first inclination was to flinch. She was standing just a little too far from her daughter.

Her mother’s colouring but plump instead of angular. A completely ordinary child, you’d say, until you looked at her eyes. Her gaze was ruthlessly unsentimental and far too old.
And my heart caught fire.

Every one of Willem’s disgusting possessive thoughts were burnt away and transmuted into a painful but welcomed purity. Similar but oh-so-different.

MINE, my heart said. MINE TO PROTECT.

I opened my arms. She judged me in a glance and then ran into them.

It hurt, there was so much to feel. The burning continued, changing every covet into a cherish. My knowledge of her was a red-hot knife and I accepted it because when it was done every single iota of Willem was cauterised from me and all that remained was fierce mama-bear love.

“Aster, darling,” I said into her hair. As soon as she grew next she’d be too tall for me to do so. “Oh, it’s so good to see you.”

She looked up into my face and said, “You’re the one that caught him.”

“Yes, darling. I’m Emma. Where are your brother and sister?”

“They’re too young for this,” she said with the perfect assurance of an extra twenty months. “They’re playing.”

“You kept them safe,” I told her. “I am so proud of you.”

She watched me, looking for the lie. When it was not found, she let me hug her again, pretending that she was merely putting up with it for my benefit. I smiled into her hair. She looked up again.

“D’you think they’ll let me cut his throat?”

Her mother - Susan - let out a panicked squawk. “You cannot say things like that, Aster!”


“Let’s find out, darling.”

We walked over to the Inquisitor and Spymistress with Aster firmly welded to my side, where we both wanted her to stay for as long as possible.

“Your Worship. Sister,” I said. I skipped the curtsey as currently impractical and repeated my respectful nod instead.

“Aster darling, go ahead.”

She pulled out a tiny knife, really just a hank of metal with a rag handle. It had been very thoroughly sharpened.

“Next time,” she said with no hesitation or self-consciousness, “I was going to stick this in his guts. I’d prob’ly die, but so would he.”

Two grave faces nodded. Leliana had heard stories like this a hundred times before and they still hurt. I’d wager Vanadirthavean had heard plenty, too.
Aster put her out her chubby chin. “I want to be the one who does it. I got the right.”

A long pause.

“Come,” the Lord Inquisitor said.

Chapter End Notes

She rather took me by surprise, but like Emma I fell instantly in love with Aster.
Willem was gagged, thank mercy for that. His eyes were speaking venom enough.

He was chained kneeling to the rock, facing the cascade. Two guards stood, hands on sword hilts. One was the bearded guard from my time, who did a double-take when he saw me that was exceptionally gratifying.

Vanadirthavean stood in front, and I noticed that he was wearing a massive ornate sword of his own. Ah, the famous blade of Ameridan, I suppose.

Telana, this is ridiculous. I cannot fight with this!

Cole-love?

He shook himself and added no more.

“Willem,” said the Inquisitor, voice ringing over the downfall, “You have been accused and judged guilty of multiple counts of raping a child.” Wow, love the lack of euphemism. “These crimes occurred before you joined the Inquisition and on foreign soil. I have no standing to punish you for them.”

What?

WHAT?

My stomach started to sink and wriggle as Willem’s eyes began to light up with hope. Is this going to be Gereon Fucking Alexius all over again? Damn the legal standing, we are in a hidden dungeon, aren’t we? You can’t let him go!

“However, there was a certain amount of ceremony when you enlisted.”

My mind raced. Where was he going with this?

“You swore, and attested to your swearing with your signature here” - at his side, Leliana brandished parchment, from one of the boxes we’d carried away with us from Haven - “that you had committed no capital crimes before this date.”

Willem’s eyes darted as he tried to figure out the implications.

“Rape of a child is a capital crime in Ferelden, where you were living at the time. Lying about such to an organisation duly empowered by the Divine would normally be merely heresy.”

Oh. I began to grin a little madly.

Vanadirthavean’s voice continued. Coldly. It was magnificent. “But since we are also a military organisation in a time of war…” He paused, just for maximum drama. Susan teetered on the edge of fainting.

“Willem, I judge you guilty of high treason, the punishment for which is death. Punishment will be carried out immediately.”
He turned to Aster, still attached to me. He inclined his head.

“You may proceed.”

Tiny knife in hand, Aster stalked forward.

***

I closed my eyes. Call me a coward if you want to.

There were a lot of clanking chain noises - Willem trying fruitlessly to avoid the inevitable. One long pause where I was pretty sure Aster was enjoying the moment. Susan’s gasp covered the deed.

Then there was a different slumping clanking noise as Willem collapsed. I opened my eyes to see he wasn’t actually dead yet.

He died over one very long minute of frothy choking noises. It was a hideous, painful, frightening way to die and one Aster would have delivered on purpose if she’d known enough about anatomy to do so.

And then his eyes glazed over. We all took a breath.

Aster looked at her mother, dismissed her, and then at me. Her face was blood-spattered, her eyes still sparkling. I love this child more than life but fuck it was scary.

Cole made sure I didn’t show the fear. There were at least four reasons we didn’t want it seen.

Instead I said calmly, “You need to clean yourself off, darling. Get your mother to help you wash.”

“Okay,” she replied and herded her mother toward a bucket that had been carefully left nearby.

Behind her, the guards unchained the corpse.

Chapter End Notes

That’s the end of Willem. Say it with me, darlings: GOOD FUCKING RIDDANCE.

Also, I passed 100,000 words this week. I want to thank every single one of you for helping me to stick with this delightful weirdness no matter the health bullshit and self-doubt. Making you happy is the best motivation I could have ever asked for.

I plan to celebrate with French vanilla cheesecake.
I turned to the two thus-silent witnesses. “They need to stay.”

Leliana, to whom this had been directed, agreed. I continued, “And Susan will need a lot of help.”

Her head tilted. “You won’t be providing it?”

I glanced over at the pair, still standing a little too far apart. “We can’t,” I said simply. “They have incompatible wants.”

“I see.” I suspected that she did. “Cordelia?”

I smiled. “Cordelia.”

Before leaving, Leliana added, “I have a solution to the mage problem. Say, Friday morning?”

I gave her a Look.

Dimpling, she corrected, “Saturday morning then.” We made the arrangements.

Leliana glided toward the pair and their new future. Vanadirthavean and I stood alone.

“I suspect I know why you were upset, that day,” he said mildly.

“I suspect I know why you were made Inquisitor, with marvellous deductive skills like those,” I replied.

There was an awkward silence. I’d never said anything that borderline-impudent to him before.

And I never would again.

He kindly changed the subject.

“Who is Cordelia?”

“She upholstered your Totally Not A Throne Chair. Probably did most of the draperies in the Great Hall, too.”

“And?”

“And… She married far too young to a man her family disapproved of. Eight years later, she managed to flee. Lived rough for a time, learned a trade. Since then she’s made her living with brass tacks and valances… but her real vocation is abused spouses.”

Vanadirthavean absorbed this, seeming just a little annoyed at how much he doesn’t know about the people he’s in charge of. “Why is she here?”

“Lachlan. He and his son are mostly settled now, though. She’s got the space for a new project.”

“And so do you?”
I smiled at Aster, scrubbing blood off her hands.

“And so do I.”

***

When I entered the office, everyone stood and met me.

Including Sister Temperantia, who must’ve been having a good day, and yes. Even Lydia.

They clustered much closer than usual. Who told them I would find that comforting? Probably Lady J with very subtle hinting from Leliana.

“Uh. Hey,” I said. Smooth, as always.

A round of awkward smiles returned my witticism. We don’t know the right words, those smiles said. But we really wish we did.

At this, my own smile became much sunnier and we all relaxed a bit.

“I uncovered a child abuser,” I told them. Lots of blinking plus one not-muttered oath from Gareth. “I reported him to Sister Nightingale and she took… ah… very decisive action because his family was about to rejoin him.”

Everyone blinked and then Katria blurted, “Willem? Was that Willem?”

“Yeah.”

“Fook me sideways!” she blurted. Her Starkhaven gets comically strong when she’s shocked, clearly. “I wrote that paper an’ he smirked the whole while, that, that gobshite.”

I agreed emphatically and patted her arm. I’ve never liked her as much as I do in this moment.

“So the gobshites - great word, thanks,” Katria fidgeted but her mouth was pleased, “that were in my room were two of Willem’s friends, wondering where he’d Disappeared to.”

Everyone was angry and appalled on my behalf. We’ve all heard tales of clerks beaten for rejecting an application, or strong-armed into sealing documents for shady types, but for most of us those tales are just that. Tales. The reality is stark and none of us liked it.

“I’m telling you this - and it has to stay quiet by Sister Nightingale’s orders -” everyone promised “- because the family is here now, including the daughter he. You know.”

Deep breath. “She is very much attached to me. And me to her!” I blurted. To my absolute relief, everyone got it. She was a paper dilemma made real, and every one of us has experienced how powerful that can be. “So I told her how to find me here and she’s probably going to visit me often and I desperately need all of you to be not-weird about it. Okay?”

“Treat her as ordinary and make no comment about her presence. Keep the story secret. We understand.” Lydia said that. Lydia.

And while I was attempting to deflabbergast myself, she went further. “Did you eat breakfast?”

I replied with a Nnn noise which was correctly translated as “I didn’t have the courage to go to the dining hall just yet.”
She nodded, not at all surprised. “I’ll fetch you something.”

I waited for her to add, “Because women with your bulk simply must support it,” or something of that ilk, but she didn’t.

She wasn’t even going to spit in it or anything.

So I said, “Thank you, Lydia. I would appreciate it.”

And I wandered, just a little dumbfounded, to my desk.

Which needed reshimming.

I started to laugh.

Chapter End Notes

I was posting updates every three days for a bit, darlings, but I have been sicker than usual and so I must go to every four days for the next while because now I am only 12 chapters ahead and it makes me Anxious.

I love you. Are you staying hydrated?
It was mid-morning. I’d eaten my spit-free breakfast, made Lady J display both of her dimples with my presence, and signed off on the preparation for the earlier-than-usual payroll.

Suddenly, kerfuffle.

One of the messengers barged right into Lady J’s office without knocking - cue the noise of enraged comtesse - and before we’d even finished doing the elaborate series of shrugging do-you-know-what-this-is-about glances at each other the comtesse flounced away and Lady Josephine appeared and told us all to follow her to the courtyard.

The side-eyeing intensified but none of us had any answers as we did as we were told.

Out in the Great Hall, the general keruffliness intensified. A LOT of people were heading out in various shades of confusion and excitement.

I saw Solas, watching the crowds curiously, and gave one of those super-casual waist-high waves.

He responded with a summoning gesture.

Okay, look. Logically, it would be much easier for us to talk over near the big hearth where he was standing. But I can’t say I enjoyed being directed as if I was a particularly dense sheepdog.

So I told Circe I’d catch up and wended over. Usually I would begin with a wide smile, an enthusiastic greeting, and probably at least one question. I did none of those things. I was polite and neutral and silent.

It is not unlikely that over our acquaintance Solas has wished, more than once, that I would be more restrained. More formal. More like, y’know, *him*. But now he had his wish and found immediately that it is very difficult to talk to someone who is contributing nothing to the exchange.

It’s too much to hope that he will draw the obvious conclusion.

“I was informed about the events of Sunday,” he said. Clever. Pluralising so I know that he’d been told about both, and allowing me to draw the obvious conclusions as to the source. “I am sorry you had to experience it. Especially with such intimacy.”

He clearly regarded the encounter with Willem as the real misfortune, with two men attempting to ambush me as a mere inconvenience. To him, perhaps it is.

Some of my amusement at this perspective must have shown and been interpreted as a critique of his oratory. Or perhaps he was already judging himself in that area.

He sighed and moved his hands in expressive arcs. “My apologies. I am not expressing myself as I wish to.”

Gently, with no edges, I twinkled, “I’m surprised you didn’t try a letter.”

He smiled back, with a trace of mild self-mockery. “I did attempt to do so, in point of fact.”

“What went wrong?”
“I found myself telling stories of scenes I had viewed in the Fade,” he said, and his embarrassment was the most adorable thing I’d seen in days. Ah, fenor.

“That sounds infinitely preferable to the usual platitudes. Could… would you tell me one of them?”

He looked critically from the dwindling crowd to my hopeful face. His eyebrows are beautifully expressive. He waited for the current crowd to leave and spoke into silence.

“I saw two dwarves, hollow-cheeked, worn from travel. They seemed very far from home.”

Also, I could listen to his voice for the next three Ages.

“The first staggered onward until he found himself on the edge of a crevasse, with no place else to flee to. The other caught up, and the first braced himself for a blow. Bitterly, he spoke. ‘Go on then. You know what I did.’”

A pause. I was utterly mesmerised.

“His pursuer came close and laid a gentle hand on a shoulder. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And I forgive you.’”

My face did a lot of quite complicated things before deciding that crying was the best option, with hilarity at the frozen overwhelmed consternation of Solas taking second place.

The weeping was brisk and refreshing, and very nearly finished when a familiar voice said, “You better not be harassing our Emma.”

The common witticism is that Tara resembles Grand Enchanter Vivienne, if Madame de Fer ate bonbons instead of babies. At this exact moment the likeness was uncanny.

I honked crisply and replied on his behalf, “Oh no, Tara darling. He just said something impossibly sweet.”

“Ah, well that is fine then. My apologies, Messere Solas.”

“By no means. I am glad to see that many care for her.” He sounded very stiff and formal, the dear.

Tara then swept me into a maternal hug; due to the difference in our heights I was pressed firmly into her bosom. It was intensely comforting.

“I hear that two pustules tried to hurt you.” I nodded into the solace-boobs. “Ah, that’s terrible. How’re you doing?”

“Very eh, with a side of sorta-okay.”

She understood, and kissed the top of my head as she let go. “You’re having dinner with us tomorrow night.”

This was not a request. “See you then, darling.”

She patted me with the matter-of-fact comfort of a good mother, nodded politely at Solas, then left.

I scrubbed my face and enjoyed his execrable attempts to be relaxed and unconcerned. “That is Tara,” I informed him. “Carpenter, mother of five.”

“She seems… formidable.”
“She is a benign force of nature, true. You’d like her.” The hint seemed to miss him completely. “Thank you for the story. I’m not sure I merit such.”

His face softened just a smidgen and he said, “I am confident you are outvoted two to one.”

Well, that is just an unfair thing to say when I am not allowed to either hug him or call him honey-names. I was probably about to giggle or say something cringe-inducing when I saved myself by blurting, “Shit! I better go” - waving gracelessly toward the door - “thank you okay bye.”

I’m so damn smooth that one day I’m going to slip on something. Wait, I did that recently.

Now, what in the Void is going on outside?

Chapter End Notes

I wrote a Solas story. Utterly terrifying; I hope it's up to par.

While I remember: do you have any suggestions for tags or summary thingies that will help other darlings like yourself find this work? It's super hard for me to read the label from inside the jar.
Wagons.

A dozen of them, piled to a staggering height. Boxes and crates and sacks and wrapped bundles and a hundred useful things.

Bull’s Chargers had dug out Haven and brought it to us. They were all grinning ear-to-ear with the full awareness of their deed - even the elf who would like to murder us all in our sleep.

At first all I saw was assorted doodads and catapult parts, which I’m sure are important but did nothing to explain the feeling of the crowd. And then I caught a glimpse of the rear wagons.

Trunks.

Par l'ongle incarné du Créateur, they found our belongings.

At this realisation, I wielded my hips and elbows with no mercy in order to rejoin Lady Josephine because I have read far too much history to not want order established as soon as possible in the presence of the sudden lunging hunger I was surrounded by.

The Commander, a man with an uncomfortably intimate relationship with some of that history, was already deploying troops as I moved. They started yelling politely at the crowd to hold their fuckin horses, please.

Lady J began to point and assign us, all of us understanding the job. I’m sure Lady Josephine’s continued determination to Treat Me Gently influenced my designation.

A flatbed wagon, axles groaning under the weight of ironmongery. Prosaic, unsexy, and as far as possible from the noise. While a part of me insists that I am absolutely fine and tough and also immortal, the sensible sections were very grateful for her decision.

“Right, who is in charge here?” I yelled cheerfully at the three soldiers.

Two of them eyed each other and then the smarter - Carson, one of our few dwarves in the military, not particularly nice but very efficient - replied carefully, “You are?”

“Well done.” I sent one of them as a runner to fetch Harritt and my writing table, then waved down the closest Charger, a dwarf woman with some damn impressive scars and an axe bigger than she was.

“’Ello, gorgeous,” I grinned at her and she leered companionably back. The crowd, forced to act in an orderly manner, were already feeling less like an incipient mob and more like they were waiting for the parade to arrive. It was a contagious feeling; Cole was beginning to giggle a bit.

I asked her, “Do you know if this wagon has anything other than forge-y stuff and weapons?”

“We filled in the space with some extra shit, but nah. That’s most of it.”

“Cheers. And thank you.”
Her eyebrows suggested all sorts of ways I could show my appreciation, none of them sincere, and I laughed and we introduced ourselves. She’s called Cicatrice, which is one of Bull’s better efforts.

She was telling me - and the guards, who were nearly falling over in an attempt to listen in without leaving their post - about fighting a few not-quite-dead Red Templars they’d found buried in the snow, when Harritt arrived. He listened too: it was a hell of a tale.

Cicatrice winked as she left and I told her she was adorable. Sometimes making friends is just that simple.

“Alright Emma, wot’ve we got here?”

“Let’s find out!”

The process was simple enough. Nothing was allowed off the wagon bed until I had it listed. Thereafter it went into one of three piles: the armoury, the forge, and Harritt’s forge. This was news to me. I mean, I’d seen the guards on the door near the Not-Throne, but I hadn’t gotten around to finding out what was behind it.

Harritt was so pleased at surprising me that when he added mysterious hints about being joined in the space I didn’t have the heart to tell him that negotiations with Dagna, daughter of Janar, concluded a few days ago and I was already looking forward to meeting anyone who can fit that much personality into three lines of contract bargaining.

Once there was room, I was awkwardly boosted up onto the flatbed so I could hear the descriptions more accurately. It was crowded, full of dangerous pointy things, lacking anywhere to sit, and it was amazing.

From up here, I could see.

While Harritt made piles of weapon head (glaive) and weapon head (halberd), I watched an impromptu laundry being set up using barrels and other improvised wash-tubs. I think mages were heating the water; steam billowed everywhere. Into the tubs went rugs, wall hangings, and most of all our reclaimed clothes. There were the occasional cries of “Be careful with that, damn your eyes!” but most of all there was laughter.

Laughter everywhere.

Laughing at mistakes, at happy accidents, at finding this in the pile… but more and more just laughing because the joy has to find an outlet somewhere. I knew already that this most of us would describe this as the year Satinalia was a week early.

Cole, my darling heart, was falling-over drunk on it within half an hour.

Standing in a careful patch of free space, I began to sing as I worked.

Chapter End Notes

Word Nerdery:

Par l'ongle incarné du Créateur - By the Maker's ingrown nail. Also, because I love making terrible puns across as many languages as possible, 'incarné' also means 'embodied'. Obscure divinity jokes!
I had cheesecake with my family on Sunday and spent some time trying to explain why my readers are the best and why this frivolous little project matters. I said a lot of nice things about you in the attempt.
Many hours later, and most of the staff had disappeared to lovingly stroke their long-losts and also string up improvised washing lines in every single piece of spare space.

A large percentage of them were also getting quite drunk with the Chargers.

My belongings hadn’t been among the fortunate ones, about which I would undoubtedly be very sad later. For now I was too happy to be able to muster up much grief.

Gareth and I had just finished off the last task - sorting a sackful of paperwork into three categories we named File, Fix, and Burn.

The sack they’d been in had previously contained ground meal, which is a substance with a lust for adventure; we were covered liberally in the stuff to the point where my hair had changed colour and my eyelashes felt odd.

I hurried off toward my guest room, to squeeze in a truly sybaritic bath before dinner.

From behind a dripping curtain came a cultured voice. “A moment of your time?”

First I startled, the genuine kind where you jump a little and your hands go up in defensive rabbit claws. Unfortunately, this also got me an inhale of dust. I sneezed like branches breaking - kah kah kah - in a long chain that went on forever.

Once forever ended, I looked up with watery eyes. Lord Dorian Pavus looked understandably amused at the show, but not malicious.

So I said, as if there had been no interruption, “How may I be of service, my lord?”

He smiled. He has a very lovely smile. “I have the terrible habit of listening to gossip,” he confided. “I simply cannot resist. It’s often gratifying, and occasionally educational.”

Did he mean when it’s less ‘did you hear what that crazy bitch did to our dear Lord Dorian’ and more ‘I don’t know what he said exactly, but we all know he had it coming’? No, wait, he’d undoubtedly heard that and written it off as the usual commoner partisanship.

His twinkle increased. “Certainly it was thrilling to hear all the descriptions of my posterior. But I also heard the other gossip you’re currently featured in.” His face grew somber and I remembered the reason for all the labour. There’s a damn good heart under those bad habits. “I am dreadfully sorry if it’s true.”

“Thank you.”

“And since I do have a reasonably decent mind, it was simple enough to make a few deductions. Clearly you’d had an unspeakable night. And Blackwall gave you comfort, yes?”

“He spent the entire night teaching me self-defense techniques.” I said this calmly, merely passing on information.

“Truly? That’s… that’s quite impressive. I may have underestimated the big thu- ahem.” I didn’t
giggle, but it was a close-run thing. “Back to my point. Under the circumstances, I forgive you,” he ended magnanimously.

“That’s exceedingly gracious of you, my lord.”

There was a pause. And of course he had to push his luck.

“Perhaps there is something you would like to say?” he hinted.

Sucker.

“Why yes, my lord,” I replied with perfect courtesy. “I forgive you for your petty and spiteful words about Blackwall.”

“Ah. Well, that’s -”

“I am not finished, my lord!” I interrupted him sweetly. “I forgive you for being so self-involved that you assumed my lapse was about you. Also for twice replying to perfectly civil words with rudeness.”

If I had delivered this with even one grain of sarcasm or malice, he would have known how to reply. But I was so kind, and so completely sincere, that he was struck mute for once.

“I forgive you for regarding me as a convenient repository for your personal problems. I forgive you for assuming that taking your abuse is part of my job description even when I am off duty. Lastly, I forgive you for almost certainly not even knowing my name until the gossipers told you.”

While he dug to find some appropriate response, I curtsied and left.

I managed to hold off on snickering until I was in my room.

Chapter End Notes

Emma wasn’t the only one snickering.

Heck, I’m doing it right now.
Forget Vanadirthavean. Sera Should Call ME Inky

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Even without the threat of racially-driven drama, payroll day is always a long one. This one was dramatically more so than usual.

Firstly, there were the very large number of people who forgot - despite being told on multiple occasions - that we had scheduled this payday earlier than usual to avoid clashing with Satinalia.

Secondly, there were the people who simply had to tell us about the massive snowfall last night. The first time I was informed I was fascinated; I’d been nowhere near a window since before dawn so I’d had no idea. The fiftieth repetition was considerably less enthralling.

Thirdly, of course, were those with crippling hangovers. Most of them were cheerful and unrepentant about it, which was pleasant enough, but either way it made questions like, “Do you want the usual amount of money sent to your family?” take five times as long to answer.

It wasn’t all bad.

I received my back pay, with none taken out for the time I spent with a bag over my head. That was an unexpected bonus.

Lydia had been one of the lucky ones, and was being nigh-obnoxiously pleasant to everyone.

Also, Aster dropped by. She squeezed in next to me on my bench, received a smooch on the head, then quietly occupied herself by organising my silvers into piles of ten.

“You don’t have to help, you know,” I told her.

“Mama likes it when I help.”

I worked hard not to wince. “I know, darling. But I am just glad to have you here.”

“Okay,” she replied and kept on.

I invited her to stay for lunch with me, but she had to look after her siblings. I kissed her again as she left.

And then, just as we were wrapping up, a summons.

Ugh. Stairs.

***

Leliana was talking with one of the assets I haven’t checked yet. Ritts? I think that’s her.

That pushy raven startled the shit out of me by landing on my shoulder as I settled in to wait and cawed demandingly until I stroked his feathers. I let Cole direct the proceedings and was amply rewarded with the continued use of my eyes.

The raven decided to stay in place when it was our turn to report. I’m not certain why that amused Leliana so much, but it clearly did.
She regarded me searchingly from head to toe then nodded. I felt oddly proud at passing the examination.

“Cole, please,” she began.

Cole and I shuffled around like two people trying to pass in a narrow aisle and then I was watching proceedings from inside my suite.

“The touch of her hand,” he said. Leliana made a sudden ah-yes-that-was-it face. Oh, is he talking about the song? I hummed along as I observed.

She turned away to her desk for a moment then passed Cole a small bag. The raven tried to peck it.

“What’s this?” he asked. Oh. Oh!

“These are your wages, Cole. You are my asset, yes?”

My honey boy was utterly flummoxed. He jingled the bag a few times as if that might help.

Don’t fret, Cole-love. Put it in the third pouch and I’ll show you how to use it later.

Obediently, he did. I sternly reminded myself not to wonder whether he gets paid more than I do.

“And now Emma again, please.”

Shuffle, shuffle. I saluted brightly.

“Your room is ready.”

***

For a while I wondered why Leliana was escorting us in person - it’s the same room, after all. Surely she could just hand me the key and let me figure it out from there?

No. Very much no.

Our new door lock requires that you push down on one particular bolt as the key is used.

“What happens if you don’t?” I asked nervously, visions of swinging blades and poison gas rampaging through my head.

She smiled. “Bells. Cacophony. And many, many guards.”

“Can. Can I hug you right now?”

She checked the empty corridor before saying yes. (Hilarious.) I hugged her as enthusiastically as chain mail will allow while thanking her for installing the most absolutely perfect security I could think of.

I didn’t overstay my welcome. She was both very pleased and quite alarmed by being embraced voluntarily. It’s been… awhile.

Then we both made a few ahem noises and got back to explaining my door.

She checked my technique, gave me the key, vanished.

I opened the door.
Mercy and fire and glory on high.

Chapter End Notes

Author Meanderings:
1. We have a new reader whose name is Lydia. I swear that any resemblance to actual Lydias, past or present, is completely unintentional. I'm sure most of you are wonderful people.

2. Cole being perplexed by his pay is super adorable and I thank my brain for providing the image.

3. I'm still operating at slow speeds due to a combination of Mysterious Health Extra Bullshit, supporting a beloved through one of Those breakups, and a few plot wranglings.

If it comes down to it, would you prefer only one chapter a week, or a short break?
Do Not Cry. DO NOT CRY.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The bed. Let’s start there.

On the floor, one of Circe’s most gorgeous rag rugs. I’ve watched; they take twenty hours to make, easily.

Same headboard, but the supports were new. I ran one hand under the crossbeam, touched Tara’s tiny engraved hedge-witch sigils. Protection. Health. Good Sleep. Whether they have any occult significance I could not possibly tell you, but they contain a magic all of their own.

Her husband Steven had coaxed the labourers who stuffed the mattress. Make it full, I could hear him say. Comfortable. Make it smell good. A success on all fronts. Heather? Yes, they’d used heather for the stuffing, and doubled the canvas so none would come through.

On that, one of the sheepskins Lace had brought with her from her parent’s farm. For warmth, two extra-thick blankets care of Shannon and Betsy.

And the please-don’t-cry-yet icing on the hold-it-together cake?

Tara and Steven, like many large families, use copious amounts of sharing and hand-me-downs to get by, but each child has one toy that is entirely their own. They have names from Doll to Two-Sin-Double-Kin-Wobbly-Goes-The-Basket (a name which must always be pronounced in its entirety). And because I knew this, I understood the enormity of seeing Arlessa Eagle propped against my pillow.

Do not cry yet. DO NOT.

Look at the desk instead.

Not super helpful, actually.

New chair is nice. The ink, parchment and quill had been replaced - Gareth’s work, there. Some hard ginger biscuits care of Clive, nested on a small package of truffles personally hand-wrapped by Lady J. Tucked in the same corner -

ne pleure pas tout de suite, bon sang

- as I had left it was a rolled letter, and Harden’s imitation of my mother’s handwriting for the “Not To Be Opened Before Satinalia” was really quite good. It even had the three silvers inside it.

An unguent jar with a note in looped smudgy writing:

###

Apply every night before bed, the scars should be mostly faded in a month.

Love Jonah and Gloriana, who apparently disappeared back to her chantry because one of her babies is giving birth she really needs to stop calling them her babies when they’re that old

###
Above that, a new bookshelf care of Blackwall. The volumes were all ones on topics I had mentioned wanting to learn more about, and inside every one I could sense an abundance of corrections and snippy notes in the margins. Ah, fenor.

Deep breath.

I moved the books aside and hidden behind them was a small detailed painting.

The lines and colours are simple, prosaic.

One boy, gangly and too thin, face partially shaded by an extraordinary hat. One hand slightly behind his back, as if holding something hidden. He is staring intently at you.

He holds the hand of a short plump woman. Forgettably ordinary; you’ve seen her in every crowd. But her smile lights up her whole face.

Nunc flere prohibetur!

It’s a clever statement, when you desperately think about it to stave off drowning in your feelings. A hidden painting in a locked room, secrets behind secrets. And what is it of? Just two people.

Just two people. Nothing to fear.

Oh, fenor.

I slid the books gently back into place and turned to the corner of the room. Finally allowed the squeal to escape that had been building since I opened the door.

My trunk! My trunk had been one of the lucky ones.

It’s a massive scarred old beast that originally belonged to one of my seafaring great-great-aunts, and it opens out like a book. In one half, my clothes. Oh Creators be kind, all but one of them are there, clean and pressed and familiar. In the other half, drawers of cosmetics and books and correspondence and three lucky shells and everything else I’d felt necessary to take with me from Ostwick.

I opened a drawer at random and pulled out my shoehorn. There are a thousand like it in every market across Thedas, but this one. This one was mine.

Nearly done, don’t cry yet.

Nestled on top of my boots - holy shit I have boots again - was a wrapped parcel with a tag that read, “With Love From Antonia (The Seamstress). The Others Helped.” That sweet garrulous darling, does she think I won’t remember who she is without the clue?

I tore the wrapper and uncovered a very beautiful cloak. Sapphire blue lining, hood, buttons to the waist, plus those arm slits that enable you to write without taking it off. And the colour! A sea-green that made me feel happy just to look at. Plus I think it’s waterproofed. It’s the most perfect cloak anyone could possibly make for me.

My thumb ran over the cloth and I stared at the colour. I tried to make sense of this room. It was rather like getting bulky furniture through a narrow doorway: I turned the thought over and over but it didn’t fit.

Am I truly so loved?

yes
Into the memory palace. I ran to Cole.

We hugged fiercely. If we’d used words they might’ve sounded like: thank you thank you you were scared so beloved I was scared so safe fury fire want to stop shout kill here and now my lovely the stalking monsters they don’t matter the night and the never not any more couldn’t say it I understand you were so heavy I was and so brave my darling heart so much so much

It was better than that. Clearer. My honey boy told me all the overwhelming confusing variety of emotions he’d felt in the last days and how he’d hidden them from me because I already had so much to deal with. I told him about healing and wholeness and gratitude and love, always love.

And finally, I let myself cry.

Chapter End Notes

This was exactly as fun to write as you'd think.

Word Nerdery:
I got to learn the correct version of "not yet" in French for this, so that's lovely. Also, "bon sang" works as a "damn it" but the literal translation is "good blood". I love languages, they are so weird.
Projections Of Yourself Still Like Having Their Hair Stroked

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once I’d finished hugging Cole and telling him how much of a blessing he was, I popped back into my body - is that a thing I just said? I am getting quite casual about this - to take care of important business.

First, CLOTHES CLOTHES MERCI AND HUZZAH

I tore off my robe and threw it in the laundry pile. Perhaps after a month at the bottom of a drawer I would no longer be sick of the sight of it and wear it again.

Then, goodbye terrible smalls! I put on my third-favourite underclothes with squealing joyful noises and much patting. Then one of my best dresses. I felt so much myself again in a way I had not managed for the last month. My thickest stockings! My most comfortable boots! My new cloak!

I hugged myself and danced around the small space, simply enjoying the swish of the material and the way it all felt completely right on me. If I prayed I’d have been doing it.

Then to start my thank-yous.

First, a note:

###

Dearest Lace,

In whatever Maker-forsaken wilderness you have been sent to, I hope you are as warm as I will be tonight. Bless you a thousand times, kind heart.

Much love,

Emma

P.S. You will be back by Tuesday, right?

###

Second, I had no chance of making it to the military camp soon, so:

###

Jonah,

Now I am your patient? This means my rôles have included servant, bedfellow, student, acolyte, needle-threader, comrade and joke appreciator.

And friend, of course. That one always.

Lots of love,

Emma
Finally, I decided that Solas would very much appreciate avoiding witnessing two emotional breakdowns in two days, so I took out another sheet of paper.

After a small consultation, I wrote:

Solas,

The words in our hands are river-worn stones. They are small and plain but we hope they suffice.

We thank you.

We thank you.

We are grateful for your gifts.

We cherish you.

Cole and Emma

it’s a poem

You’re a poem.

yes?

And I’m in a very silly mood.

I missed you

I missed me too, honey.

Right, I have a little bit of time and a dozen people to thank.

The recipe seemed very straightforward:

1. Find the benefactor.
2. Thank them in specific terms.
3. Praise their gift.
4. Praise them.
5. Ignore all attempts to downplay either.
6. Deliver as much affection as they will enjoy.
7. Leave.

This approach lasted exactly as long as it took Circe to open her door.

She instantly burst into tears.

Ugly, heaving, completely uncharacteristic, shoulder-heaving sobbing.

What the what? I panicked for a moment. This is Circe, who has never even smiled in public.

Aaaagh! Then, absolutely hilariously, I went into the ready stance for a moment. That did the trick.
I herded us both inside her room, closed the door, and hugged the crap out of her while she began to incoherently explain in Orlesian.

“You, my dear, are - Harden is the one always funny, yes? Always making jokes and it is lovely. But you are the one - how can I say it? You are the one who smiles when I pass your desk. Always you look up and smile at me, yes? You are a light, a light in the passage of my day. And since the bad men, your light has been so dim. I worry that it is gone, perhaps forever. It would be a tragedy to have this lovely light grow small. But you are at my door and you are beaming, you are radiant and so I cry. It is foolish, but I am so glad.”

And of course now I was crying, too, but I was smiling from ear to ear while I did it and telling her (also in Orlesian, I am rusty but suddenly that did not matter) that she is marvellous, and I hope that she always knows it, that she too is a light in my day, and she began complaining that she knows she is too quiet and people do not enjoy her company the way they enjoy my warmth and I replied that is bullshit and that sparking that small gleam in her eye is a triumph I would trade for nothing, nothing you hear me? that she is perfect and I adore her and would have said so after a month of working with her if I had the courage and she was still crying and hugging me and I was hugging her and I hadn’t even managed to mention the rug yet.

Eventually, we tapered down to sniffles. I had comprehensively cried my way through Chandler’s handkerchief but that was fine because I owned ones of my own again and so I had another to dry my face with.

“Don’t you dare,” I said sternly. “Don’t you dare be embarrassed about this later. It’s fine if you want to go back to being undemonstrative, that has never and will never be a problem, you darling, and I will meet you at whatever amount of affection you wish me to display, but don’t you dare decide that you need to put some extra distance between us. The rug is very beautiful and thank you for it, but the best gift has been this and please please do not take it back, yes?”

She looked thoroughly sheepish and then promised that she would not. I hugged her again while I had the chance.

Then I said, “I have a dozen wonderful people to thank, and thus I must away. Good night, chérie.”

She didn’t smile, because she never, ever does. But her eyes sparkled at the endearment.

Snow be damned, I was warm all over as I skipped away.

Chapter End Notes

I have new painkillers and I am writing again, albeit more slowly than I wish. Hooray!

If I find I am only five chapters ahead of publishing I will go down to one chapter a week, but currently we seem to be holding stable around ten chapters and while that makes me inexplicably anxious I’m going to go with it.

Be kind to yourself today, sweetness. You are cherished.
There was nowhere near enough time to see everyone, especially if they burst into tears at me. In fact, there was really only one more stop I could afford to make if I wanted to be on time for dinner. Since Steven was firmly of the “No-one begins until we’re all seated” school of manners, I would be a monster of the first order if I ran late.

So, one stop. Better make it a good one, yes?

(Oh hey, I’m thinking in Orlesian. Haven’t done that in a while.)

You’re quiet in there, honey.

just as I am. just as I am. never did I expect to hear such words

Bless her, I should have said them sooner. Perhaps we should get them tattooed on ourselves.

I have some money if you want?

Well done, Cole-love. That is indeed one of the things it could be used for.

here, you should take it

Void, no, honey boy. It’s your problem to deal with.

He did that but-I-don’t-wanna fidget and I laughed.

Oh! I can see why everyone wanted to tell me about the snow.

On the coast it snows rarely, and in spare amounts that are instantly tramped into brown slush. Haven had more, but the wind tended to push it into piles intermixed with identical brown slush.

In the courtyard the wind could not reach. I suddenly understood the phrase “a blanket of snow” in a way I’d never grasped before. There it was, white and thick and… blanket-y.

Wow.

Paths had been dug, criss-cross, but no slush had managed to form. Every damn inch of it was white and snow-covered and gods-be-damned blanket-y! I wanted to go find a staff member who was trying to do payroll and tell them about it at length.

“You don’t get it,” I’d say. “It’s so beshitting blanket-y.”

I ran through the linen to the lighted inn.

***

First, I found Gareth and his ale. He is one of those people who likes to drink without ever getting drunk.

We exchanged our usual rib-cracking hug and he opened his mouth.
“Nope,” I said promptly. He tried again.

“Also nope.”

He grinned and said, “I was happy to be of service, moppet.”

“Much better,” I replied and hugged him again. “The quill is gorgeous. What kind of feather is it?”

“Falcon! Climbed up to the nest a few years back. You like it?”

“I love it.” I hugged him a third time and then we’d said everything we needed to. We are very efficient that way.

***

Blackwall was present - while he has overcome many of the terrible habits of his Life Before, I don’t believe he has defeated his attraction to free beer - and our interaction was… something I needed to think over in depth later.

But I had something more urgent on my mind.

What the fuck is The Iron Bull doing right now?

Chapter End Notes

Hello, new readers! I continue to be intensely grateful about how many people's days I am apparently making a bit better with this work.
Surrounded by his Chargers, this I expected. He has tonnes of mother-henning to catch up on. But the lapful of sweetie was…

I need to figure this out.

I would wager all my money that he knew I would be over now-ish to thank him inarticulately and at length. But the dwarf lass on his knee and the posture and his demeanour? All of it said very loudly: Keep Your Distance. He hadn’t even looked at me and if he didn’t know I was here I’d eat one of my new books.

Why? Why would he want to…

… keep me very firmly at an arm’s length like perhaps he wanted to have hot sweaty sex with me in - oh my - a day and a half which would be completely impossible if I can’t keep the illusion of mild friendliness intact?

Oh.

Ohhhhh.

Hee.

How’m I going to deal with this?

I smiled at a fond memory and got to work.

***

“How hello there,” I drawled, as archly as I could manage. “It’s the hero of the hour! The glorious Iron Bull.”

His smile was deeply appreciative. I’d played it correctly. “In the flesh.”

“In-deed.” I was pretty much a caricature of myself mixed with far too much Chandler, but I didn’t care one bit. He knew what I was actually saying. “I don’t know if any of us have words to adequately thank you. I know I don’t.”

“It’s fine.”

“Oh, it’s far better than fine. You know?” He knew.

“Anyway, you certainly have your hands full, so I shall dash. I simply wanted to…” Fenedhis. This was getting difficult. “You know. Inform you of my gratitude. Which is just killingly profound.”

“It was my pleasure.” Oh, beautiful. What are you doing? That husky voice is completely unfair and I am barely getting through this and -

- and you’re struggling too, aren’t you? Miséricorde, you are.
My breath caught and I lost all my artifice. His mask grew even better, as it does.

In the absence of any better options, I smiled my most winsome smile and walked away.

Success?

Chapter End Notes

How many hoops would YOU be willing to jump through for the chance to ride the Bull?
I had a child on each knee.

This wasn’t strictly necessary; there are nice long benches in Tara and Steven’s kitchen that fit the family plus one guest commodiously. But Flora, the youngest, was deep in the charming dictator phase many four-year-olds go through and had imperiously ordered me to act as her throne.

And Glory. I haven’t mentioned Glory yet.

Let me start with the superficial. All of these children - being a combination of their tall, dark and aquiline mother and their scrawny, pale and vividly ginger father - are an arresting bunch. But Glory is going to be beautiful. She already is beautiful.

Her beauty is by far the least interesting thing about her.

It took less than five minutes for me to decide I needed to put aside a silver a month in order to help her fund whatever particular method she decides to use to take over the world.

Oh! those silvers are in my trunk.

picking up gold dust. one glitter at a time

Yes indeed!

One of the many reasons I like children is how intense they tend to get about, well, everything.

Glory has all that intensity plus all the energy plus a - to me - gobsmacking level of bravery. No, bravery isn’t the right word.

It’s… to me, if I see a problem, my process is like this:

1. See problem.
2. Decide what to do about it.
   1. Debate endlessly if more than one feasible solution exists.
3. Analyse all the complications of the issue, potential and actual.
   1. Then think about the complications of any solutions.
4. Freak out.
5. Do nothing.

Cole has made improvements here, mostly by communicating the volume of hurt and fear and sorrow, which is so clearly more important than my own crippling self-consciousness that I have, for the last month, been dramatically more capable of skipping Step Four and just damn well doing something.

I still have a backlog of thirty-eight years of good-intentioned inaction of which I am heartily ashamed. And I’ve gotten better at it over time - when I was a child it was worse.

Glory’s process is:

1. See problem.
She is bubbly and cheerful and an absolute terror and I adore her.

She’s also the owner of Arlessa Eagle, who I was attempting to return. I had not yet succeeded.

“What happened?” she asked. I received two matching looks of parental panic from either end of the table.

“Two men ruined my room and tried to hurt me,” I said.

“Yuck. Why?”

“They thought I’d hurt their friend.”

“Oh. Did you?”

“Yes. I got him arrested.”

“Did he do something bad?”

“Very bad.”

Glory thought. “So his friends were right because they were protecting their friend, but they were wrong ‘cause he wasn’t worth protecting?”

I smiled. “That is definitely a valid perspective.”

“What happened to the men?”

“They got arrested too.”

“Cool.” She asked curiously, “Are you okay?”

“I am now, honey.”

“Cool.” She nodded. “You can give Arlessa Eagle back, if you want to.”

I did, and thanked her again for her extraordinary kindness. She brushed it off, not rudely, but because to her donating her most prized possession to make someone feel better is an obvious decision and not worth being praised for.

Two silvers a month is more appropriate, I think.

***

There was simple food. Cuddles. Many songs, appreciatively received. (There may be a compliment higher than your audience throwing a tantrum as they are carried away, but if so I do not know what it is.) Sticky kisses goodnight. Then the adults sitting by the fire, talking quietly about nothing significant.

You know, a good night.

After I left, I spent so much time convincing myself that going to the inn was a terrible idea - I had said an adequate thank you, just a quick hug is not going to happen, you will fuck this up
guaranteed, leave it alone for mercy’s sake - that I actually got halfway to the guest suite before I realised my error.

You couldn’t have told me?

told you what?

Never mind.

To my actual room. Key. Remember the bolt trick - huh, now I have two of those. Lock trick?

Open door.

What in the actual fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Author Meanderings:
You might be wondering, "Why do we have two interesting young girls in this story now? What purpose does Glory serve?"

The answer is I don't know. I just invented her a year ago as an adjunct to Tara while I was fleshing out the friends Emma had before the story began.

If this was a conventional novel, Glory might find herself edited out in the second draft. But this is a different and interestingly inefficient one here, where I plant a bunch of seeds that might never come to any fruition.

So Glory, as marvellous as she is, may never be anything other than background. We'll have to find out.
Chandler, comfortably seated on my bed, smiling with his usual urbane gleam.

I turned my back on him and faced the hook next to the door, began to unclasp my cloak. A monumental task. My mouth took its chance and raced off unsupervised.

“Most people, I’d ask how you got in here. In your case I assume you just told the door, ‘I. Am. Chandler.’ and it swung right o-”

“I fucked up, pet.”

The harp-string tension in his words. My hands froze on the fabric. Don’t move don’t talk don’t do anything that might make this even harder for him.

“As well as performing a truly comprehensive listing of my failings, the massive Qunari who cornered me this afternoon provided a solution to the impasse we have been in, and most likely I should lead with that. Get things put right first, then take advantage of the improved situation to move to the topic of how I have been an utter prat.”

“Sounds like a solid plan,” I said quietly, back still turned. “Smart.”

“Indeed, which is why I thought of it.” I grinned a smidgen. “But not…” He sounded perplexed, in new and unfamiliar territory. “Not… right.”

Ah.

I finished hanging my cloak, patting the fabric just so.

Then I turned around.

And I waited.

***

It was like watching a striptease.

The first layer was perfect, unshakeable confidence.

Underneath that, chilly hauteur.

Then wary brilliance.

Mask after mask after mask after mask tumbled to the ground.

And then there was just Chandler, stripped of artifice and polish and ironical inflections. Fidgety, self-conscious, ungraceful. No performance, no defenses. Less handsome but absolutely beautiful.

“I’m terribly sorry, Emma.”

“Oh, darling,” I said. I started to cry for no reason I could explain. Perhaps it was his sincerity and
my appreciation of the impossibly great courage and effort it had taken.

Strong arms. Great shuddering breaths.

We held each other for a long time.

***

Have you ever watched someone decide which persona to wear like they were choosing an outfit? It’s quite fascinating.

Chandler went with a subdued look, sincere but with a mocking gleam in the eye. He accessorised with a warm smile. It was an excellent ensemble.

After face-washing and handkerchief redistribution, we both sat on the bed, companionably close. “So what’s this impasse thingy?” I asked.

“Such precise language, you must be a scribe.” I poked him. “Responds to critique with violence? I am incorrect. You are clearly an academic.”

I snorted.

“Now to this… impasse… thingy. I have been informed that the solution is to advise you that you are not able to solve the problem.”

Huh? Who else could…

Oh.

Well now I feel stupid.

Chandler continued. “Clearly you understand. Marvellous, because I am lamentably ignorant.”

I smiled. “Wanna meet my imaginary friend?”

***

I wandered around the memory palace, feeling a bit stupid. I can’t reassure Chandler about my reaction to his secrets, but there is of course someone who already knows the aforementioned secrets and is the world’s leading expert on Emma.

It seems so obvious in retrospect.

To be fair, I’ve been a little preoccupied lately. I probably would have figured it out eventually.

Right?

Time for a distraction! This is a good time to start an addition to the memory palace I’ve been planning. We need a wide, protected place. The palace’s archery green would be perfect, but not since that fistfight. Never did find out what that was about, but the image of blood from a broken nose spraying over the linen really spoilt the ambience from then on.

Hmm. Oh! Diligence’s field! That would be perfect.

I started to visualise.
“What’s this?” asked Cole. He waved to the tiny tortoise ploughing the right corner of the field. The tortoise nodded without slowing.

(I don’t think I meant a copy of Diligence to be included. But once I finished imagining the field there they were, so.)

“It’s an experiment, Cole-love. Remember when we talked about triage?”

He furrowed his brow. He really didn’t. I patted him reassuringly.

“Well, sometimes one problem hurts one person. Like a stone in their shoe.”

He got that.

“And sometimes one problem hurts lots of people. Like a stone in the path people keep tripping over. One stone, lots of bloodied knees.”

Still with me.

“So in order to find that second kind of problem, we’re going to group causes.”

Utterly lost him there.

“Go grab a few books from the same shelf, honey, and I’ll demonstrate.”

He returned quickly. The bakers. I rifflered through the index to the entry titled Physical Pains.

“Burnt her hand opening the third oven - the handle is too thin.” I conjured a miniature version of the oven door and a plinth to put it on. I added a small note that said, “Jill”.

I took the second book and repeated the actions. Yep, it’s happened to Quinze too. I added a second note with his name.

Third, fourth, fifth books and two more names added.

“So now we have four people burnt by the same inadequate handle. We fix it, lots of people will benefit. You see, honey?”

He didn’t - couldn’t - understand the logic of it, but grasped the idea that people would be helped. Thus, approval.

“He believed me.”

I’d been far too afraid to ask. “Thank you.” I gave him one of my best hugs then left him in a wide field with a plinth and an agrarian tortoise.

As one does.

Chapter End Notes

100 chapters! *throws tiny amount of confetti, realises that no-one else can pick it up,
When I started this project, I figured the reward would be a feeling of accomplishing something despite all my significant health limitations.

But honestly, the absolute best part is this: I have been reliably informed that this frivolous little bit of comprehensively unpublishable verbiage is making people's days brighter with its existence. I find praise pleasant, but every time I make ya'll happy I feel rainbows and puppies and daffodils. Your joy works much better than my painkillers.

So, thank you.
Officially This Is The Best Day Ever

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You know that thing when your friend is seeing someone you really don’t approve of and so you handle it by talking around them in conversations and generally kinda pretending they don’t exist?

Chandler’s been like that about Cole. Listen to him and you’d be forgiven for thinking my honey-boy’s name is Your *Polite Cough*.

So I wasn’t expecting they’d suddenly become besties or anything. I was still surprised by what I saw.

Chandler was horrified.

Not by Cole as a person, I was confident. Considering Chandler’s comedic inclinations, he likely found Cole - the endless supplier of straight lines - quite charming in a naive way.

Nope, he met a spirit of compassion and his reaction was horror.

How do I even begin to think about that? Mercy.

He read me - bien sûr - and said, “I warned you to run, pet.” His tone offered one last chance to do so.

Psh.

I replied as I had before, “Never gonna happen, lovely.” We smiled very adult complicated smiles at each other and finished kicking over the impasse.

The agreement was that I would perform his traitor checks differently to everyone else: by asking direct questions and using Cole to detect any lies or evasions. He said he’d worked with Cole to determine relevant filters and would permit the rest through.

It all seemed so damn simple now.

“Choose, pet. Boring business, or first gift.”

“Second gift, Chandler. You’ve already given me one.”

“I have no idea to what you are referring,” he lied airily.

I laughed. “You choose, lovely.”

“An excellent decision. Gift it is.”

My first (second) gift from Chandler was a haircut - which is a hilariously self-serving kind of thing from him - followed by a gurgle-inducing head and neck massage. I was a limp noodle, patiently listening to a firm series of instructions about how to best arrange my hair.

Then there were tiny pastries and wine, but only one glass because business.

“What are your loyalties, in order?”
“The Nightingale, myself, and the Inquisition.”

“Woah.”

“Pet, you don’t get to interrogate and comment.”

“Sorry. To whom do you owe favours?”

On and on. He was suggesting questions, which made it go smoother, and Cole gave a constant nod to his answers. I was nearly done when inspiration struck.

“If you learned a secret about an Inquisition member which does not threaten security, what would you do with it?”

“Tell the Nightingale if necessary. Smirk at them if humiliating. Generally feel smug, I expect.”

“Would you use it against them in any way?”

He chuffed. “No, pet. That would be unprofessional.”

“Splendid! It’s time for my third gift. Take off your boots and belt.”

He raised an eyebrow.

***

“You don’t mind, do you?” I asked. We were both snuggled in my bed under all the blankets. He was trying to pretend this wasn’t pleasant, but not very hard. “It’s just… okay, so there’s an Inquisition member who murdered her husband. And Leliana -”

“First name terms with the Nightingale, I see. Impressive.”

“Shh. So Leliana knows all about the murder and has decided it was a long time ago, and completely justified, and so she’s let it go. But she doesn’t know that the same Inquisition member would have a snifter of brandy every Sunday night into which she’d stirred a spoonful of her husband’s ashes.”

It’s rare that I genuinely startle Chandler, but this was one occasion. “Really.”

“Really! She drank all of them. Every bit. It took years and she drank her husband’s ashes and this is the kind of thing I know now and I really rather need someone to tell about this stuff because Cole is marvellous but he has no grasp whatsoever of context and so that entire thing seems perfectly normal to him but saint trou de cul it completely does my head in and I have to give that woman her paycheck and smile when I do it.”

Chandler started to laugh. I was pissed for one second but then I joined in. The whole thing is just so utterly ridiculous.

“She… drank… his ashes.” Chandler said. “Surely the bone fragments were a problem.”

I giggled, “She cut the roof of her mouth with a sharp bit once. It took a month to heal right.”

“One last stroke from beyond the grave!”

“What grave?” I giggled harder. "His last resting place was her privy!”

At that, we both started to roar. We kept it going by occasionally adding, “Privy!” and “Drank him!”
and a few times, just for nostalgia, “Ba-gawk!”

It was so glorious to be back.

Chapter End Notes

People are weird.

Word Nerdery:
saint trou de cul - holy butthole. I made this up myself, although when i was double-checking my grammar I found there’s an expression that would translate to "when St Asshole arrives" which is pretty great.
I Ask For Advice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I have never been attracted to so many people at one time.”

“Do tell,” Chandler purred.

“Because usually I need some solid emotional connection first, and it used to be that was a process that took time. But nowadays? I can forge one of those in seconds. And that isn’t the problem because so far as I can tell a number of those attractions are impossible or unreciprocated.”

“Surely you could know whether they are.”

“Technically. But that would be a massive abuse of Cole’s powers and he is under very strict orders not to tell me about that sort of thing. And like I said, it has been odd, but not actually a problem. Considering the variety it adds to my fantasies, overall I’d call it a win.”

Chandler snorted. Fenedhis, I’d missed laughing with him.

“But tonight things got complicated. It’s… about Blackwall.”

“Ah, the tormented toymaker.”

“Seriously?”

“The wounded woodworker,” he continued, grinning sadistically.

“He -”

“By ‘he’ you refer to the self-castigating carpenter, of course.”

I started to giggle. “No no, I mean the careworn carver.”

“The vanquished varnisher.”

“The sorrowful sander.”

“The… damn, I’m starting to run out of carpentry terms. Ah! The aching artisan.”

“Yes, okay. Him.” I was by this time completely relaxed and unselfconscious, which was of course Chandler’s aim. Knowing this did not reduce the efficacy.

“I assume that you know the man’s dread secret.”

“Yes, of course. I - is it okay if I tell you this bit first and ask for some advice then I tell you the backstory part and see if your advice changes?”

“I utterly fail to comprehend your logic, but yes.”

“Okay. Good. I’m going to just ramble this out.”

“Naturally.”
“You shit,” I said affectionately. “Right. I don’t have a type, per se, but if I did Blackwall would be it. And that isn’t an issue, because he is clearly the kind of man who respectfully flirts with any vaguely personable woman in his vicinity and I enjoy that, always have. Everything was fine. I fancy him, he flirts, all is well.”

“But something changed tonight.”

“Yup. So I went to the tavern as part of my grand tour of people-thanking and he was there, having a silent beer with a handful of Chargers, which is just fucking adorable. And he put up that bookshelf -” my hand appeared above the covers to point “- there. I go to thank him and he comes over to meet me. And I am absolutely expecting this to be awkward. I assume he’ll be the worst at accepting praise.”

Chandler nodded, understanding completely. “So when he’s all bluster and throat-clearing I assume I know what’s happening. But then I realise.” I swallowed. “He’s. Fuck, I can’t even say it. This is hilarious.”

“He is looking at you, absolutely glowing with joy - at him, no less - and he’s thinking, ‘Damnation, this woman is gorgeous.’”

I hid my face and nodded, blushing.

“Pet, forgive me for being dense, but I utterly fail to see why this is a problem. You fancy him. He fancies you. Go have beardy babies together.”

“But I can’t!” I wailed. “I can’t be intimate with someone who doesn’t know about Cole, and if I tell anyone who isn’t on the approved list my stay of execution will be… reconsidered, and Blackwall is an assigned priority. I have to spend time with him. A lot of time. When I thought my attraction only went one way, I could manage that easy-peasy.”

Light dawned. “But denying an attraction once you know it’s mutual is a different matter.”

“Mercy, yes. I have zero experience in this arena and I am in so much trouble!”

“You needn’t worry.” I glared at him. “No, I am serious, pet. He’d never act on his feelings. You are far too pure.”

I scoffed. “I’m far too fucking what now?”

He smiled. “Not virginal. But when he looks at you he sees someone much too good for him. I promise you that unless you strip yourself naked and paint, ‘No seriously, please have sex with me,’ on your breasts -”

“I’d have to write small.”

Habitual glare. “- he will never make a move. You will possibly be uncomfortable, but you will be fine.”

I pondered and checked with Cole, who agreed (albeit in much different terms). I relaxed some more. “You make things seem so simple, lovely. It’s very comforting.”

“Since I am being so comforting I shall skip that tempting opening you just handed me.”

“Cheers.”
“As long as you tell me the dark secret.”

So I did.

I started with a rainy promontory in the Storm Coast and a man changing names. Chandler failed to grasp why he’d made such a choice.

I explained, “If asked, he’d tell you sensible answers. But I think the more relevant fact is that he’d spent the last six months drinking to blackout and picking unwinnable fights.”

“Second-hand suicide. I see. Because…”

“Because he is Thom Rainier.”

“Ah. That makes sense.”

I glared at him. “Really? That’s all you’re going to give me? I tell you this massive dark secret and you just say ‘It makes sense’?”

He sighed patiently. “I am truly the wrong audience for this, pet. But here, I shall humour you.”

He opened his eyes comically wide and gasped, “Thom Rainier! The monster that slew General Callier and his entire family! Oh woe! Such a man within our walls, whatever shall we do!”

“Oh shut up.”

“Honestly, the only interesting part to me is why you still find him attractive.”

“Because he isn’t that man. He did the impossible, Chandler.”

He pondered and acknowledged the point. “It’s… mildly impressive, I grant you.” I glared harder. “Fine, it is extremely impressive. Rarer than an honest grain merchant. I assume that’s what we’re working on.”

We. I liked that word. I liked it a lot.

“Yes, and I am in desperate need of advice how to proceed.”

“Ah, meddling. I do so love a good meddle.”

We spent the next hour or so planning, which required me to describe all of our interactions in as much depth as I could recollect and then listening in appalled fascination as he told me how to proceed from now on. His plan was… very Chandler.

Then we took a break for bodily necessities and more pastries, before wordlessly returning to bed. We rearranged the snuggling and got warm again before I had the courage to ask about my other most vexing issue.

Chapter End Notes

Chandler’s overdone reaction cracks me up every time.

So, bad news, my sweetlings: I’m still sick. (Sicker than usual. Sick +2, if you will.)
We're going to have to go to one chapter a week for the next while. I've had signs that this may be on the mend, but making promises about this condition is a sucker's game and one I have learned not to play.

So I shall merely say that I am still 100% committed and will continue at whatever speed I can manage until we get there.

Love you.
A Special Fanart Bonus

In lieu of another chapter, here is a massive treat:
This marvellously detailed and characterful portrait of Emma was rendered by Alicy Sunberg, who has already contributed a spectacular amount to the quality of this work by catching my many errors in French. (She also has a new and enjoyable fic with one of the most intriguing Inquisitors I can think of.)

Can I take a moment to gush about this? Cheers.

THAT FUCKING CHATELAINE OMG. I didn't describe this outfit but it now exists, ditto this hair. That comfy, capable stance. I want to be friends with her plz. How goddamn adorable is this entire thing? It is now my desktop background and I am utterly gobsmacked at the existence of this lovely portrait and the fact that I apparently made something worthy of such inspiration? WHAT. WHAAAAAAAT.

Alicy says she's now working on portraits of Chandler and Vanadirthavean, which... wheeee.

I'll publish them here too, darlings. I'm a sharer.

And look. If you've got art or exhaustively detailed headcanons or PoVs from other characters that you want to contribute? Hit me up in the comments. Make my day.

Now go tell Alicy nice things.
“Your fellow assets are fucking with me.”

He raised an interrogative eyebrow.

“Y’know, they’re supposed to come see me and do as I say. They’re being… extremely creative with the timing and location of our meetings. My favourite thus far - I ran out of sealing wax and one of them was waiting for me in the repository, next to the supply cabinet. Holding a stick of wax. *Whistling.*” I laughed at the memory. “I mean, I understand what they’re doing. The situation is a vulnerable one, so they’re re-establishing some control. Right?”

“Of course.”

“And it’s adorable. I mean, three different ones have been lurking outside the privy, but they don’t mind me washing my hands first. It doesn’t bother me. I ask them three to five personal-yet-non-threatening questions, they answer them, I establish enough of a connection for Cole to use, tell them that’s all, they look surprised, they leave. It’s interesting, thus far the distribution of those who are broken and would like not to be versus those who are broken and don’t wish to change it is -”

“Feel free to reach the point any time you care to, precious.” Stupid insightful spies, always pointing out when I’m stalling.

“Gardener.”

“Ah.”

“Yes fucking *ah*. He’s been away on an assignment but he’ll be back some time and I’m already dreading our interaction in depth and colour and this is *Gardener*, darling. He’ll be on my fear like a shark on chum. And I can just see him deciding I’m his favourite new plaything and then I can imagine him just fucking appearing in my peripheral vision at odd times, never doing anything wrong, fenedhis he probably won’t even be *looking* at me, he’ll just be *there*, all the *time* until I can’t take it any longer and -”

He held my shoulders while I calmed myself. On the exact same spots Blackwall had used, I noted. He’s really very clever.

Once I was ready, he said, “An obvious solution to the problem exists, you are aware.”

“Yes, but. He’s the world’s leading expert in toeing the line while leaning over it,” I said wearily. “Fuck, he’ll probably adopt an air of injured innocence and blame me for it. ‘I happen to be in the dining hall twice when she’s there? What does she expect me to do, starve?’ Shit, he’ll probably enjoy it more for the extra challenge.”

He conceded the point. “Besides,” I continued, “it’s already hard enough to convince Leliana to relax around me. I’ve managed to help her a couple times, just small things, but after last week? If I remind her *again* that I am vulnerable she’ll reestablish the professional distance and it’ll make my attempts so much trickier.”

“Your fears are entirely justified,” he said calmly. “You have described with precision what you
would expect to happen under normal circumstances.”

That was not much comfort.

“However,” he continued, “you have me.”

That was.

“I will visit Gardener as soon as he returns.”

“And?”

“And I will threaten him,” he said serenely. “I will do it very, very well. Gardener will be informed that while the Nightingale is willing to accept his… foibles, she regards you as infinitely more valuable. I will advise him that you are on first-name terms with her, in fact. And I will tell him that if he ever decides to torment you, they will never find his body.”

The last phrase was delivered with calm terrifying deliberateness. It was enchanting.

“I don’t think I will ever get used to being comforted by people threatening Gardener, but miséricorde does it ever work.”

“I am unconventional but effective, precious. I wish to request a reward.”

“Anything,” I said instantly.

He put on a glittering untrustworthy smile. “Tell me about you and Dorian Pavus.”

***

I put on an entire performance for an audience of one. I didn’t receive a standing ovation, but solely because we were both deeply comfortable and didn’t want to move.

He was startled and impressed by my approach. (“I genuinely did not think you had such brilliance in you, pet.” Chandler managed to make that sound like a supreme compliment, the jerk.) He also had an abundance of much-appreciated advice about how to transition to the next stage and a few pitfalls to be wary about.

Then I just told him… things. Bruised secrets, sure, and about adjusting to sharing my everything, but also just regular normal person events like the snow and the nuggalope and the continuing Saga of Lydia.

“- still wearing it, bless him. I - fenedhis, is it… morning?”

“Mmm-hmm. And before you apologise, I shall remind you that this is a balancing of scales.”

“True. It’s also been absolutely the thing I most needed.”

“Well, I am your handler, pet.”

“Don’t you fucking dare!”

He apologised. “It is my task. But also I am your friend and it has been my pleasure to help you, precious.”

“Much better.”
“I shall leave you to your day. But first, one last important undertaking.”

He held up his comb and grinned.

Chapter End Notes

You're adorable, just in case you needed a reminder today.
I had an immense amount of work to get done, but I still managed to sneak in the rest of my tour of thanks.

(My favourite: when I complimented Harden on his forgery skills, he gasped theatrically, “You can’t have read it yet! It isn’t Satinalia.” He was dead serious, too.)

(Okay, second favourite: Antonia demurring that she’d only done the collar and lining and hem of the cloak. As if that wasn’t most of the work.)

(Third favourite: the other seamstresses were remarkably relaxed and even the habitual bitches - ooh! habitches! - accepted my thanks graciously.)

(Oh, and Lady Josephine. Mercy.

“I hope you will enjoy them.”

“So much so that I shall have to ensure no children are in earshot.”

Two spots of colour, high up on her cheekbones. Will she imagine me - best not to think of it.)

Also, everyone complimented me on my hair. Everyone. Chandler is going to be insufferable about this.

Mid-afternoon, I went to the rotunda. Solas was deep in an incomprehensibly technical discussion with another mage that seemed to mostly be communicated in insults. They were having an excellent time. I snuck past and up one flight of stairs.

Jarrah reassured me that not only were the Tranquil being adequately treated, but there were three other people who regularly visited to ensure this was so. As I warmly approved, I noticed a new book on the shelves and grinned to myself.

And then back downstairs once the debate had finished.

“Good afternoon, Solas!” I chirped.

“Greetings.” By the twitch of his mouth he clearly enjoyed the return of my usual style of address, which made it even sunnier. He tilted his head interrogatively and I nodded.

We went to his tiny cupboard room. The meadowsweet was hanging above his pallet and why does this man not like hugs? Why? I mean, I know why. It’s just at times like this it’s really inconvenient.

“Firstly,” I said, as warmly as he will tolerate, “we love the painting. It’s brilliant.”

“I am glad you find it so.” For all his issues, this is the first time today I’ve given a compliment like this and simply had it accepted. There’s a reason I saved this one for last.

“Second, I got no sleep last night.”

He made an expression I would describe as, “Okaaay. And?”
I continued, “So Cole has done his awakeness trick and that so far has guaranteed I end up in the Fade. Normally, I’d be all, ‘Yay, a visit’, but after the week I’ve had…”

“Ah.” Concerned face. “How much skill do you possess in focusing your thoughts? Not simply directing your attention to one point, but avoiding all interruptions?”

“Not enough to wager my sanity on.”

He sighed - not exasperated, just sad - then thought deeply. “It is a difficult problem,” he admitted.

“Why?” I asked. “You did it before. The time I drank the ocean.”

He smiled absently at my phrasing and explained that was a completely different situation. Last time, he’d used an ancient somniari ritual to (in essence) carry me through the Veil. This time, it’d be more like waiting for me on the other side and trying to… catch me.

My mind refused to remember that the Fade operates on very different rules and insisted on treating me to an image of me, hurtling at speed into Solas. I’d break several things on impact - illusions, dignity. Bones, possibly.

While floundering for an alternative thought I realised something important. “It wouldn’t even work, though. Skyhold is weird.”

I scored a few points for this insight, although he didn’t particularly enjoy my choice of words.

the apples, like you wanted

Solas started to speak and I shushed him. Apparently that works in this reality, too. I should try it more often.

Go on, honey.

they’re in the basket. eggs on the top like you said, papa

Are… are you the basket, Cole-love?

I’m a lot of things

“Cole says that he could help. You can talk to him about it if you like. We’ve been doing that a lot, lately.”

Solas blinked. “You… give him control?”

I wasn’t expecting Solas of all people to be surprised by this. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Most people would not be so trusting,” he said, as if this was the understatement of the year.

“I’m not most people,” I said airily, in the absence of anything better to say.

“Of this I was already aware,” he replied.

I chewed on that as I gave control to Cole. Is that a compliment? Second time a handsome man has said that to me lately.

Handsome men say lots of inscrutable shit to me nowadays.
I rather like it, on the whole.

“Hello, Solas!”

And I like that too.

Chapter End Notes

Splendid news, darlings!

The last week it’s warmed up enough for my body to be able to sleep in its optimal position (which includes hands above the covers) and suddenly when I wake up during the night I am not greeted by the kind of pain that sternly demands painkillers right damned now.

If you’ve ever spent two months without a single pain-free day I cannot really recommend the experience. You’ll just need to trust me that even at low-ish pain levels that shit gets EXHAUSTING.

But it’s going away! I can think again! I can write again! Wheeeeee!

It’s going to still be slow going for a while, I think. But I can see a point where we might make it back to two chapters a week.

Many thanks as always to you all, especially-est those who take the time to leave comments. They help a lot.
I let Cole and Solas sort out the details: it’s not like I was going to be in control of any part of the process. Besides, I think they like each other and would enjoy some alone time.

Then I told Cole the next hour was his to spend as he wished.

to help people?

No, honey. To please yourself in.

why?

Because it would make me happy?

oh.

…

can I visit the nuggalope?

I was expecting nothing less, my dear.

If Cole was a mortal person I would be worried about his utter lack of selfishness, but as it is I’m pretty sure it’s normal.

I did insist he wash our hands after, though.

***

Nearly nine bells. I spent the last few minutes doing breathing exercises. I mean, they’re designed to strengthen your diaphragm for long notes, but they’re as close to a meditative practice as I have.

And then it was time for another one of those nigh-indescribable experiences.

First, it was all Cole. His - spirit? - wrapped around mine, like a chiaroscuro cloak. Then impossible boggling movement and a smell of cinnamon and I was being put in a woollen pocket with sassafras that was as big as I was and everything felt like smooth porelessness and then -

A figure. Merely a suggestion of a person, a floating translucency. A wisp, but one that clearly delineated a hunch in the shoulders and a darting set of eyes. The figure hesitantly moved down one path in a fork and then paused. Shook. Began down the other path instead. Only a foot in, they stopped. Went back. Over and over.

It was easy to understand the dilemma. Far ahead, you could see both paths. One ambled across a grassy plain, smooth and safe and scenic. The other went through a razor-sharp incline with terrible overhangs and the rumble of rocks above.

But with the hills and dips and no small amount of mist, it was absolutely impossible to tell which path went where.
I tilted my head in sympathy and opened my mouth.

Solas appeared at my side and shook his head. Obediently, I did not speak.

There’s not much I could have said that would have made any difference, anyway.

We walked together the other direction, leaving Indecision behind us.

***

It was a quiet walk through misty not-much-in-particularness.

Solas was reflective. Sorrowful, too, I think.

Personally, I was wrapped in that awkward kind of silence where you keep trying to think of something to say and every possibility is worst than the last.

After awhile, I just gave up and was glad we’ve reached the stage where we can be silent together.

We’re not besties yet, but the world doesn’t seem to be ending this week. There’s no rush.

Chapter End Notes

Author Meanderings:

I wrote this chapter while I was deep in pain-fog, with each sentence a massive effort.

I'm not certain whether I like the result or if it shall remain as an artifact of At Least I Wrote Something, Dammit.

Of course, it occurs that - apart from the length, this is a shorter than usual chapter - that you might not even see any meaningful difference between this and others. It was massively different to WRITE, and I feel there's less depth in here than I usually have the time (and brain) for, but again perhaps that's just me.

It's interesting to ponder, now I have enough energy to do so.

Also, you are very beautiful and I am glad you exist.
“I’m giving you an out.”

The Iron Bull, midway through eating an apple, raised an eyebrow and kept crunching.

I took a few steps further into the room I’d just barged into.

“I would desperately love to just pick up where we were so rudely interrupted and pretend that no time has passed, but so, so much has happened to me in the last week and I’m okay, really I am, but I have no equilibrium whatsoever and I don’t think I can reliably deliver on my part of our previous arrangement because I’m just a big weird mess right now and so you can just say No now and that’s fine. No hard feelings.”

He finished eating the mouthful of apple, put the core down, and said, “Sure, I get it. You wanna make out for a while?”

I blinked twice and then said, “Ooh, yes please.”

Door closed. Hands a bit trembly. The good kind.

It was amazing how fast I was ready to begin.

(Or perhaps it wasn’t.)

His chair - one I had no doubt had been built to a careful plan - was of a height that made him still an inch taller than me. I gently, oh so gently, cradled his head in my hands. He held my shoulder and the back of my head in warm safety and we moved slowly, oh so slowly, together. His breath smelt of apples.

Touch.

Tiniest touch.

More.

Oh, more.

We paused there, mouths barely meeting. Then we breathed in and truly began to kiss.

Chef Robert makes a special treat for Wintersend. The exact recipe is a closely-guarded secret, but everyone knows he starts soaking dried fruit in the best quality brandy three months in advance. Each servant and staff member is given only a small square of the finished product, but that is always more than enough to feel stuffed full and slightly tipsy.

Kissing The Iron Bull felt just like that brandy fruitcake.

For some time I felt the compulsion nagging that I was supposed to be doing more than this, more than this. But every time the thought occurred the contentment radiating from him slew it instantly.

Some time later, I chuckled.
“What’s so funny?” he asked, smoky and warm, utterly relaxed.

My reply was in the same tone. “I’ve encountered a few gigolos, roués and libertines over the years.” Those are fun words to say. “For a while I was keen because I thought they’d be as excellent as my first proper lover. I gave up on that pretty quickly. You know why?”

“Because they’re boring and they never actually enjoy what they’re doing.”

“Precisely.” I stroked his face. “More, please.”

He obliged.

***

Sometimes I pondered taking things further, but I figured any day in which the idea of being fully naked feels mildly alarming is probably not the time to push your limits. The kissing (and mild, over-the-clothes touching) was perfect and delicious and that would suffice.

Two slow, sensate and quietly spectacular hours later, I crawled off the lap I had annexed. Lips swollen and wearing a smile that would appear off and on for the rest of the day.

“So. Um.” I said, brilliantly.

“See you next Friday?”

It’s almost pathetic how much my shoulders dropped in relief. “Yes?”

“You not sure?” he teased.

“I was actually more worried that you’d decide to give up and stick with much simpler encounters.”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Okay. Cool. See you then.”

He slapped my arse as I turned.

Grinning, I hobbled away.

Chapter End Notes

Authorial Meanderings:

I know. I know. I promised smut this time.

I tried, a frankly ridiculous number of times. It never felt believable, no matter how I approached it. It really has been one hell of a week for Emma, y’know?

But all my expectations aside, writing interactions between these two is always a delight.

As are you, sweetness.
It was barely mid-morning and I had no commitments other than the one to avoid skipping or bursting into song because I am far too old and dignified for that sort of thing.

Cole-love?

No reply.

I found him diligently working away in the archives and hugged him while he shelved. He’s gotten very comfortable with this due to the volume of practice, but emits the same warm you-like-me surprise as the very first time I did it. Again, if he was a mortal person I would be more worried by this.

“Are you finished kissing?” he asked.

“For now.” He nodded seriously and went back to shelving, but I knew he’d be paying closer attention now that I wasn’t being all weird and icky.

I visited the cordwainer (less of a necessity now I had my old boots back, but I’d still paid for them, so...), listened to his patently false excuses for them not being ready yet, and bought my last couple of Satinalia presents. Mostly new ones, plus a couple of replacements for the few that did not survive the journey unscathed.

I took the parcels back to my room and took the chance to rearrange my hair, which definitely needed it.

you should see. be. it’s now

Where’s what, honey?

careful on the steps

Unedified but willing I went back outside, glad again for my new cloak.

Almost every child from three to thirteen (including, to my utter joy, a few of the apprentice mages) had created a snowy grand mêlée in the lower courtyard. It was a chaotic swirl of scuffles, with sides never specifically delineated, yet still somehow able to provide the opportunity for memorable betrayals.

It was easy to deduce the chain of events:

1. Workers begin clearing snow in preparation for Monday.
3. One realises that the tall pile on this sled provides excellent cover to ambush their elder brother.
4. Hilarity ensues.

Some of the workers were futilely ordering the kids to stop. Some were covertly joining the fun. The rest were sneaking off to have a smoke.
My eye went a thousand directions, following the distractions, until it found one pair and latched on.

First, stolidly making snowballs, was Tara and Steven’s eldest. The simplest way to describe Rose is to say she is the most profoundly literal child I have ever met. Also the most obedient: rebellion requires imagination, a quality she possesses in not the smallest amount.

With her, also making snowballs, Aster.

Rose isn’t the playmate I would have chosen as a child, but Aster’s priorities are something I decided quickly not to think about in too much depth because it would make me sad.

I… let us not be coy. I hid. Just a little. I especially wanted the chance to see Aster’s siblings for the first time.

Clara, the youngest, arrived to collect her elder sister’s handiwork. She resembled none of her immediate family and also all of them. Indistinguishable from the rest of the children: snowy, happy and red-nosed. Not that I was naive enough to assume that meant that she was completely untouched by her family’s poisons, but it was still a good sign.

And then the middle child zoomed in. Oh mercy, Brom looks like Willem in unsettling miniature. Not just his face, but some of his mannerisms and stance, too.

Oh Andraste, I promise I will believe in you devoutly if that is as far as the resemblance goes. Please. Please.

He picked up an armful of frozen ammunition, said, “Thanks!” and ran off to rejoin the fray.

As I watched, Clara got tumbled over by a well-aimed missile and was having trouble righting herself.

Brom immediately dropped his bundle and picked her up, brushed her off briskly, and said something to make her laugh.

It appears that at my late age I may have acquired religion.

Chapter End Notes

Hey cutie. I'm super glad you're here.
I pulled the conversation starter I’d spied earlier from the shelf and headed round the corner to the reading nook.

The occupant responded to my arrival with instant wariness.

Lord Dorian Pavus. Son of a magister. Powerful necromancer. Possessor of almost every kind of power that one may have… was wary. Of me. I could not invent a more hilariously surreal idea if I tried.

I managed, barely, not to laugh too much as I tried to hand him what I was carrying.

“What is it,” he asked suspiciously.

“It’s a book, my lord.” My tone was close to saccharine and my eyes were gleaming.

This was precisely the correct tone to take. His long-honed sarcasm habits kicked in and instinctually answered, “Yes. I can indeed see, with my eyes, that seems to be a book of some kind. Marvellous. Why, pray tell, is it here?”

“Well, the first time we met you were… ah… engaged in a critical analysis of the Malefica Imperio.”

His eyes narrowed, presumably waiting for the dagger in my words.

“And what I didn’t get a chance to say was that you are absolutely correct. I’ve read it and it’s dreadful.” His eyes narrowed further, more convinced than ever I was planning something nefarious. “Did you know the author’s mother was a noted historian and essayist?”

That wasn’t anything close to his expectations. “Was she, indeed?”

“Yes! And this -” I presented the volume “- is a collection of some of her best-known monographs.”

“Ah, I begin to see. Was incompetence a heritable trait?”

“That’s the interesting part! She’s actually brilliant. Accurate, witty, and… you know that incredibly over-elaborate style that gets irritating very quickly?”

“The gibberish camouflage?”

“Yes! That. So you read her works and you can see what he’s doing an incredibly poor imitation of. Her style is deliberately slow and the sentences are almost fractal, but in her case it’s fascinating to read and done for deliberate effect.”

“And what effect is that?” He hadn’t lost the wariness, but now it had friends.

“It takes time to parse the meaning out, so instead of just getting facts, I found I was deriving insight about the people and places she described.” I was starting to gesture emphatically by this point. “Like I said, brilliant!”

“Such a pity one cannot say the same thing about her progeny.”
“I know, right? I looked once - the first edition of the Imperio was published two years before her death. Plenty of time for a number of awkward family dinners. I like to imagine her cutting her meat into smaller and smaller cubes in an effort to avoid giving him feedback.”

He actually laughed at that.

I passed him the book again and this time he took it, while asking, “But why are you giving it to me?”

“Oh, my lord,” I said sympathetically. “You still really haven’t the faintest idea who I am.”

I curtsied and left, leaving a mildly bewildered man behind me.

Chapter End Notes

Progress! Lookit these cuties.

Hey, so you know all those Authorial Meandering notes I add because I find process fascinating? I decided to make a place where I can talk about it more. If an exploration of the creative process by me (someone with a chronic illness and an equally chronic addiction to introspection) sounds like your cup of tea, it’s over on the Facebooks.

If you are wondering whether I am also hoping I get to see some of your adorable faces and maybe make FB friends with you? BUSTED. YES.
After Lunch And A Bonus Nap, Just Because I Could

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The secret cellar smelt like apple-jack and badly chosen bluffing. It is now the Somewhat Secret Cellar.

Chandler - my company in the Somewhat Secret Cellar - had spent the last two days on the code desk, ciphering and deciphering messages. This is a job that is the mental equivalent of shoveling coal: grimy, repetitive, and with absolutely no chance for élán. As a result, he was in a Mood.

“I know how to get you assigned to different duties!” I chirped in a deliberately aggravating manner.

He ignored the provocation and indicated a faint desire to learn more.

“It’s helping Cole and I!”

The look became infinitely more unimpressed. “Pet. It’s been weeks since the last time I assisted you in that manner, and the end result is still following me around with calf eyes. I’m reluctant to acquire more worshippers.”

“You fucking liar,” I replied sweetly. “Anyway, that was an emergency. You will have much more liberty to solve problems your way this time.”

“Hmm. It sounds vaguely interesting, I suppose.”

“Double fucking liar. Shall I begin?”

“Pet, exaggerations do not count as lies. Be reasonable. And yes, you shall begin.”

So I did.

The Triage Field was explained and I was told that was “the single most… you idea I have ever heard,” which is fair enough, I suppose. He asked for examples and I went to go fetch some.

I reappeared from the memory palace within a minute, laughing helplessly.

“Trauma and woe are not generally quite so hilarious, in my experience,” noted Chandler.

Still laughing, I said, “Cole. Must’ve. Gotten. (hic!) Bored. While I was. Um.”

“Ah, you were umming earlier.” His grin was smug. “I wonder with whom.”

“Shh! I. Oh, mercy.” Still giggling. “My sweet honey boy.”

you’re laughing at me?

He was curious and not even a smidgen offended.

No, Cole-love. Laughing because of you.

okay

Love you.
Once settled, I explained.

“Cole is either the absolute best or the absolute worst at context, depending on how you look at it. Like… the scar on your inner wrist. How would you describe the circumstances in which you got it?”

“A rather dramatic fight. On a rooftop, of all things - nearly got myself weathercocked, as I recall.”

I smiled and continued. “So three pieces of context. Not even the weapon or who you were fighting.” He agreed. “Cole’s list of circumstances would be roughly eight pages long. In very small writing.”

“Including…”

“The wind direction, what shirt you were wearing, every piece of food in your gut, the roofing materials…”

“Ah. And he’s been helping to triage. Sounds… comprehensive.” That was one way to describe it. The first pile I’d seen grouped incidents by the presence of asparagus. “And of course extremely simple to make sense of.”

“It is?”

“Emma. Emma. Look at this like a professional organiser of information.”

I ignored the implied insult and did.

“Hmm. Sort by size. Then for each pile, starting with the largest, randomly choose… say, ten incidents. If for none of them the named factor was relevant to the incident then this factor can be discarded. Slower than making assumptions, but I'd guarantee there’s enough gold in there to prove worthwhile. Then draw conclusions and make changes from there. Perhaps the first five minutes after dawn actually is a riskier time of day and we need to assign work duties accordingly.”

“There we are. Cole helped, in his own inimitable manner.”

His inimitable manner made much more work for me. Which was… pretty consistent by this point.

Which I do not mind. It’s good work.

nine is friendlier than ten. ten takes too long.

If you insist, honey.

nearly never

True enough.

I gave Chandler a double handful of problems to solve that I already had on my list - the bakery door handle, for one - and completely ignored his whining about whether these tasks were below his dignity.

Then I gave him a hug and sent him to work.

The Compassion Sidekick now has a sidekick of her own.
Neat!

Chapter End Notes

I adore you.
Vanadirthavean and I were reading.

He was ploughing diligently (ha!) through an unfriendly-looking tome entitled The Colossus of Orlais: An In-Depth Examination Of The Rule Of Emperor Florian. He was making progress, but at the cost of a number of lines on his brow.

I was having the fun kind of difficulty with Speaking to The Other: A Translation (With Copious Additions By One Elven Apostate). It was an intimidatingly technical volume, but much appreciated. Cole liked it too, although I’d wager he understood the content less than I did.

Then, apropos of nothing…

“Why do you keep coming here?” said Vanadirthavean. Tone curious, although with a small edge to it I couldn’t identify.

Finger inserted as a bookmark, I replied, “Because you haven’t told me not to.”

I thought this was a complete answer. My opinion was clearly not shared.

“Cole can’t tell me anything about you,” I elaborated. “And your face isn’t much more forthcoming. But your actions are still open to interpret and sometimes they’re quite communicative.”

I smiled. “I sincerely doubt you’d keep welcoming me into your rooms if you weren’t getting some benefit from my company. So whether or not it’s what I intended I’m doing something right, and thus I continue.”

“What did you intend?” Edge still present.

“I thought… well, that you are in one of the loneliest positions in the world. If it were me, I’d appreciate sometimes having company that isn’t making any demands.”

“Is that why I haven’t ordered you to stop visiting me?”

“No idea,” I said cheerfully. “You might be keeping me around in case assassins attack or surreptitiously sniffing my hair when I’m not looking. As long as it’s helping you in some way I’m not sure it matters.”

“You are here to defend me from assassins?” he asked, now definitely amused. Somewhere in my cheerful nonsense I’d said the right thing, the reassuring thing. In for a copper…

“What? Mercy, no. I’m a screaming distraction who’ll get shot while you dive for your weapons. Tragic. I’ll get a small tasteful plaque in the gardens commemorating my sacrifice. Maybe a plinth, even.”

“At which I shall weep tasteful decorous tears?”

“Damn right you will. Also you’ll don a wreath from your trembling hands. Poetry would also be appropriate.”
I hit a wrong note in there something, perhaps an old unquiet memory. The easy banter wobbled and fell over.

In a much softer tone I continued, “Anyway. Whatever you need, I’m here to be of service.”

Once more unreadable, he said, “I see. Thank you.”

And then he started Regarding me.

Unless it’s being done by:

1. A very small baby, preferably one with round cheeks; or
2. Someone bearing a gift or - ahem! - something else gift-wrapped and quite definitely intended for me,

I wholeheartedly do not enjoy being stared at. My interrogation/job interview has only solidified this feeling, and I still occasionally have flashes back to Leliana’s calm searching stare.

So the person doing it had to be the only one where I can’t give in to temptation and use Cole’s insights to silence the internal voice that plays endless - and blithely vicious - guessing games about what other people are thinking about me. (Which I have done. Mostly, the other party isn’t thinking about me at all, which is honestly a relief.)

But service is service, so while I made a small pained argh-I-do-not-enjoy-this squinch I put up with it for what seemed a farcical length of time.

Then he spoke.

“There is one task I could use your assistance with.”

Chapter End Notes

The book Emma is reading is one from Solas’ actual book request list. It's the small touches that warm my nerd heart.
The Latest In A Long Line Of Surreal Experiences

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I was handed a list.

Names - all the ones you’d expect. Beside each…

He’d used the runes of Kingspeak, in his usual unpracticed-but-confident hand. The words themselves were in Elvhen. Now that I thought about it, that’s a brilliantly simple approach for keeping information secret.


And I’m pretty sure ‘SOME DAMNED LYRIUM PERHAPS’ wasn’t a serious suggestion.

It was barely two days until Satinalia.

Oh, dear.

***

“There’s a simple solution,” I informed Vanadirthavean.

He raised a questioning eyebrow.

“One sovereign and a note. Has to be hand-written by you personally, though.”

“Seems… cold.”

I shrugged, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. “It’s common practice for the nobility and other Important Personages. Everyone would understand.” I thought of Sera. “Or not give you much shit about it, anyway.”

“Everyone?”

“It only works if it’s universal. Either everyone gets a hand-written note and a sovereign or no-one does.”

He said, stiffly, “I’d prefer another way.”

Mercy, I wish I could read him better. Was he upset at acting the lord? Certainly possible - it’s still been such a short time since he was a Dalish elf, lurking near the Conclave. I don’t know about the Lavellan clan, but from what the members of Elvalaslin mentioned they made a big deal about Satinalia. It was… a celebration of still being here, a big middle finger to the Tevenes who named the moon.

Oh, le Créateur aie pitié. His family! If there was ever a time to miss your family with a bone-deep ache, this would be it. I’d find impersonal donatives distasteful too.

“Um,” I said. “Varric has plenty of ink, you know. What he really wants is a chair that tips back properly. The one in his room doesn’t and it bugs him.”
Vanadirthavean made a note. I swear I saw a gleam in his eye.

“Do continue,” he said.

***

As I traipsed down the hidden stairway exit, I pondered uneasily. Had I just crossed a line? It felt rather like cheating, somehow. I would ask for a second opinion, but I already knew that the judgements would be fine/delightful/expedient/fine/fragment of poetry.

Besides, his list was pretty mediocre. Does he not know his companions and advisors at all?

The saviour of the world doesn’t need to have excellent gift-giving insights, too. I suppose.

It was getting late and I had a big day, but Cole had strong opinions about clearing one more item from my to-do list.

***

“Evening, hero!”

Blackwall looked up from his intent regard of a dovetail join and smiled at me. Damn it, why does he have to be so attractive?

You won’t be able to play it natural, Chandler had informed me. Any attempts to pretend otherwise will be equal parts amusing and disastrous. So be awkward. Just provide a reason why.

“It feels wildly unjust but I have a favour to ask,” I said. Chandler was right - I was aware of every muscle in my face. How do faces smile, again? Argh!

“I am at your service, my lady,” he replied with a disarming mix of ingrained courtesy and well-hidden dimple.

“So. Ah. This is embarrassing.” Hands. Where do they belong? Nope. Nope. Not there, either. Fenedhis. “I got promoted to higher duties a while back.”

“Con...gratulations?”

“Well, yes. But it was one of those promotions where they don’t actually remove the rest of the workload you already had.”

“Ah.” Everyone who’s ever served in a military unit knows that tune.

“So I am stressed. And tired.” At this his eyes took on a speculative sparkle that I would undoubtedly be remembering later on, oh my. My voice acquired a squeak. “And. Um! I... thought I should start” - oh dear merciful Maker, I am blushing, I didn’t even anticipate this particular strain of awkwardness but I will smack Chandler later because I guarantee he did, that shitheel - “ exercise. Like running or something stop looking at me like that hero, you are not helping at all” - he started to laugh in a friendly chaffing way - “and while I am aware that the recruits do so every morning the idea of me lining up with sinewy seventeen-year-olds is a level of personal humiliation that I am not in any guise willing to endure.”

He was still chuckling when he repeated his offer to be of service in any way I required.

(DAMN IT.)
“I was thinking of going to the old silo and… I don’t know? Running up and down the stairs? Lifting… things? I need someone to teach me how to get fitter without spraining my everything.”

“You do that over in the old silo you’ll break everything you own. It’s icy as the First Enchanter’s comfort over there.” I didn’t giggle at that slight, but my eyes did crinkle. “Much easier to do it here.”

I looked around. The stables were quiet at night, and as private as anywhere in this place gets. Also, not covered in ice. Definitely a plus.

“So you’ll teach me, hero? Man of a thousand pies?”

He bowed elaborately and said, “Of course, my lady.”

I got out of there before I could embarass myself any further.

Besides, tomorrow was going to be a long, long day.

Chapter End Notes

I am writing a chapter as it's due to be published, which is itchy and I hope to get further ahead soon once current Domestic Disaster resolves itself.

Let's all be extra kind to ourselves this week, 'kay?
“Mind the rubble.”

This was from Fisher, acting as my guide through endless interstitial spaces. I’d been contemplating how I could subtly hint that her father probably isn’t as judgemental as she thinks about less-common relationship configurations, and she’d just saved me from tripping over.

Secret passages are awkward enough, but unmaintained ones are a *nightmare*.

I thanked her and decided to add the parental finagling to Chandler’s list. A marvellous thought, that.

“Here we are,” she said, three bruised shins later.

*Here* was a small space, all angled shadows in the light of our watchmen’s lamps. It contained a cot, a table, and a curtained space that likely housed a chamber pot. Also a collapsed tunnel for a touch of ambience.

I sound a bit like Lydia when I’m nervous.

“Any last questions?”

I was more than a touch curious as to how all the participants had been manipulated into place for this, but there didn’t seem much point in asking. For one thing, I’d wager the only people who knew would be far away from anyone who actually did the work.

So I smiled and said no and waited for Cole to say something reassuring.

    all of our toes are still attached?

I nodded gravely and climbed the ladder to the trap door.

***

I do not want to spend time calculating which of Leliana’s qualities is the most terrifying. I very much do not.

But if I *did*, her preparedness would definitely end up in the top three.

It was a room, thick stone, thick door. (*Remarkably soundproof*, said a small cold voice.) A row of chairs.

And for me, a nook behind the oddest privacy screen I’d ever encountered. The screen was iron, for one thing. And bolted to the *floor*. Large enough to hide me, the trap door, and a stool. Lastly, there was a wool blanket firmly covering the lower half, on my side.

I took a small sip of the water kindly provided and eyed off the other item that had been left for me.

A hand bell. One of the small crystal ones that belongs to the kind of countess who has an eidetic memory for every fault ever performed within three miles of herself and has also forgotten how courtesy operates. I eyed it with distaste.
There wasn’t long to wait.

First, two Templars. Ser Derek and another whose name I did not know but seemed to be crafted from the same mould: swift responders, with no desire to instigate. The kind who will never start trouble, but quite firmly finish it.

They looked searchingly around the room and I tried not to shrink behind my screen.

Then nothing for a time. As far as socially awkward situations go, this was new and interesting. I had been Very Firmly Instructed to make no noise whatsoever, so I had to find new and silent methods to fidget in order to distract myself from the inevitable alternative: nonchalant humming in order to fill the space.

Emma

Mmm?

why am I honey?

Umm… what?

You call me Cole-love and honey boy. Cole-love is - his voice grew… not hesitant. Reverent. -

because you love me.

It certainly is, yes.

His sweetest smile.

do I want to be honey?

Why do you not, my dear?

because I don’t want to be a sometimes food.

A… what?

you don’t eat honey often. even when you could. maybe I could be potatoes instead?

Ah.

I smothered the giggle that I was not permitted to make.

You’re using the wrong metaphor here, Cole-love. I am not dining.

There was another long long pause while he let that settle in. First a whirl of thoughts and then a long quiet reflection, one shaft of light into a green forest pool. I could almost smell the insight.

Emma-bee!

I.

What?

OH.
Is… is that my new name, honey?

Yes?

I love it.

good!

Luckily, wide grins are inaudible as well as a great way to fill the time.

***

Finally, it began.

First Leliana and Seeker Pentaghast, in a well-practiced maneuver. Lady Cassandra looked determined (as always) but also unusually discomfited; the look of one who has made a choice but not been able to comfortably discount the ramifications.

Then the seven most well-respected mages in Skyhold. The Grand Enchanter, both remaining First Enchanters, two heads of their colleges, two luminaries.

I picked up the bell and began to ring it frantically.

Chapter End Notes

Emma and Cole are so damn adorable together, amirite?

This chapter brought to you by the Society for Rhetorical Questions.
Many sensations occurred.

First was the indescribable sensation of being crash-tackled from the inside. I fell with knee-bruising force behind the blanketed lower half of the screen.

There was a scream of weaponised arrogance; much later I was able to arrange into the word, ‘TRAIIIIITOOOOOOOR!’ At the same time an utterly immense roar of noise and sudden dryness in my lungs, followed by a familiar nose-wrinkling smell and heat and belated terror as the reason for the blanket became very, very clear.

Maker have mercy on us all, I just had a fireball thrown at me.

The upper half of the screen glowed cherry-red with the impact of it and if not for the slightly charred wool I would probably be the same shade. The stool had fallen over and the unprotected part was sooty, I noted with a dazed clarity.

Also, the world appeared to be ending over thataway.

At the time I couldn’t tell whether it was shock or temporary hearing issues caused by being nearly fucking fireballed to death, but though the violence was intensely cacophonous it wasn’t registering clearly. Behind the burnt-wool smell was ozone and cold and pain, those I could still notice. There was a gristly organic noise that I’d never heard before and instantly decided I never wanted to hear again. And a voice always shouting beneath me and scurrying and dare you.

I clutched the hateful crystal bell to my head and tried to breathe hot-cold-itchy air and waited until it was all over.

***

Without Cole, I would have violated the Absolute Silence mandate with mangled screeching when Leliana appeared around the screen.

(Of course, without Cole I would be filing invoices instead. This was a thought with no teeth. On one side of the scale were scars and Willem and nearly getting flambéed by magical fucking conflagrations, but the other side held a hundred kind deeds and also my honey boy, so.)

Leliana indicated I descend through the trap door. I did so on numb clumsy limbs, with her following me with infinitely more grace in the effort.

In the subterranean antichamber she inspected me critically and then passed me a stoppered vial.

I stared at it. What a funny feeling the surface had, like it had once been smooth but had been used and cleaned and refilled so many times that it was now almost gritty. What was the word? Patina. This vial had patina.

Leliana sighed - something I Cole-d more than heard - snagged it back, pulled the stopper, and held it to my mouth.
I’ve never drunk a healing potion before. Potions made by healers, yes. But this was very different to the expectorant I often employed against my mid-spring cough.

The taste was out of all proportion. My tongue was numb and dry; everything should have tasted like a combination of soot and absence. Instead, there was a stunning bloom of embrium in my sinuses that made my eyes open wide, followed by an equally vivid slap of laurel, slippery elm and willow bark.

And then it actually worked.

My ears popped, hard.

My skin lost the too-taut feeling you notice after a bonfire night. (I hadn’t even noticed it was there until it was gone.)

My knees unbruised themselves.

And I was suddenly awash in feelings of warm confidence that I both appreciated and utterly mistrusted.

“Shit in a bucket,” I said faintly.

Leliana smiled, amused and sad and weary all at once, and we sat down on the cot. She passed me a waterskin I hadn’t noticed before and ordered me to drink at least half.

It tasted faintly like lemongrass, just the thing to cut through the unpleasant tastes in my mouth. Her preparedness made a valiant jump to the top two most terrifying qualities.

“What did I miss?” I asked.

Chapter End Notes

Do you think people in Thedas get addicted to healing potions? It seems possible.

As always, I adore you. Be kind to yourself, okay?
The mages had jumped as individuals and arrived at the same conclusion en masse:

They thought I was the Inquisitor.

It was understandable, especially considering Chandler’s First Dictum Of Cynical Interpersonal Relations (People don’t want the truth, they actually just want the world to make sense). And honestly, of all the possible answer to the question, “Who is apparently capable of forcing abominations to reveal themselves by ringing an irritating bell?” he is the least unlikely option.

Less unlikely than the real answer, certainly.

I felt a deep bone-twisting sympathy for the mages, who were currently discussing - sans templars and Seeker - whether or not to be involved in evaluating the rest of their colleagues. Evaluating. Fenedhis, what a cheap euphemism. The mages were currently discussing whether they were willing to be involved in witnessing the second Harrowing of all their colleagues, and possibly throwing lightning at them if they proved to be abominations.

There weren’t enough painkillers in the world to stop that thought from making me wince.

“Did you know?” I asked Leliana. The words just fell out of my mouth.

“About Yardley, you mean,” she replied calmly. You’d need a Cole to hear the sorrow underneath.

“Not of a certainty, but there were… suspicions.”

I nodded, unsurprised. “We don’t hate you,” continued my inadequately supervised mouth. “Cole and I. It sucks, well, in an infinitude of sucky ways, and there simply aren’t any good answers anywhere because Yardley… wasn’t, anymore, and who he was now was pretty much the definition of a security risk because Pr- his loyalties weren’t to the Inquisition or even other mages and it could have ended in worse ways than smelly blankets, much much worse ways and at least now they’ll all know, and they want to so desperately, to be free of the fear that their friend or mentor or lover is wearing a false face, so-”

“Jump.”

“Wha… what?”

“Jump.” Leliana was crisper than spring cider. “Up and down. A dozen times.”

Sure?

I tucked my arms across my chest in the time-honoured tradition of all people with breasts and that was when I realised that my hands were shaking.

Oh. Awkward.

So, under the calm eye of the Mistress of Spies to the Inquisition, I jumped.

One. I think I’m past being embarrassed around Leliana.
Two. For the best, in the long run.

Three. It would have been nice to travel a less mortifying path to the destination, mind you.

Four. Hey! I said the right thing to her!

Five. Because she didn’t mean for me to get nearly incinerated. We know that.

Six. I mean, it was stunningly manipulative.

Seven. Get the most respected mages in one room.

Eight. Prove beyond a doubt that she possesses an abomination-revealing Something.

Nine. Mercy, I am so unfit.

Ten. Watch the mages fall in line.

Eleven. What else can they do?

Twelve. Still. Not angry.

Puffing like a many-times-mended bellows, I beamed. “Better! Still don’t hate you. Even with the - pant - you know.”

“I am glad to hear it,” cooed Leliana. It was true.


She heard the statement, understood it in its entirety, and then rejected it. I am not yet certain whether spies are all taught to do that, or whether it is a skill they acquired as part of the damage that makes them good at being spies in the first place.

I’m... getting quite skilled at analysing depressing facts, aren’t I?

Chapter End Notes

Authorial Meanderings:

Apparently this fic helped some of you through tough holidays, which..

Yesterday my sister asked me, "Did you ever expect it to have this kind of effect?" and I laughed. Pretty hard. "No. Hell no. I really didn't assume this would ever matter to anyone who wasn't me."

"How's that feel?"

Just... I mean, I'm housebound for all but about four hours a week and bedbound 50% of the rest. I started writing a silly piece of fanfiction just to be able to feel I could still DO something. And somehow it is comforting and encouraging and supporting so so many people, it's this weirdly political act in a time of institutionalised cruelty, it MATTERS, it changes the world just a smidgen in all the ways I want to be doing...
"Fucking fantastic," I told her. "Fucking FANTASTIC."
“We have some conditions for our cooperation.”

This from Beckett, a mage with a reputation for both his habit of striding into the middle of bowel-quakingly terrifying situations in order to demand all parties discuss the problem reasonably and rationally, and also his ongoing survival despite it. I would pay good money to hear his stories.

Their requests were equitable to a degree I found oddly depressing: mostly about how to handle those who did not “reveal themselves so flamboyantly as abominations, merely at the sound of a bell”. As much as I’d like to think he meant the attempted fwooshy murder, I knew he was referring to the fleshcrafting I’d heard. (All signs of the corpse were long gone before I returned, and I was Profoundly Glad for it. Ick.)

Leliana put up only the amount of resistance required to convince them they were not being taken for a ride.

Because they were, of course.

Cole is, like almost all spirits on this side of the Veil, congenitally blind to the presence of his kindred. They do not need him, thus they do not register. However once they do register - in this case, because of me acting as an aiming mechanism - he can communicate with no problems. All three of us were confident he’d make a compelling case.

So Leliana made all the right noises about due process and fair trial while I tried to find a comfortable position to lean against the wall. I no longer trusted the slightly charred stool, and I knew this would be a long day.

***

I rang the bell six more times.

Two ended in violence.

After negotiation, three spirits returned to the Void, leaving behind two mages who were whole except for a large missing piece of time, and one who laid down quietly and died as soon as the spirit left her.

And then there was… the other one.

***

“Oh, yes, dearie,” he replied affably to Leliana’s charge of abomination.

Even she blinked. Abominations come in many forms, but rotund and benign was an unexpected one.

“What are you then, demon?” This from Vivienne, tightly leashed fury.

“Ah, little Vivi,” he replied. “You never lost that directness you held as a child, did you? I always thought it quite charming. Feel free to address me as Greed, if you wish.”
There was an intensely awkward silence from the entire room. I was starting to enjoy this.

“You admit then, you are an abomination?”

“Why yes, Grand Enchanter.”

Fiona sounded profoundly disturbed, which takes a lot to accomplish. “And how long is it that you have been so?”

He hummed. “As of this morning… fifty-seven years, eight months and two days.”

More gobsmacked silence except for a choking noise from one of the Templars.

Eventually: “This cannot be,” she replied.

“Certainly it can. I keep excellent note of details.”

“But…” Fiona became silent, buried under the weight of objections. But I’ve known you so long. But no-one ever suspected. But you’re so damn jolly.

Beckett, bless his fearless heart, took the lead, manners externally unruffled. “Why did you gain the position you did, demon? Chief Archivist of the Diarmuid Circle?”

“I am Greed, my dear. It is not so hard to reason out.”

“You… you are greedy for knowledge?”

“Why yes. So superior to power or money, you know. It’s possible to share it and yet retain it!” He chuckled. It was a rich, warm, and completely genuine sound. (I was really starting to enjoy this.)

“And none of you can complain, can you? I uncovered so many long-lost publications, engineered exchanges of tomes and papers that benefited every Circle. Mutual benefit is a marvellous invention.”

“Ah.” Leliana, who had been watching with a critical eye.

He beamed at her. “I knew you’d catch on, little Nightingale.” I was quite certain he’d pinch her cheek if he thought he’d still have fingers afterward.

“Mutual benefit,” he repeated, twinkling. “Shall we bargain?”

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovely. I'm so glad you're still here.
“Secrets.” Greed enunciated the word with relish. “Some are bent copper coins and some. Why, some are sovereigns.”

The Left and Right Hands? These particular mages? All high-performance political thoroughbreds. The silence acquired a certain hungry attentiveness.

Which was immediately broken by Seeker Pentaghast, bien sûr.

“There is nothing you could share with us, demon, that would parole you for your crimes.”

“Which crimes are those, my dear? Other than the fact of my existence, I have committed no capital crimes. None at all.” The Seeker opened her mouth and he smoothly overrode her. “Not even Marcus, poor lad. His spirit died, true, but not by my hands.” He gestured as he said it, chubby fingers spread wide, innocent. “All I’m guilty of is… squatting in an unoccupied residence? There is no juridical entity that punishes such a crime with death, other than one small hamlet up toward Weisshaupt. Legally it is a fascinating case, but irrelevant because firstly, I have never been near the place, and secondly, I am not a fort capable of providing housing or succour to at least five members of the militia.”

His laugh rolled out again, warm and sincere. “I acknowledge that I am portly, but no-one is that capacious.”

When you can’t buy anything else, buy time.

Cole, presumably deep in conversation, did not reply.

Seeker Pentaghast, bless her, was not one whit moved by the geniality or the obscure legal precedents. “It is easy to claim innocence when no-one can prove you false.”

His twinkle increased to the point where I was mildly concerned. “Ah, but is that so?” He turned and waved saucily at me, behind my screen.

Oh.

Shit.

***

You could see the moment when, in silent conference, Leliana handed over a trust-me chit. The Right Hand was abundantly unimpressed but agreed, albeit with an abundance of disgusted noises.

The mages, the Templars, and one highly ruffled Seeker left the room. I realised suddenly that my mouth was dry.

Is there a graceful method to appear from behind a screen? If there is, I do not know it: I popped out like a badly-made jack-in-the-box.

The walk across the room was six miles long. I smiled guardedly, made no effort to shake hands. He didn’t mind.
“Emma, so lovely to make your acquaintance. Cole is rather gushing in his praise, you know.”

“I do. He’s cautiously optimistic about you.”

He laughed boisterously. “Praise by faint damnation! Marvellous.”

That got a small snort.

I realised the longer we took the worse this would be.

I said, “I don’t believe we can read you.”

“Indeed, I agree.”

Leliana narrowed her eyes - well, then what is the point of this?

I answered the unasked question. “We can’t be sure if Greed has committed any crimes.” I started to grin - my life is a marvellously odd thing. “But Cole and I can tell you if his body has.”

***

Leliana had retreated slightly for presumably tactical reasons.

We were sitting on the floor; I’d insisted. Neither of us were comfortable, even with our padding, and I was looking forward to our combined groaning once we had to stand up. Please let that happen.

“Third time’s a charm, right?” I asked no-one in particular.

“Haven’t had a good run with this, then?” was the avuncular reply.

“Very much not.” Don’t remember Willem, don’t remember Willem. Or fucking Gardener, either.

Cole-love? Are you certain this is gonna be okay?

hope huddles hidden

That was some comfort. I would have preferred a, “Yes, absolutely, I guarantee it,” but needs must.

I mean. Technically I didn’t need to do this at all. I could just… watch Greed get decapitated.

_Piss in a thrice-cursed bucket at the top of a windy summit._

Deep breath.

Deep breath.

I took Greed’s hands in mine.

Chapter End Notes

I love you. Are you looking after yourself in this weather?
Later, I would describe it like mooring a large galley. One line after another, thrown and made fast, bringing us together.

To start, there is just the body. I am it but watch it from outside, as we always do in dreams and memories. (Whichever this is.)

Marcus, surrounded by candles and sigils and odd gemstones, plump cheeks not masking his determination. A brilliant experiment into the Fade!

Confirmation of my hypothesis to Solas - souls can get severed. A silent musical twang and we are lost/gone/empty/wrong, only one instant before the body lays down like Harlan earlier today but in that one breath Greed, ever the opportunist, slides on in. All hunger, possibility sliding down their chin like peach nectar.

Ill-fitting, blundering around inside us (the sack of meat) writhing constantly, bumbling into our limbs and out again none of this seems right to them and then we breathe and all attention rushes to our lungs what is this what is this this endless need/demand/greed? Air in and then air out never stops stridently calling and this, this feels familiar. Greed makes their home in our lungs, returns to them in every uncertainty.

People seem difficult to them. Our face hurts from smiling - before we smiled all the time and when we smile now our muscles are tenseness and torsion and neither of us seem to understand why this is. It wasn’t like this when we were Marcus.

They adapt to us (the sack of Marcus) and to the other people quickly, all rapacity to learn. Skills acquired, devoured. How to body, how to human, how to mage, how to social. No-one learns faster than Greed.

The yearning avidity when regarding a library full of unread books. Shelf upon shelf of salivation, anticipation. Where to begin? For of course we shall read every one.

Marcus-us and Greed-us and Emma-us all unite for one moment of perfect shared wordlust. It is not the deep fusing of Haven, more like one lightning flash that illuminates the terrain. Lines are thrown and made snug. Now Greed’s voice can be heard, their intent sensed.

It is faster now, deeper. Greed absorbed all the crumbs of Marcus and ate them, of course he did what else could he do? and did he forget that we become what we devour or did he remember? he can’t say for sure it was a long time ago now and he has two names and both of them are him.

Greed does not remember the day that “they” became “he”. Greed does not remember the the day when the smile was just a tiny touch more than camouflage. Greed’s knowledge is detailed and voluminous, but some facts cannot be captured. He fears change less than some of his kind.

Books and debates and more books and ginger snaps and novelty and sameness and yet more books and…

I’m on the floor and there is a boot under my head and way way up there it belongs to Leliana and she is genuinely worried for me I mean not gonna lie she’s still ruthless as all get out but she cares
too is that better or worse?

“BLARFARHARBINS,” I said. This did not seem to reduce her concern.

I made more mouth noises then I sat up, gingerly. Greed was sitting with his hands held up in the eternal I-didn’t-do-it gesture.

“Fibber,” I accused. I was handed a mug of lemony water; I drunk it gratefully and with few casualties.

“Well, *that* was a thing.” I knew I wasn’t saying anything meaningful but the very mundanity of it helped somehow. “It’ll all work out in the wash. Make hay while the sun shines? Penny saved is a penny earned. Butts.”

Greed laughed at that. I blinked and stretched and yep, I’m me and everything is attached and Cole is fine.

Now for the easy part.

Chapter End Notes

I re-read this entire work last night, just to keep it fresh. (It's been nearly eighteen months since I started WHAT)

And I kept thinking, "Damn, this is good. It's really good." It's a pleasure to read something and be glad it exists, and - okay - a wee bit more pleasurable when you're the one who wrote it.

Anyway, be kind to yourself amongst the end-of-year madness, okay? Cole wants you to remember you're vital.
After A Strenuous Amount Of Indexing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the memory palace Cole and I arranged fifty-seven years, eight months and two days worth of… living. He works very quickly when he understands the process.

“‘You are very brave,’” he told me.

“I don’t think so, honey boy,” I replied thoughtfully. “I was just more afraid of watching him get eviscerated than I was of the alternative.”

He tipped his head (hatless, for once) to the side as he thought, which always makes me smile. Then he sidled over and hugged me.

“What was that for?”

“For…” His brow drew in. “Being scared of the right things. For being Emma-bee.”

Well. Well.

We extended our hug break for a few extra experiential minutes, and fuck anyone who disapproved.

***

“- there was some spectacularly vicious maneuvering around budget allocation time, but I mean that’s true for every archivist I’ve ever met. Plus a complicated system of… I’d call it blackmail but that isn’t quite right. What do you call it, Greed?”

“Risk and relationship management!”

“Rather a bland euphemism.”

“What would you have chosen?”

“Butter and crowbar!”

“It has a certain prosy charm to it, granted.”

He tipped an imaginary hat. Leliana was less than thrilled by the comfortable badinage we now had going on, but decided not to mention it.

“The butter is precisely calibrated gladhandling, while simultaneously preparing the crowbar - leverage on anyone who might possibly pose a threat now or in the future.”

I started choosing my words carefully. “This was used… I would say judiciously - Greed has a very healthy share of risk aversion. Less than First Enchanter Vivienne, in an average year. It could be argued that this information was utilised in a manner which caused the deaths of four persons. It could also be argued that those four persons sincerely had it coming.”

“Only four in nearly sixty years? Such restraint,” was Leliana’s only comment. Both Greed and I were smirking a little now. Leliana was mostly looking tired - I guessed it was the prospect of… well, another me to handle.
Time for the sugar. “Tell her about the caches, Greed.”

Greed has a special fondness for paper. Books, certainly, but also letters, bills of lading, ledgers, notarised birth documents, indiscreet billets-doux…

Once he started listing them, the rest of the issue was concluded. Greed was put into protective custody as part of “ongoing investigations”. He was cheerfully chatting to the templar who marched him away before the soundproof door closed behind them.

***

He was the high point of my day.

The tension piled on - waiting, holding the Irritating Bell mistrustfully silent. Is this another? Is this? No relief when they were not an abomination - I still had to complete the traitor checks, after all. I’d interacted with maybe a fifth of the mages in enough depth to be able for Cole to read them; the rest I had to build a bond with. From behind the screen.

In most cases, that bond was built on threads of sympathy, on the sudden hunch of shoulders and wariness in the eyes. Ingratiation and defiance. Fear.

At lunch I spent fifteen minutes drooling leek-and-fennel soup onto my cot. Shaken awake, I blearily drank more lemon water, used the privy, and climbed the ladder with a body that seemed made of witless lead.

And that was only half-way done.

***

When I pitched into my room, Chandler was waiting for me.

At my cautionary glare, he said, “As your handler, I am aware that you have had a long draining day. I solemnly vow I am here as your friend.”

“Huzzah.” I aimed for the bed and was redirected to my chair. “Whyyyyy.”

“Because you smell like death, pet,” he said simply. “Get Cole to do his awakeness trick and let me work.”

“Sbarely thingy now. Did it too many times.” My hair was undone, brushed out. He’d even managed to provide hot water to wash it. I started to relax and realised that would end Very Badly so I used my best stay-awake attempt: aimless rambling.

“Five times. Six? FuckIdunno. Like, the fancy-pantsy mages were getting fucking so loud by the end they. So good at regulilating their ‘motions but. Loooong day. Loooooong.”

“Head back,” was the only response.

“Tha’ feels nice. Just. No-one wanted this. No. One. We were all stuck in it together except not really ‘cos I was hiddened. Hided. Hidden. Fuck. Allofem thought I was the Quizitor except Viv. She wasn’t so sure. Which is nice, somehow? Comforting. She was so odd. Did even know triumphant terror was a thing until today. But it is. So. Huh. Did you know Fiona is King Alistair’s mother? Not ‘sposed to say. Shhhh. Also weird. People.”

Hair rinsed. He washed my face briskly, my hands gently. Picked up the towel. I kept talking, mostly
a muffled thesis about how people and how weird they are.

Chandler clicked his fingers in front of my face. “Huh?”

He gestured to my buttons. I looked pleading.

So the handsomest man I have ever met stripped me naked, popped my nightrail over my head, and tucked me in.

He kissed me on the head before he left.

***

There was a hot brick at my feet. No, two. I’ve had orgasms that felt less enjoyable.

Towel on the pillow because my hair is still damp. Warm feet. Finally, I can relax and let the inevitable unfold.

My eyes tried to shoot open as realisation dawned, but too late. “Shiii-”

Sleep grappled me under.

Chapter End Notes

Cole says you are lovely and you are trying your best.
Hello, darling. Catherine here, writing just before midnight. My hair is damp because I decided to enter the new year with exfoliated toes for some reason.

This year was... not gonna lie, sweetness. For me this year was *pretty fucking brutal*. Goodbye 2018, don’t let the door hit you in the ass on the way out!

But you, honey mustard, you were a blessing in my life. YES, even if I only know you’re here because my metrics increase. All of you are beautiful and splendidferous and I am so grateful for you.

I was gonna say I bought you a gift but that would be a fib. *Alicy* made you a gift, I shall merely play the ribbon.

It's a Chandler.
The one in my head has a slightly different chin, but the smirk is perfect and that is the most important part, no?

Enjoy, cutie.
I awoke in a haunted place.

The space was not larger than most marketplaces, but it gave the strong impression that it would continue being so in any direction you walked. The light sourceless as always, but harsher. More callous. Clay bricks in a herringbone pattern. A small splash of blood on the mortar between them.

On one stone bench, an elven apostate awaited my arrival.

How did he? Ah. Of course. Leliana, bless her terrifyingly prepared soul. I’m glad - I didn’t intend to breach our agreement about trips into the Fade.

Sitting in half-profile, he reminded me of nothing so much as a cat, going to elaborate lengths to ensure you know you’re being ignored.

I’ve had too long a day for this.

I plonked myself down where I arrived. “I caused seven people to die today,” I told the bricks. The words were soft, but acoustics are different in the Fade. No movement, but I could tell I had more audience than the bloodstain.

Touched the first brick. “Yardley. That Harrowing is well-named, isn’t it? No-one comes through unscathed. He came out of it convinced, *convinced* that pride would be his downfall. Irony comes a-knocking - so talented, so capable, and so dang humble, what a model mage he was! Sent to Kirkwall to provide an example for the others. The best rooms are up high - the Gallows had an excellent view of the City, surely Anders knew that. Voilà, one moment of pride… and his prophesied downfall.”

Second brick. “Empty-Pockets Pride.” Solas visibly shifted his head at the name. “She spent decades in the mirror of Kirkwall’s Circle. Centuries, maybe. Whispering, encouraging. ‘They can take freedom, choice, even life. But not everything can be taken from you. Head up, head up, don’t show them they won. You still have me.’ No idea how many would have crumpled without her voice in the night, her steel down their spine. And then Yardley. And then Redcliffe. And now here, and she’s not really *needed* anymore. Not important. One betrayal and she came apart. We betrayed her, Cole and I.”

Solas was now sitting next to me, as close as he ever gets. Naming the spirit as a person is what did it, I suspect.

“Understand,” I told his sad attentive face, “I don’t have the data for facile calculations about her ratio of good deeds to harmful ones. I don’t think it matters.”

“No?”

“No. The Chantry talks about spirits as the Maker’s first children. *Such* bullshit. Empty-Pockets Pride was birthed by Kirkwall, the city of chains - we have no right to complain when a child has her daddy’s eyes.”

Solas does silent sympathy very well. (In the Fade, at least.)
So I told him of a boy who never fit in anywhere. He and Rage had matched so well together, at first. But self-hatred is venom and it poisoned them both.

I told him the little I knew about Arla who died years ago, even though her date of death would be listed as today. Safe back in the Fade, the demon would miss her shape.

I told him the tragic tale of Kristophe and his endlessly terrible luck.

Then I paused, hand hovering over the seventh brick.

“Depair.” I choked the word out then stopped. The words were too heavy to shift.

“Hey,” I said in a verging-on-grotesque attempt at cheer. “I don’t suppose you’re in need of any double-entry bookkeeping?”

“I am not.”

“No staff that need managing?”

“No.” His attempt at amusement was about as dismal as my own. He looked woebegone and very old.

A flash of insight. This isn’t just me and our weird circumstances, is it? This felt formula, ritualised and wretched. Stale but freshly painful every time. This is the point where his relationships with non-spirits often die.

It’s hard to be friends with someone as pathologically self-sufficient as Solas. Simple as that.

The usual unspoken rhythm of give and take - cup of sugar? sure. here’s a book you’d like. can you help me move this? - it does not function here. He will give, when he wants to. (And only then.) But he will never, ever, ever ask for anything. Not once.

That’s hard to interact with. Most people will fall apart, slither away, under the glaring reality of Not Being Needed, Damn It.

I would have, too. Before Cole, I mean.

“Well, I’m willing to call you hahren,” I said airily. “But if you ever address me as da’len I’mma smack you, fair warning.”

“I shall take that under advisement,” he replied gravely. Perhaps a teensy relieved quirk in the corner of his mouth. I pass, I have made it beyond one more of the barriers of the intimidatingly intense obstacle course that is Eventual Besties.

I wish I could say the triumph made it all worthwhile, because it was there and a lovely thing. But truly, the more convincing reason to persist wasn’t mine. Cole never ceased reminding me that if connection was water, Solas would be staggering crabwise at mirages while holding swollen-tongue converse with his hat. Being friends with Solas was hard fucking work and probably always would be.

I could live with that.

“Despair sucked.” With a different weight gone, I now had the strength to move these words. “They registered us and they froze. Like, literally froze. Into two dozen shattered pieces which will run rampant through my nightmares for the foreseeable future, no doubt about it. But worse than the
grisly bloodless conjuration was… was…” I fumbled in the air, trying to find words.

“The feel of them?” Hahren is helpful. (I snickered internally.)

“No, although that was also very very unpleasant. No, it was… the orchestral fanfare of Cole’s terror. An instinctive withdrawal of every piece of him. Vertigo and revulsion and denial and all of it huge, huge and instant and primal and, and… impossible. He was never more alien to me than in that moment, that’s what I’m fumbling to say.” Solas nodded in perfect comprehension. “It was an alchemical reaction - two ingredients mix and both react violently and in this metaphor I think I’m the flask? It is very uncomfortable to be the flask.”

I took a deep sigh - the sham air was baked hard and no comfort to my projected lungs. “Anyway. I needed to say that. Thank you.”

“You are most welcome.” I could hear the unspoken da’len.

I narrowed my eyes warningly.

We both added the first ever chuckles heard in the Plaza of Sacrifice.

Chapter End Notes

Whoops indeed. I posted the next chapter instead of this one. Apologies to anyone who got confused there!
I overslept.

Two predictable outcomes:

1. I got one squished roll and some lacklustre porridge for breakfast.
2. Lydia.

Why would anyone be so inconsiderate to be late on such a busy day escaped her, she said to no-one in particular. Especially after a day spent doing Maker-knows-what. (I wondered briefly what the Maker’s stance would be on how I’d spent my day. Interesting thought.) People can be so selfish, she stated.

This particular subset of people could give less of a shit about her opinions, honestly.

***

We wrapped up some time after dinner. I ran quickly down the stairs to my room, and much more slowly up different stairs. I was admitted at a knock.

Leliana and Vanadirthavean were seated near the fire, drinking mulled wine. The distance, angles and body language suggested… rapier duellists. Fast-moving predators in a rare moment of relaxation. Loosely sheathed peril. Varric would sell a finger to see it.

“Good evening,” I said in a chirpy tone.

“Is aught amiss, Emma?” asked Leliana.

“No. Well, yes. Plenty. But that isn’t why I’m here.” If nothing else, I am willing to provide comic relief. At least one member of the audience enjoyed it, and then added a go-on gesture.

“Tomorrow will be frantically busy. I thought I might…” the absolute absurdity of this situation jumped on me from an oblique angle. Less than half a year ago I was in Ostwick, by the Maker’s theologically-disputed beard.

So I was grinning as I held up two wrapped objects.

“Io Satinalia!”

***

Leliana showed her typical nothing, but her internal reaction made me grin all the way down the stairs.

Vanadirthavean remained a cipher. It was an itchy feeling, and one to be resolutely ignored. With so many people angling to influence him, it seemed more considerate to let him hate his gift if he wanted to.

I put it out of my mind before I reached the stables. Good thing too.
Blackwall had brushed his beard.

it’s about respect

True, love. I just find that kind of respect extremely attractive.

I was being more impish than serious, really. I was still extremely tired and grumpy, despite all attempt at chippering. Some of it must have leaked through.

“Long day?” asked Blackwall.

I made a throttling gesture with both hands as agreement.

“I have just the thing,” he said, and led me onward.

Through the hay-scented interior. I was handed a... something. The outcome of a night of forbidden passion between a broomstick and a leather strap? If you squinted very hard, it might be called a sword. I gave it a few experimental swishes and was very sternly told to stop.

I terminated my first response due to inappropriate sarcasm levels and meekly asked why.

“Exercise cold and you’ll pay for it tomorrow.” A sudden memory of me the morning after the last time I touched a practice sword, hair a rat’s nest and buttons askew. That resonated.

He demonstrated, with the usual endless patience, a series of stretches. Correcting me with small gestures until I most definitely felt warmed. (Ahem.)

Once limbered we moved through the back areas, ending up in a reassuringly large space. In front of stacked crates was a feedlot taller than I was, oats and lucerne and molasses tightly bound in burlap.

Then Blackwall waited.

“No pointers? No technique?” I asked.

“Lookin’ to make it as a swordswoman?”

My laugh was a definite no.

“So why bother? Just have at it, my lady.”

“Until when?”

“‘Til you want to stop.”

“Really?”

He grinned. “Those recruits, they got nothing to do but train and rest. You’re already carrying a full load and we ain’t in a rush. We can afford to take it slow.” He did not say that with any suggestive inflection but my brain is an arsehole and provided its own unhelpful commentary.

Oh bugger this. Let’s get to it.

Chapter End Notes
Authorial Meanderings:

I'm a member of a writing group (something I could enthuse about for hours) and we recently challenged ourselves to write something from a different POV than we usually employ. I wrote a third-person snippet following Aster.

And I thought, "Hey! This is fun!"
And then, "Hey! I should share this with my darlings!" (That's you, btw.)

So I added a separate work to do just that. My current - loose, defined by illness and life - goal is to add one a week on Sundays. Some will be extra snippets that wouldn't fit into the flow of the main work. Some will be perspectives by people other than Emma. Feel free to make suggestions, I would enjoy that immensely!

Cole says you can let that thing go now.
I decided to start with something resembling decent form and used the ready stance, to general approval. Held the pseudo-sword firmly and swung. Unlike the training mannikin, which had responded with a woody crunch, this bale replied with a soft stubborn resistance and a bwomp noise. A soft indentation which sprang back instantly.


“Am I doing this wrong, or what?” I asked. I sounded very much like Sera, which was an accident - I think - but amused him anyway. I doubted very sincerely this was the treatment the recruits got.

“Tell me about that day of yours while you go,” he suggested.

I couldn’t tell him about how my back muscles were still aching after a day spent hiding in mage ambush, but there was one item on my grievance list that felt very much appropriate to my audience. The vitriol burst forth as if I’d spent hours rehearsing.

“Usually (bwomp) I stay on the seneschal side of the office, and today (bwop) I had a vivid fucking reminder of why I prefer it that way.” Bwamp bop. I think he enjoys it when I cuss. “Forcibly dragged (bwomp) into tomorrow’s preparations for our guests, oh woe (bwomp) is me.” Theatrical self-pity, with its own percussion section. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. (Bwomp.) In general dealing (BAMP) with the Quality is essentially (bamp) indistinguishable from (bamp) anyone (bamp) else except for (borp) the number of curtsies deployed. They are, y’know, (bwamp!) people.”

I had a quick look around the stables and realised they were still temporarily unoccupied - except for horses, who never snitch. I had a short window in which I could be blisteringly honest. The grip was starting to feel scratchy; real.

“Of course, (bwap bwap) since they are just people, (bip) the usual problem: some of them (BWAMP) are crap. Shitweasels (bop) with zero (bop) redee(bop)ming (bop) qualities. (BWEMP.) And often, (bwamp) because the Maker is cruel, (bwamp) with infinitely more resources (BAMP) and influence (BAMP) than the others I don’t despise.” He was nodding, sympathetic but with an iron edge around his eyes. Yep, correct audience for sure.

“I remember (bamp) having five-ten minutes of hope once (bwomp) that because we were doing such (bap) abundantly, undeniably vital work... maaaaybe wouldn’t need to pander to them? (bam bam bammmmmp) Seriously, that was optimistic (bwop) even for me. So... (barp) my entire day (bwamp) was full of stupid (bamp) frivolous (bamp) bullshit for stupid (bamp) frivolous (bamp) idiots, attempting to feed the endless (BWARB) yawping (BWARB) maw of the insatiably (BAMP) bored because tragically (bambambam) that is the best (bam) path to acquiring the resources we desperately need. (bim) Also, one of my co-workers is a complete bitch.”

At this point I start chuckling. Breathless and sweaty and fully aware of how ridiculous I looked. The stupid hay bale looked exactly the same as when I began. That made me laugh harder.

Exercise is more fun than I expected!

I prepared for the usual hug and ritual offering of pastry but was stopped again. “Going from hot into the cold, that’s the other mistake that you’ll pay for in the morning. Come and rest until you’ve
cooled down a bit.”

“Oh!” How did I get to this age without learning this? Does everyone already know?

I turned and offered one last duellist’s salute. “Adieu, Ser Timothy. You were a worthy foe.”

Already turning back toward his usual haunt, and you could see the moment when the pun registered. Encouragement!

“Are you acquainted?” I asked.

“Never had the pleasure,” he said. He’s such a good sport.

“Ser Timothy Rye. Of the Cloverfield Ryes? His mother was a Fescue.” He was shaking his head. “Une famille champion.” Now he was starting to look deeply pained. “Been outstanding in their field for, oh… three Hay-ges.”

I got a heartfelt groan at that last one.

Like I said, he’s a good sport.

Chapter End Notes

Grass puns. Onomatopoeia. I tell ya, this fic has it all.
There was a brisk knocking at my door and then two large chests let themselves into my room.

“Damn it,” I hissed. “It is a holiday. Holidays mean I get to sleep in, Chandler. That is what they are for.”

“Yes, yes,” he replied, “But I have something better in mind than blankets.”

“Impossible lies, nothing is better than blankets. Also, Io Satinalia.”

“And to you, pet.”

He put the chests down and waited smugly until curiosity got the better of me. (How is Curiosity doing? I miss him.)

“Fine, screw you, what’s in there?”

“A challenge!”

He theatrically opened one chest and pulled out... a Gown. Gold damask with a black rococo pattern. Petit-point embroidery at collar and cuffs and hem. You know, the kind of outfit that would cost roughly three year’s salary for me to afford.

“Uhhh... what am I supposed to do with that?”

He told me.

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“You are joking.”

“I am not.”

“You are insane.”

“Pet, you can do this.”

“Even if I agree - which I do not - why in the blazing fuck should I?”

“A chance to fool the foolish.”

“Not really my style, dear.”

“And you’d get to eat their meals.”

Damn. That was compelling.

“And what would you be wearing, Chandler?”

He reached into the other chest and pulled out another gown, this one delphinium blue.
Oh shit, we'd match so nicely!

I lost the debate when I started to laugh.

***

A few conditions were very firmly established.

First, this was not a competition because I would always lose, obviously. Instead, I would be awarded prizes depending on how long I managed to last without being revealed as an impostor.

(Did Chandler know what the prizes were? No. But he swore to make them worthwhile.)

Second, Chandler would be doing the hair and makeup. He made that condition; I cheerfully agreed.

I was a bit less cheerful when he made me promise not to complain while he was working, but did.

Third, I was allowed to do my actual Satinalia errands while he got started on his coiffure.

***

I floated back in an hour later.

Chandler looked extraordinarily pretty. I especially enjoyed the look of his moustache combined with his eyeshadow.

I carefully pecked his powdered cheek and told him it was a pity he wasn’t interested.

He laughed, clearly flattered, and then bade me sit.

My desk was covered in pigments and unguents and an entire torturer’s academy worth of implements. I carefully deposited my basket on the bed instead and braced for impact.

***

Wigs are not the labour-saving devices you might think. First you need to secrete all the existing hair, then very very firmly anchor the wig in place, and then you still have to style the locks as you would regular hair.

I had been extremely patient - if you asked me - through the maquillage. (If you asked Chandler, my squeals during his work on my eyebrows were both undignified and unwarranted. Psh.) I had also been mostly silent, solely for logistical reasons.

Now, with him past the scalp-bruising part and into the part I could see nothing of, I started talking.

“So that was interesting.”

Chandler replied with an interrogative grunt through a mouthful of pins.

“The gifts. It was… monotonous. No! Bad choice of word. Repetitive. It was repetitive.”

Another questioning mmm?

“Circe and Harden and the rest, Aster’” - Chandler made a dismissive noise; he utterly fails to see why I care so much about her - “and then Tara’s family. There are more to do but that was all I could - ow! - fit in.”
A small muffled noise that might possibly be construed as an apology and an invitation to explain further.

“It… gifts are usually a tiny bit nerve-wracking. That moment when you hand it over and you’re committed and you have no idea” - Chandler, mouth still full of pins, reappeared within my field of vision, eyebrow clearly communicating that using the second person was not in any way an accurate choice - “Oh, fine. I get nervous, usually. I’m never sure that I got it right and that the person will like it. Better?”

A smug nod. He returned to work.

“But this time Cole helped. It was almost slightly eerie, except in a nice way? Most of them cried. And then they all said, almost verbatim, ‘How did you know? This is exactly what I wanted.’”

I smiled, grateful that due to his expertise I could do so without danger to the layers.

“And I received such lovely gifts, Chandler!”

Very, very carefully I reached sideways, dragged the basket closer. I brandished one of its contents.

“That,” said Chandler with polite disdain and no pins, “is a bundle of sticks, haphazardly twined together.”

I turned around. “It’s a dog,” I said firmly. “Aster found out that I like dogs, so she made me one. See?” I turned the piece around.

“My apologies, pet. Clearly, it is a dog.”

“Damn right.”

He didn’t continue the mockery.

I don’t think he dared.

Chapter End Notes

Never mock the dog.
I hadn’t seen what I looked like yet.

My room contained only a small hand mirror which had been taken away before the process began, presumably due to Chandler’s instinct for the dramatic. Now painted, bewigged, masked, and eased into The Robe (my suspicions that it was a tool of the spies - an asset’s asset, if you will - was confirmed by an ingenious system of adjustable darts and seams; it fit as if made for me) I sauntered out to the large and adequate mirror that served our floor.

I stared at my reflection in disbelief.

The person I saw was… lush. Abundant. Fabulous.

She was also, very very clearly, Not Me. If given my own budget (and a modiste and team as talented as Chandler, bien sûr) I would look nothing like this. This woman was inclined to dark and dramatic looks. From a blue-black riot of curls past kohl-smoked eyes, amber beads, all the way to vicious button boots, she was…

...who was she? This noble I was going to pass myself off as?

She looked like a woman who smoked cheroots and drank neat brandy. She looked like she had a wicked sense of humour and derided the Randy Dowager as weak tea. She looked like she fornicated with pirates and stole their hats, to boot.

She wasn’t me, but damn if she didn’t look like fun.

“You brilliant gorgeous fucker,” I breathed. Chandler fanned himself with false modesty and blue ostrich plumes that matched his dress.

He cocked an elbow.

I took it.

We swanned away.

***

As we navigated the back halls - hiding diligently from those who would expose us - I concocted a lady.

A name first, I suppose. Harilla would be a little too on the nose. Pity. Maybe it should start with Em in case I screw up? Emily. Emily? That seems safe. No, she doesn’t feel like an Emily. Emmalina? Definitely not. Emilia! Yes. Lady Emilia, that’s a name with just enough eyebrow in it to work.

Second, background. She isn’t important enough to be known, definitely not Orlesian. Marcher is easy enough - so many of the bloodlines have bred spares that there’s an entire network of manors for them. She probably holds the nancy courtiers in contempt, none of them have spent a night with a labouring mare. Knows every tenant and crofter by name. Usually wears riding boots and tweed, both liberally bedaubed with mud.
She’s here to... scope out potential suitors for her third daughter, the awkward one who giggles nervously when addressed. She has a vestigial husband who she refers to simply as Him. And she has decided that, on Saturnalia and foreign soil, she is going to have some fun.

After all, no-one is their usual selves today.

except me

Except you, honey.

I was so captivated by fleshing out the backstory of Lady Emilia - she was a Townsende, a clan so persistently fertile that not even their members knew every relative - that we reached the doors before I knew it.

Oh shit.

Shitshitshit.

What in the name of all that is holy am I doing here?

Chapter End Notes

Shorter than usual chapter, due to Stuff(TM).

You have the most adorable face, you.
What’s the worst that could happen just a harmless Satinalia prank, right? right? oh sure, just a wee wholesome Satinalia jape that ridicules the dignity of the nobility oh sure, sure, they’re famously relaxed about affronts like that…

At my inner and outer elbows, two men watched me patiently. Like they were waiting for me to grasp a blindingly obvious fact - oh. **Oh. Of course.**

I can destroy any person in that room.

Not that I *would*.

I wouldn’t.

But I *could*.

Shoulders back. Insincere smile.

“Let’s get this fucking party started,” I drawled.

***

Like all ongoing shindigs of this type it had at least one of the Inner Circle on hand at all times to receive the guests.

At this time, it was Lady Josephine.

I wasn’t really sure how I felt about this.

She recognised me, of course. (This didn’t end the challenge because she was one of the few people Chandler and I had agreed wouldn’t count.) Under her smooth diplomat face her eyes went wide.

Chandler swooped in and under the veil of yadda yadda whispered something in her ear. Her eyes went momentarily wider - shock? or was that… sorrow? - but by the time she turned to me the façade was back in place.

“Such a pleasure, Lady…”

“Emilia.” I supplied. Chandler, blocking us from view, rolled his eyes ostentatiously at my choice; I ignored him.

Lady J performed all the requisite courtesies instinctually, her eyes to the middle distance. I waited: I knew what that meant.

“...and the buffet tables are downstairs. By the way, it would be very kind if you could find out why Lords Alphonse, Fauvain and -”

I interrupted as gently as possible. “You know it’s my day off, my lady.”

She nodded, apologetic but unrepentant, and added but if I should *happen* to find out why those
particular ladies and lords are here…

Her dimple is a terrifying weapon and ought to be peace-bonded.

***

One of Chandler’s rules: I must introduce myself to at least two-thirds of the guests and converse with them for at least three minutes. Seventeen short conversations. Fifty-one minutes of superficial chit-chat. Easy peasy.

My plan was sheer elegance in its simplicity: meet and greet a half-dozen of those nobles, then make a prolonged and thorough acquaintance of the buffet.


***

The rotunda had - with the Unambiguous Exception of the rookery - been converted into all that was necessary for the party. Spaces for performers and dragooned special guests, spaces to see and be seen, spaces - I had heard - full of delicious degustations, and of course, many many many spaces to hold private converse.

I sidled into one and beckoned Lady J to join me.

With no preamble, I named seven lords and ladies. “They’re part of a new political faction; they’re calling themselves the Boni.” I could not forbear from a small lip curl - more than a few groups over the years had named themselves The Good Men, and this one certainly wasn’t showing any signs of breaking the deeply ironic trend of that choice. “Their weightiest goal is to convince the Empress to instate a privy council to quote-unquote ‘consider the needs of the people’. They have a few modest ideas about who should be on that council, bien sûr.”

Lady Josephine looked troubled but did not interject.

“They’re here to scheme and recruit in semi-privacy; also to decide if the Inquisition is a useful ally. And gather an example - the Inner Council is operating efficiently enough to make…” My mouth tasted bitter; I gulped the remainder of my brandy cocktail.

“Make an elf look competent?” she finished gently.

I nodded then barreled onward. If I let the anger slip through my fingers only sorrow might remain, and this kohl took far too long to apply to let that happen. "Predictably, most of them combine a poorly calibrated sense of their own importance with the aforementioned cheerful patronising bigotry, but the real problem is-"

"Emma." I was so startled to hear my actual name I hiccupped and fell silent. Lady Josephine continued in a gentle but inexorable tone. "It is your day off.

"But you said -"

"I shouldn’t have." She looked down at the white knuckles of my goblet-clutching hand. This was alcoholic beverage number two and I hadn't eaten anything yet, which tells you how well my plan had fared. "Tomorrow we shall meet and talk politics and factions. We shall decide how to handle our guests." They would run for the hills if they heard her say so. (Had they a spoonful of sense to share among them.) "For today, enjoy yourself." I opened my mouth to argue. "For me."
"Yes, my lady," I replied. What the fuck else *could* I say? "Oh! Your gift."

I presented her with a small wrapped scroll. Inside it, carefully written, was one paragraph.

She looked puzzled, quizzical. I explained: "The Head Clerk of the Third Archive is unmoved by money. He cares not for influence. *That*, however..."

Her face at realising what I had made possible nudged my crush upward a few notches.

I bravely accepted my fate.

Chapter End Notes

My dearest darlings, Stuff(TM) continued to get in the way. Last week I missed publishing a chapter! Teh horrors!

Hopefully that will not be repeated. *crosses all the things*

You are marvellous.
Now What?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

So here I was, at a party full of people I disliked, with a dozen conversations to navigate and two brandy cocktails merrily sloshing around in my empty stomach.

Wait. I’m not Emma today. I’m Lady Emilia. This is her problem.

I started to giggle.

For years Lady Emilia had diligently grown acres of fucks, using irrigation canals and three-field crop rotation to ensure a healthy fuck yield. But first came the floods, and then a fuck blight ravaged the seed stores. Now all the farms were fallow, and save only one small greenhouse of fuck varietals her bins were empty. The days of abundant fuck harvests were over.

Around the thresher they said it in hushed tones:

Lady Emilia had zero fucks to give.

Shit, I’m going to go have some fun.

***

My new one-woman play entitled Lady Emilia’s Carefree Adventures opened to an internal ovation. Scene One: swanning down to the banquet area in the ballroom and eating with gusto and unfeigned moaning noises. Maker’s duodenum the food was good.

I got through a couple of dutiful conversations by adding a diverting extra for myself. Replying to every question with a song lyric, playing a unilateral game of Statues, that sort of thing. It filled the time.

Then I found myself next to two giggling ninnies who reminded me vividly of the non-existent daughter I’d conjured an hour or so before: more breeding than chin, scads of education but no experience. One of them had clearly read somewhere that pastels were the correct choice for débutantes and had persisted in the face of her pleading seamstress. (She looked both seasick and in the final stages of liver failure.) Her name was Lady Beatrice.

With her was Lady Violetta, who ran to watery blue eyes and slightly bucked teeth; the overall impression was of a kind-and-not-especially-bright rabbit. She undoubtedly sends every single one of her friends and relations a very nice card on their birthday.

I flicked an eye sideways to see who they were giggling about.

I began to grin.

***

“Good morning, gels,” I said as I breezily swanned between them. “Who are you - ah. Got your eye on the Bull, do you? Well worth your time, I must say.”

Violetta gasped, “You mean you -?”
My laugh was much bigger and much lewder than the usual run of things. “I most certainly did! Absolutely killing time I had, too. Pity about the cell bars, though.”

Beatrice blinked and said, “The… bars?”

My eyes twinkled. “Bit of a long story, I’m afraid. But he adapted quite brilliantly.”

There was the kind of silence that can only be produced by two very naïve girls trying to calculate unorthodox carnal logistics and failing.

So I explained.

With gestures.

Violetta’s mouth fell open. Beatrice kept throwing sideways glances at The Iron Bull’s hands and back to me, her eyes growing wide. “Didn’t it hurt?” she squeaked.

“Ah, girls,” I said genially. “My precious, uninformed dears. By commencing the penetration with only one finger -”

Violetta’s mouth opened even wider. Beatrice began to openly take notes.

***

I cannot claim I ran the entire gamut of sexual practices during my impromptu lecture, but I assuredly offered a broad introduction to most of them, as well as a compelling sales pitch for masturbation and a very thorough grounding in consent.

Beatrice’s parents would faint if they heard it. Violetta’s father, who had spent the last year or so steeling himself to deliver a much limper version of the same, would be relieved.

The girls themselves? All the best Satinalia pranks end up with the victim sincerely thanking the prankster, I think.

My day was taking a turn for the better.

Now where shall I go?

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the delays, my dears. Stuff (TM) was joined by Bureaucracy Shenanigans, Pest Recurrence, Car Trubs, and Sudden Phone Battery Demise.

Not the best week I’ve ever had, tbh. EXCEPT for the lovely comments from new readers and prior ones. I don’t make long replies most of the time; once I focus all available energy into the text I generally have little left over except all-caps endearments. But you are all special and beautiful and I am so so glad I am writing something that you like.

Also, I giggled the entire way through that no-fucks section.
Swanning Around

Chapter Notes

I don't know about you but I hate when a fic has long exchanges in a language I don't understand so I need to continually scroll down and back up again and find my place each time.

As a result, I tend to make all such inclusions obvious from context or able to be looked up later without breaking the flow.

This time I couldn't manage either because Flirting, so I shall tell you now that the upcoming sentence translates to "I have not yet begun to enchant you."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You look like you’re having fun,” said The Iron Bull. He was grazing from a mound of food next to him; most would fail to notice how precisely he handled the tiny amuse-gueules.

“Beautiful, you could pretend you didn’t know it was me. Just for a second.” He smirked and shook his head. Even Hissrads have their limits, I suppose. “Do you like my getup?”

“Whoever you are today, she looks extremely fuckable.” It was my turn to smirk and flourish my fan.

“Lady Emilia.”

“Enchanté, madame.”

“J’ai à peine commencé à vous enchanter,” I drawled back. Both of us let it sit in the space before laughter, where lip-biting and impropriety dwell. We were playing with play, flirting with the lines. It was Satinalia, after all.

Speaking of…

I presented him with a gift. He unwrapped it, smelt the familiar odour of horn balm, and then froze. Froze like a startled deer. I did not need Cole to see the calculations running.

Horn balm this far south means Varric and that means Kirkwall, Varric has not yet managed to re-create a reliable raven system which means overland both ways plus turnaround to acquire this stuff - not easy - and ship it back and that’s likely three weeks including travel times and if that’s correct she hobbled out of the healer’s tents and directly to Varric to order it which is making me a much much higher priority than I am comfortable with and if that is correct…

“When I ordered this jar - *which I did two weeks ago, by the way* - Varric mentioned there are still merchants stuck with pallets full of the stuff. I don’t know how fast you’ll go through it once - spring? it’s spring, right? - arrives, but he’ll be easily able to meet demand.”

He favoured me by not hiding his series of responses. First was that of one caught out in a simple mathematical error, pretending not to be embarrassed by it - almost irresistibly boyish, that. Second was a deep amusement at how accurately I’d read him; it wore the shape of a mentor, proud of his
clever protegée. And third, deepest of all, was a simple joy. The joy of being seen and understood and still mysteriously liked at the end of it all. I wish that only spies felt that way, living their lives of deception and falsehood as they do, but no. Every single one of us, spirits and spies and scribes and extremely petty nobles alike, all of us still had a small conviction inside ourselves that if anyone saw us, the real us, that the other party would run screaming.

Fuck, brandy cocktails make me philosophical as shit.

So anyway, he gave me a hug and Cole a scruffle (very careful not to disarrange the curls) and I was given my gift.

It was my turn to make faces.

What the heck a pair of leather straps oh! because the laces on my brown boots are frayed and close to snapping after their adventures how in the actual giddy fuck has he noticed that? all my skirts are more than ankle-length and it’s not like he’s anywhere near ground level… did I wear them on the day we canoodled for a couple hours? nope, either Cole told him or he’s just that bloody observant my goodness that is impressive and oh! oh! these aren’t from the merchants because I’ve only had these back for a little while and everyone has been sold out of bootlaces is? is? yes, oh. oh. these are the same colour as the binding on his bracer. this is his personal stock. oh. that is…

It was a good thing we were in a nook with strategic lighting, because no real noble would ever permit anyone to witness the smile on my face. I hugged them gratefully and popped them away.

The Iron Bull, who had clearly enjoyed watching me gush, then said, “Hey, Cole. Got something for you too.”

me?

Yes, Cole-love. Why not?

because I’m... me

Get out there!

We swapped and Cole took over. I didn’t know my eyes could actually go that wide and guileless.

“Hello, The Iron Bull.”

“Hey, kid. Having fun?”

“All the needs are simple today. They thrum, strings in the stream. It’s loud but quiet, too.”

A very Ben-Hassrath nod. I’m sure people are easier targets on days like this, but I’m glad he hasn’t entirely lost the capacity to enjoy it like a guest, not an opportunity.

“This is for you, Cole.” The Iron Bull again put leather into our hands. This time a money pouch, oiled and plain. Practical. Cole stared at it, uncomprehending.

The Iron Bull explained gently. (He would be so great with children. I can only think that kind of thought safely when I’m not in control of our face.) “You still don’t know what to do with your wages, right?”

“It’s so heavy,” Cole said. Sudden pang. I had been too busy being amused by his bafflement to realise that the currency, carrying as it does the imprint of a thousand thousand hopes and fears and
dreams, would be more than metal in a pocket. No wonder he’d wanted me to get rid of it.

Sorry, Cole-love.

... how many cities can you build with one hammer?

As always you are very kind.

Then The Iron Bull explained that if Cole wanted, he could put wages into that pouch and they would be taken away from Skyhold when The Iron Bull goes on operational excursions with the Inquisitor and used to help people met on the way.

I didn’t know my smile could go that wide, either. It actually hurt our face a little.

“Thank you, The Iron Bull.”

“You’re welcome, kid.”

We swapped back and as I was shaking out the after-effects I noticed something very, very interesting.

My Lady Emilia was back in full force.

Chapter End Notes

HEY GUYS

I received a comment from a number of new readers - hello darlings, love your faces - and one of them clearly is wondering if this has become one of the many abandoned fics that break our hearts.

No. Non. NYET.

*totes skippable info about me*

I had a number of extra Stuff in the last month, most of which were lovely. A long visit from one of my besties, lunch with understanding peeps, an invite to sing in a small show! Lovely Stuff, but the annoying fact is the recovery period doesn’t really differentiate between Good Stuff and Bad Stuff. So that knocked me flat on my ass for a bit.

Also... there's a difference between being in pain and being AWARE of being in pain. The first one is true for me all the time and is honestly not that big of a deal - like having one of those headaches you wouldn't bother taking an aspirin for. But the second one SUCKS. VERY HARD.

And either my pain levels have snuck up or my tolerance has dropped a bit, ’cos I am now aware of being in pain 24/7.

I have an appointment with a rheumatologist in June where we can explore better pain management options, and I'm getting better at dealing with it, but this shit is tiring.
*back to the point*
Unless I die I am finishing this fic, I promise you faithfully. We're gonna get there.

I am going to be much slower for a bit, and probably a bit less polished. This chapter was written in very small chunks over a month and is honestly not quite as good as I wanted - I am quite possibly going to come back and improve the flow in the future - but 90% is better than 0%, right?

Love you. Thanks for being patient.
There’s a certain kind of boring that is intensely comforting.

For me, it starts a few days into any visit to my parents. The novelty and the gifts and the gossip are all complete and I wake up and wander down to the dock to watch the fishers coil their nets; the same dock and the same fishers and the same nets. The same exact conversations, word for word. Same old tired jokes. When I was young I hated it, but now it soothes me.

Clearly, Lord Dorian’s equivalent is… this.

Odd when you think about it.

I swiped another tidbit and asked with patently false casualness, “How goes the seduction of the altus, anyway?”

He stole back his morsel, ate it, and replied with equal insouciance, “Going fine. Slow and subtle.”

Oh.

Damn.

I took a moment, fan and brain both racing madly, to sort out what I was able to say, what was right to say, where the lines existed.

“Beautiful,” I said very carefully, “do you think that Lord Dorian’s past affairs have been slow and subtle by preference, or by necessity?”

One loooong pause.

“Shit.”

He scruffled the Cole-spot, added an affectionate thumb down my cheekbone, and strode away.

I ate the rest of the plate while watching with amusement. Within two minutes Lord Dorian’s eyebrows were to his hairline and he was starting to visibly stammer.

I’d been wondering what to give him for Satinalia.

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A bit later, and I had successfully lied to nearly half the nobility present in Skyhold, excepting those those who were asleep, mingling with the Common Folk, or enthusiastically fornicating in a linen cupboard. (Farmhands are not the only ones who experience a bumper crop of August babies.)

I decided to reward myself with another trip down to the banquet tables.

Two of those and a scoop of that? yes please. I’ve already eaten four of those spiced liver things but they are so gooood just one more. Okay, two. Then...

I saw Elise first and brightened the way you do when you see a friend in a foreign town. Of course,
to her I am at best a face she vaguely associates with wages and paperwork, but what of that? I still think of her when I see the scar on my left ankle.

Next I saw what she was doing. The polite grimace, the soft murmured negations. If her hands weren’t full of mugs she’d be waving them in a series of gentle fending-off motions. Such a compliment, my lord, truly I am honoured, but I must decline. Thanking him for his attentions and sidling away. I’ve lost count of the number of times I have seen this.

Contradanse complete, she left with her mugs. Normally that would be the end of it.

But I saw the denied aristocrat’s face after she’d gone.

It held a look I had seen before.

###

I’ve been working in the castle just long enough to not get lost in the corridors, but I still often find myself exiting through a door other than the one I’d planned.

Now I have accidentally barged into an awkward moment.

The maid, whose name I have not yet learned, is dark and snub-nosed. The lord is long-fingered and cadaverous. He leers a question, she twitters an extremely polite refusal, she curtsies, she leaves.

And then he… looks at her retreating back.

I scatter-shot a curtsy at the room and scurry away at speed.

Fuck?

I haven’t made any friends here yet, not, like, real ones. The head clerk is a nice enough man but he had a complete fucking meltdown last week because a decorative stone was loose in one of his clasps and he’d caught this before the stone fell out, even.

Besides, what am I going to say to whoever-it-is?

“So there was this lord, I think he was a lord anyway, and he looked weird.”

I’ll be laughed out of the castle!

“No, really! He had a look. Like, ugly.”

An ugly lord, oh my. Call the town crier.

I don’t know what to say or who to say it to. But I know something bad has just happened.

###

I was naïve then, and very young.

Even if I hadn’t known how to articulate it, I was also completely correct.

The next morning in the servant’s quarters I found a cynical old baggage named Carlotta flinging odds and ends into a basket. Some maid had sassed a lord, she said. He’d complained, she’d been fired. Let go without a reference.
“But… that isn’t what happened,” I managed to stammer.

“Never is,” she replied. “Lucky to not be pregnant, at least.”

At my dumbstruck and horrified face she’d laughed. “Way of the world, ducks,” she’d said.

***

Way of the world.

She wasn’t entirely wrong. Or more accurately, from one specific vantage point she was entirely correct.

Way of the fucking world.

I’d failed the snub-nosed dark maid whose name I had never gotten a chance to learn.

And others. I’d failed others.

But this time I could do it right.

***

I cut Chandler from the herd and into an extra-secluded niche.

“Help me destroy a man,” I said.

Chapter End Notes

I'm starting to begin to write consistently again. Woot!

And don't worry, adorable concerned people, I am ALSO being very very careful with managing my health and energy. I would never sully your enjoyment by hurting anyone, including myself.

Cole says to be extra careful in the changing weather. He also says the birds are worth listening to.
Chandler opened his mouth.

"And don't begin a terrible impression of someone who has just undergone a cerebrovascular accident," I snapped, "or swiveling a finger in your ear saying, 'I must have misheard you, pet' or any of that tripe. You heard me perfectly."

"Oui, madame," he replied with an adequate attempt at meekness.

Good. "Who first, or why first?"

"I admit, I am awash with fascination as to motive."

"A guest is about to get one of the maids - it's Elise, if that matters to you - " he shrugged; impossible to tell if he was truthful, "fired for having the effrontery to refuse his advances."

"Tsk, tsk. Terrible manners, I grant you. But rudeness rarely deserves death."

"I didn't say kill! I said destroy. And you know damn well it's never just one maid. It's a crowd of maids. And flogged kennel boys. Bankrupted tenants. One boy run over by a carriage and his heartbroken parents who had a handful of coins flung at them when they cried out for justice."

Chandler looked flummoxed. As I've said before, diplomacy fails in the face of the truly ugly. Addendum: charm flounders in the face of the deeply earnest.

You could see him cycle through personas before deciding on Concerned But Caring Uncle. (Not his best rôle.)

"I... right. Well." He was seconds away from awkwardly trying to pat my shoulder when luckily my sense of the absurd saved us both and I laughed. Well, more an angry bark, but the tension became less full of edges and more a roiling simmer.

A deep breath.

"Any more questions about why him?" I remained a little curt.

"Not your choice in targeting, no. But I remain unsure as to why you are not proposing taking this to our respective employers and making it their problem to deal with."

"Because they would protect Elise."

He rarely gets to see me be more cynical than he is, but is certainly well able to catch on. "Ah. Elise, but not those past. Or, of course, those yet to come."

"Yes."

He nodded in agreement of my analysis. Both our bosses would want to help, but neither would be able to justify doing so.

"And your..." He made a twirling motion toward my temple. (Why does everyone think Cole lives
“I mean he’s pretty drunk.” Chandler made a startled look. “Not the cocktails, that doesn’t touch him unless he’s driving the body. But right now there are dozens, maybe hundreds of people in his immediate vicinity all getting what they want. So he’s a little wobbly, but he still says that the gauze is piled knee-high and we have a mattock.”

“I take that is a yes.”

I nodded. “So… are you in?” I tried to make this sound casual, as if I had any chance of succeeding without him. I failed utterly. I could feel the heat in my cheeks and the cold in my hands.

“Might as well.”

“Might… as well?” Destroying another person is something one can agree to like a second cup of tea?

“Watching you educate the young was the most amusing part of the morning. Seeing you transmute into a rhetorical firebrand is almost guaranteed to be the best part of lunch, honestly.”

Huh.

So, either he is being completely transparent and is now agreeing to ruin a man for the mild entertainment value, or he is covering his real motives so thoroughly that I cannot see a single sign of them.

That seems… bad?

But what other option do I have?

***

Chandler made a guess as to the name of the lord in my sights.

His guess was correct. I wasn’t surprised. He, in turn, was not surprised by my lack of surprise, and so on.

He then used the still-giggling Cole and I to dig for… something. I understood the drift behind almost none of the tacks he was choosing. (Why would his preference for laced boots over buttoned ones be relevant? Why does it matter that he never eats hothouse oranges? Why?)

It took Chandler less than five minutes to plan the purging of an aristocrat. Even in my bridled state that was chilling. Perhaps, I thought, he already makes these plans habitually and he was merely fine-tuning? That wasn’t a comforting idea either.

“Keeping it simple,” he told me patronisingly, “you are going to spread the rumour that Lord Drumford is secretly trading information with Grand Duke Gaspard in exchange for future favours once de Chalons takes the throne. Close your mouth, pet.”

I did. “But… Lord Drumford prides himself on being a loyalist. He’s thoroughly obnoxious on the subject.”

“Quite. Which is why the rumours will be effective.”

“But…” I sputtered.
A flamboyant and contemptuous eye-roll-and-sigh, accentuated by the make-up. “Go on, Lady Emilia. Do say it before you choke.”

“But… but he hasn’t committed treason. Or even contemplated it. He’s… he’s innocent.”

“Oh dear, what a moral dilemma, however shall we manage,” drawled Chandler. “By all means, feel free to go tell that assembled throng the truth. ‘Lord Drumford treats his underlings shabbily.’ I’ll stand by to catch them when they faint.”

I hate it when he’s right like this.

“You wanted to destroy him, with all haste. Considering the limitations, this is the best I can do. Take it or don’t.”

there’s nothing else

What do I do, Cole?

be

Or was it ‘bee’ he said? Should I sting?

Should I?

Chapter End Notes

Chandler may well be my favourite character to write.
Decisions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s not, really it’s not, like I don’t understand the fine art of character assassination. But bringing someone down with a lie feels like such a… *Lydia* thing to do.

Worse, doing it with one of the few marginally acceptable parts of his personality. It often makes him a conversational bore, and he dramatically overestimates his importance (he’s met Empress Celene three times in the last year, and only one of those meetings lasted longer than ten minutes) but…

Wait.

Wait.

He is absolutely certain he’s So Very Important. To his family. To the Empress. To the entire Empire of Orlais. All of Thedas, perhaps! So important, in fact, that the botherations of the little people are especially irksome. How dare they refuse someone as So Very Important as he is? Don’t they understand that the little people are supposed to do whatever he wants?

Look at it that way, and this particular approach held a certain poetic justice.

Beware we little people, Lord Drumford. Some of us have morally-dubious friends.

***

A heartfelt sigh.

Five heads turned inquisitively to me. “What troubles you, madame?”

“I’ve been looking for a suitable match for my Lavinia and I thought that Lord Drumford’s younger step-son would do, rather. But after what I just heard” - with a flick on my fan over to another group of conversers - “clearly I must keep searching.”

The predictable reaction. “Oh? What did you hear?”

***

Tell *her* and *them* and *them*, Chandler had said, get the rumour embarked. “And afterwards, stay far away while the actual work is done.” He called my face perfidious, which I decided was overall a compliment.

I tried to have another conversation but I immediately had to concede Chandler’s point: anyone who hiccups when nervous is not designed for this kind of secret-keeping. I went up to the next floor, where Jarrah was serenely removing crumbs from a set of treatises. Dorian would have definitely said these particular volumes would be improved were the mice to devour them. I giggled at the thought, and the general surreality of *having* that thought while down below me…

Books. Books are an excellent distraction and a mask all in one. Hooray for books.

***

I re-read the same four sentences a thousand times over, never once gaining any sense from them.
Then I arranged myself in a Lady-Emilia-appropriate drape across one of the chairs and disappeared into the memory palace.

Watching Cole giggle about gifts and mince pies and pranks was a much, much better way to spend the time.

***

When I reappeared, things had changed.

Everyone was alert in a way that was new; it made my shoulders tighten. (And my boobs wobble as a result, which was at least an amusing distraction.) Watching them drink and ramble about tailors, it was easy to forget that these people had power. They had it now; a roomful of tigers.

From above, I leaned on the railing and watched the latest bout of the Great Game.

It was subtle - I undoubtedly missed most of it. But one thing I could observe: wherever Lord Drumford went, other people were not. He pretended that everything was as usual. Everyone acting as if he emanated a terrible reek? I don’t know what you mean.

I had to remind myself very sternly that this man had it coming, had it coming by the wagonload, in order to not wince at watching a man become invisible.

When eventually he strode from the room - still pretending that nothing was different, everything was well, and he was the most important man in Orlais - there were a few quiet titters, and more than one stage whisper.

I did neither.

I was better than that.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to Paradigm_F, who in addition to writing their own amazing fic is very generous in helping mine when I have written something that does not work and I do not at that time have the brainpower to figure out why.

Love you, sweetness.

(This chapter is a wee but shorter than usual because this was the best spot to put the chapter break but the next one should be along quite soon. I'm producing again, OMG)
The character assassin leaned on the railing next to me and smirked. “I trust you’re satisfied, pet.”

“You? Trusting?” I teased back automatically. “This day is full of surprises.”

“It most certainly is,” he mused. “You have succeeded. In the challenge, I mean to say. Full marks.”

“Does… does that mean I can go get changed and go join the actual fun party?”

Chandler nodded.

“Thank mercy for that,” I said, fervently.

***

I was doing the ecstatic slump of the recently-corseted while Chandler removed the last traces of Lady Emilia.

“How did you do it?”

“To provide an example that you could grasp… epaulettes.”

I was insulted and also not much enlightened.

Chandler continued, waving his comb to embellish. “Drumford wore epaulettes with aquamarine frogging the same week the Duke did.”

“Does that mean anything?”

“I suspect their tailors use the same suppliers. However, if one mentions it in the same sentence as the débâcle on the Great Northern Road, people begin to draw their own conclusions.”

Two benign facts become sinister just by being juxtaposed? No wonder spies are so cynical.

“What… what happens now?” I asked.

“Drumford will be politely and visibly questioned by the Empress’ agents. At the border if she’s quick enough, and she generally is. Then, once the rumour begins to circulate that he is no longer her preferred supplier of canvas and hawsers… all suspicions will be confirmed. He’ll very efficiently be relegated to persona non grata by all sides.”

Because I am me, I envisaged that in correspondence. First a wave of letters from joint ventures, company boards, merchant consortiums - full of regret-to-informs and under-the-circumstances. They would hide the second trend: the sudden decline of invitations. Galas, promenades, soirées, showings - reduced to a trickle overnight. Not to nothing, of course: there will always be vultures and fools who mistake bluster for strength.

But perhaps, just perhaps, seeing the complete withdrawal by every Orlesian of character… perhaps Lord Drumford will see that he has never made a single real friend. And conceivably, he might even deduce why that is.
Not a chance, of course. He will blame everyone except his own abundant lack of... every worthy quality. It’s who he is. But he’ll meet almost no new maids in the life that is to come for him. And the few he does meet? It’s easy to brush off a no-one.

I grinned with pleasure at the thought.

“You’re both pretty and marvellously terrifying when you smile like that,” noted Chandler.

I stuck my tongue out at him.

***

In a short time, I looked like me again, albeit a festivally-fancified version. Chandler had done nothing to his own assembly other than rectify minute damage. Why would he? Emma dressed as a noblewoman was both odd and suspicious; Chandler as the same was neither.

rap rap unwrap?

Whoops! Merci.

“You blindsided me so thoroughly this morning I forgot to give you your gift!” I said, and began to dig through my basket.

“Ah, yes. Apologies.” He wrangled his out of a pocket I had not seen before. With bows, we made the exchange.

Mine was a bottle of wistfully-scented oil, to be combed through my hair after washing. I liked it very much.

His was a bundle of linen, wrapped in one adventurous handkerchief. His brows furrowed as he unfolded it. “Drawstring pants. And a tunic. Very capacious. And linen. Quite… plain.”

I answered the unasked question. “Not your usual style, I know. But I figured you’d prefer neither of us to be naked.”

“What.”

“When you sleep here, dearest. Which you may do... any time you wish.”

This isn’t the first time I’ve been hugged at last in part so I couldn’t read another’s face.

But judging by the almost rib-crushing force of it, I’d scored another hit in the gift department.

Chapter End Notes

Please remember you are beloved.

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