Reverse-Cowgirl Diplomacy

by orphan_account

Summary

In response to the following prompt over at the DAO kink-meme:

*PC gathers the army by sleeping her way through Ferelden till she claims all treaty rights. Origin doesn't matter, but PC's got to be a slut who loves it. All diplomatic encounters can be solved if you're a dirty enough whore! It's up to you whether she gets Templars or Mages, or elves or wolves, or whatever. Bonus k!meme points for any gangbangs.*

Notes

This is the first draft of the novel that has become *Elysium.*

Please see *the Elysium/RCD Author's Notes and News entry* for more information.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Meet The Couslands

Chapter Summary

Chapter Pairings: Bryce/Elissa, Eleanor/Duncan (implied)
Content Warning: Parent/Child Incest

"There's little to nothing in all of Ferelden that can't be gained by means of some well-applied fellatio."
--Lady Eleanor Cousland, when gifting her daughter Elissa with her treasured copy of The Art of Passionate Love in celebration of her menarche.

The Couslands were an interesting family. That much, Duncan knew. Bryce Cousland enjoyed bragging to select friends about the fact that he'd found his wife in Ferelden's most elite brothel and raised her up to be the highest noblewoman in all of Ferelden, second only to the Queen herself. As a hostess, she was possessed of a rather singular set of skills that made staying under her roof an absolute joy, and one Duncan made certain to savor each time he happened to be in the Coastlands, usually with her husband looking on in debauched delight.

In a rural community they would have been considered profligate, sinful, perverted. The men would have been driven away from any and all eligible girls at sword-point, the women would likely have been accused of any number of crimes, from whoring to witchcraft.

As one of the two most powerful noble houses in Ferelden, however, they were merely considered...eccentric. Perhaps the word "decadent" might be used by their harshest critics.

Such was the privilege of nobility.

Elissa Cousland was cut from the same cloth as her mother, and not only in looks. It was obvious from the smoldering perusal she gave him as he entered the Great Hall that she understood the sensual arts completely. She looked at him for a long moment, there on her knees, before her father grabbed her chin and reminded her to mind her lesson. She returned to her studies, opening her mouth wide and experimentally shoving her fingers down her own throat while her mother lectured on the best tricks to suppress a gag reflex.

"Most of the time, men want to sit back while you suck them off," her mother instructed, "but other times, if they're seeking to dominate you--assuming you choose to allow it--they'll want to take control, and essentially fuck your mouth as unreservedly as they would your cunt. Some might actually wish to make you vomit, thinking it a testament to their size and stamina, whereas others would be repulsed by such a thing. The trick is in reading your partner, his mannerisms and mood, deciding how much it benefits you to accommodate his whim, and from there figuring out whether to take steps to prevent gagging, or to allow it to happen. Now, let me see you do it again, without gagging this time."

Drawing a deep breath, the girl composed herself. Her father grabbed her by the hair and no sooner
did she open her mouth then he rammed his cock down her throat, all the way to the balls. With deep, hard thrusts, he fucked her face for several moments until he came with a grunt and a shudder. Elissa Cousland's throat convulsed as she swallowed, only a tiny trickle making its way to her lips, where she quickly stroked it clean with her tongue.

"Excellent work, pup!" her father said, helping her to her feet and bestowing a paternal kiss on the cheek. "Now, I have business to attend to, so as much as I would enjoy to watch you give your mother her customary compensation for her brilliant tutelage, I'm afraid I need to ask you ladies to take the remainder of the lesson elsewhere."

"Yes, father," Elissa said sweetly, dropping her mother's skirt from where she had already begun to ruck it up to Eleanor's hips. Then, as though nothing untoward had passed whatsoever, she fell into step behind her mother as Teyrna Cousland strode regally from the great hall. She gave Duncan a slow, knowing wink as she passed, dropping her eyes to make sure he knew that his oak-hard state had not gone unnoticed.

Duncan loved visiting Highever Castle.

This visit, however, also awakened in him a thought he'd not entertained before.

Why did the Grey Wardens not have any recruits with that particular range of talents? The approach seemed to be benefiting the Cousland family admirably, and paramount to the survival of the Wardens in Ferelden, particularly in these tumultuous times, was diplomacy. Since King Cailan had begun mustering an army to battle a Blight in the south—a Blight no one truly believed possibl—Duncan was finding his skills in that particular area ever more strained.

He needed a goodwill ambassador, as it were.

He still needed a skilled fighter, so no common whore would do, of course. Recruiting in the brothels was out of the question.

Which was why he found himself remarking to Bryce Cousland over a snifter of fine brandy that his daughter would make an excellent recruit. Eleanor Cousland had already wiped her mouth and departed with a warm smile after seeing to Duncan's most urgent need for comfort while he and Bryce discussed his recruiting mission and the looming Blight.

"I'm afraid that's out of the question, Duncan," Bryce answered with a shake of his head. "Elissa's extremely talented, I'll grant you, but I need her here in Highever. Eleanor is still a very beautiful woman, so much so that her age is rarely a factor when she uses her skills to aid me in negotiations. But with the existing noblemen and merchants getting older, they're craving younger meat. Fergus is quite skilled, but some of them only want a young woman. Elissa just turned sixteen, and she's been tutored extremely well. With her maidenhead still intact, I might add. And now there are rumors that the Queen is barren. I'd never thought to aim so high, but since Eleanor and Elissa both brought it up, it's become more and more obvious. The time may just be ripe for the Cousland family to make their move toward the throne."

"Well, then I will not press the issue," Duncan replied with a sanguine air. "I do hope, however, once the matter is settled and you and your family have decided the disposition of your daughter's virginity, I might be invited back for a sampling of her talents." He laughed, "Unless, that is, she's residing in the royal palace."

"You most certainly are always welcome," Bryce said warmly, draining his brandy and rising, clapping Duncan on the back. "And now I must go see to my other guest, Arl Howe. Relations have become a great deal more strained with him since Eleanor flatly refuses to pave the way as I carve off
parcels of the Arling of Amaranthine for the Couslands. She insists his spunk tastes foul."

Bryce gave a *can-you-imagine?* eyeroll. "I can't allow Fergus to entertain him since Howe behaved so boorishly and tore Fergus up when he was seventeen, and I don't trust him to preserve Elissa's maidenhead; he'd likely rend it just to spite me. That is, assuming he got the drop on her and she didn't gut him first, since she knows what's at stake here better than anyone. After all, the notion that she might replace Anora was first brought up by her. She's ambitious, my pup. At any rate, if this keeps up I'll be forced to fellate Howe myself to keep him happy, and I do try to make it a point never to stoop for weasly-looking men with foul-tasting spunk. It's undignified for a man of my station, you understand. Regardless, make yourself at home as you test Ser Gilmore. If you'd like, I'll send Fergus and Oriana to you tonight. That will keep Fergus safely out of Howe's grasp, and the pair of them should prove...quite relaxing."

"I would enjoy that immensely," Duncan replied, finishing off his own brandy. "For now, I think I'll go look for Ser Gilmore and introduce myself."

As Duncan righted his clothing from where it still lay open, his now-flaccid cock resting on his thigh, he still found himself unable to let go of the thought of having Elissa Cousland as a Grey Warden.
"Your mother has instructed me to accompany you until you've retrieved your mabari from the larder," Duncan heard a familiar young male voice say as he strolled the outdoor walkways of Highever Castle the following day, whiling away the hours until dinner. It was Ser Gilmore, the young knight he was to test for recruitment, speaking.

"Surely, Ser Gilmore, you can manage that task without me," came a soft reply, in a purring contralto that traveled straight to Duncan's cock.

Lady Elissa.

"I'm sorry, my lady, but I'm far too attached to my hands to take the chance," the young man's voice replied, sounding strained.

"Mmm, and what nice hands they are," Elissa remarked as Duncan silently came around the corner and leaned against the wall, watching, unnoticed by the knight. She took Ser Gilmore's hands in her own. "I should rather think those hands would be put to much better use attached to me." She brought them up to her breasts, breathing deep to press her bosom into his palms. His fingers closed, massaging of their own volition. Elissa licked her lips in a long, slow, sensuous motion. "Wouldn't you agree, Ser Gilmore?"

"My lady!" the knight's voice cracked and then he was pressing against her, pushing her back against the wall in his fervor. He began to run heated kisses over her face and neck and shoulders, kneading her breasts in a rapid, desperate motion while she writhed sinuously against him. "Oh, my sweet Elissa, I swear I'll die if I can't have you soon!"

"We have to be patient, my knight," she gasped. In a lightning-quick move that left Duncan in no doubt of her skills at hand-to-hand combat, she grabbed Ser Gilmore's shoulders and reversed their positions, slamming him against the wall. Slowly, deliberately, she ran her tongue over the edges of his mouth, never quite closing in for a kiss despite the way the knight strained toward her. She lifted a knee and caressed his groin with it, causing him to whimper as though in pain. "You know why I can't give myself to you. Once my plans are set into motion, though...once the Couslands' ascension as the pre-eminent family in all of Ferelden is secure, then we can have each other. I will be Queen and you will be my most loyal Captain of the Queen's Guard, zealously watching my person morning and night, the best of knights whose dedicated service I simply could not do without."

Taking his hand from her breast, she lifted her skirt and pressed it between her thighs, humping it for a moment. Her eyes closed in pleasure as she rolled her hips, masturbating with his fingers.

"There," she hummed in pleasure, withdrawing his hand. "Now you carry my scent. My mabari will
not hesitate to obey someone who smells of me so strongly. I must go and bid my brother farewell, ere he leaves for Ostagar this afternoon. Thank you, Ser Gilmore, for attending to the situation with my mabari."

"I will!" the besotted knight breathed. He pressed a fervent kiss to her hand and left at a jog in the direction of the kitchens. When Elissa turned to cock an inquisitive eyebrow at Duncan—as though she'd known he was there all along—she was entirely composed.

"Do you enjoy watching, Warden-Commander?" she asked. "I would have thought you a man of action, instead."

"I enjoy watching when the show is worth seeing," Duncan answered casually. "Well played, my lady. That poor lad has no idea what hit him."

"Are you implying I'm leading him on? For shame, ser!" she scolded, turning her back and walking away from him as though in no doubt he would follow. "Clearly you have no knowledge of how I operate."

"Are you telling me you intend to keep the knight on as your paramour once you gain the throne?" For some reason, it never occurred to Duncan to question whether or not she'd attain her goal. He suspected that Elissa Cousland having her way was as inevitable as the tides, or gravity.

"When I give my word, ser, it is golden. In due time, he shall have me if he so desires. Of course, I cannot be held accountable for the vagaries of fate. If, in the meantime, he should find his destiny lies elsewhere—for example, in becoming a Grey Warden—well, I shall of course be heartbroken to see him go, but thrilled for his sake that he has found a greater purpose, even if it's greater than his love for me."

"I see," Duncan nodded. "Remind me to make a point of extracting a promise from you some time in the near future. I should dearly love to collect myself, some day."

"If not for the fact that this Blight has suddenly become an issue, I'd be in Denerim right now, seducing the King," Elissa gave him that same assessing look she'd bestowed the first time he saw her, and was apparently satisfied with what she saw. For a moment, she let the mask of cool control slip, and confessed, "Were I not after much larger game, I'd have you in my chambers this instant," she said bluntly. "I find virginity begins to chafe. I would much rather be done with it and sample all the joys sex has to offer, instead of these childish teasing games. Oh, some of them are pleasant enough, I suppose, but I'm eager to experience a real man between my thighs. Alas," she gave a philosophical shrug, "I dare not even invite you to to play the childish games I am permitted, for you are such a man that I suspect it would be all too easy to forget myself with you and lose sight of my objectives."

"I...thank you for the compliment, my lady," Duncan said, both intrigued and aroused. Even having spent the better part of the previous evening buried balls-deep in Fergus' eager ass while his lovely Antivan wife tongued Duncan's balls and asshole, he was all too tempted to attempt to persuade the girl to take the risk anyway. He wanted nothing more than to feel that talented throat quivering around his cock.

But he knew the gesture would be futile: the girl was too set on her goals, and he dare not intrude upon Bryce Cousland's good will if he wanted his invitation to Highever Castle to remain open.

Elissa studied him thoughtfully for a moment. "I understand that Cailan is a great admirer of the Grey Wardens," she said at last. "I imagine, then, there will be no shortage of opportunities to invite you to the palace. And this promise I will make you, Warden-Commander," she gave him a look that made
his armor suddenly feel far too hot and confining, a look guaranteed to make any sane man wish to begin removing his clothing, "I will invite you."

She let her sizzling eyes linger on him for a moment, then offered a bright smile. "If you'll excuse me," she licked her lips slowly, with relish, "Now that I know the crisis in the kitchens is in capable hands, I must go find my brother and bid him a proper farewell before he leads our troops to Ostagar."

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Twelve hours later, there was no sizzle in Elissa Cousland's eyes. They were cold and hard and bleak as she beheld her dying father.

"I swear to you, father, by Andraste's pyre, the very last thing Rendon Howe will feel in this life will be the Cousland family sword raping him, just as his swine did to Oriana."

"Duncan!" Bryce gasped, a fleck of blood appearing on his lips. "You must take my wife and daughter with you, away from here. You must help them reach the King."

"I will, my friend, but I fear I must ask something in return...."

He was keenly aware of Elissa's merciless eyes upon him as he laid out his bargain. He would recruit her into the Grey Wardens in exchange for escorting her to safety. Clearly she did not like what he had to say about the duty of a Warden overriding all other considerations, even vengeance.

"You must get to Ostagar," Bryce insisted over her protests. "The King is there. Whatever you have to do, you must get to the King. Our best hope for revenge now is not only to bring Howe to justice, but to ascend even higher in spite of his schemes. Do your duty as a Warden as you must, but you are a quick thinker, Elissa. You can adapt our plans as you see necessary to win the King."

Finally, she nodded, and Duncan saw a minute fracture appear in her facade for the briefest instant, a hint of the inconsolable grief savaging her. Then she turned those desolate eyes to Duncan. "My virginity is now the only coin I have, and it's far too precious to squander lightly," she said at last. "Give me your word of honor, here before my father, your friend, that I will arrive at Ostagar with my maidenhead intact. And that so long as I do my duty to the Wardens, you will allow me the liberty I need to pursue my game with Cailan."

"It can only benefit the Grey Wardens to have more intimate ties to the throne, particularly if those ties override those of some of his councilors who are not in favor of the Wardens. You have my word."

"I will stay here," Eleanor Cousland announced, withdrawing a small blade from the knot of braids at the back of her head, then carefully tucking it back in. "If Howe's men took the time to sport with Oriana, they may well wish to sport with me as well, and Maker willing, I may prove more dangerous game than they anticipate. 'Twill buy you more time to make your escape."

Grimly, Elissa nodded. She moved toward her mother and bestowed a long, loving kiss on Eleanor's lips as tears flowed freely down both women's cheeks. Then she bent and did the same to her father, and when she pulled back, her lips were red with her father's blood. She made no move to wipe it off.
The blood was still on her lips, dark brown and flaking, as the sun broke over the horizon and, in exhaustion, she and Duncan made camp in a wooded copse. As Duncan set aside his weapons and began to settle on the ground to sleep, suddenly she was there, her determined hands on his shoulders, pushing him down onto his back, her small clothes still dangling from her fingers where she hadn't even bothered to drop them to the ground.

Without words, she straddled him and ground her cleft down upon his face. Duncan grabbed her hips and began to lick, his tongue delving cautiously into her cunt, before returning to her clit. Her body began to make jerking movements and soon a sound reached his ears.

It was not passion.

Heaving with sobs, she rode him to a bitter, anguished climax. Afterward she sank onto the ground beside him, her tears making the blood on her lips dissolve into trails down her chin, and cried herself to sleep.
Droit de Seigneur

Chapter Summary

Elissa arrives at Ostagar and sets her sights in King Cailan.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Cailan (Elissa/Duncan implied)

Content Warnings: DubCon

Cailan Theirin was a good man in dire straits. Having been tutored on the signs of sexual frustration, Elissa knew it at a glance.

Small wonder. All gossip pegged Queen Anora as a cold, passionless woman. Her stock in trade was her competence as a queen, not her sensuality. And Cailan had now been away from court--and subsequently from both the queen and the ladies of Denerim--for many weeks now. There was inevitably a camp full of whores on the outskirts of the army encampment, to service the soldiers, but the last thing a king wanted was a case of the pox. Elissa was willing to wager Cailan hadn't been so long without feminine companionship since his transition to manhood.

His words were proper enough, light-hearted even, as he greeted Duncan and made all the necessary inquiries, but when his eyes landed on Elissa, she knew it for a mask. Something desperate and hungry flared in his eyes as they widened for only an instant, something that very few save Elissa would have recognized.

"You're Bryce's youngest, are you not? I...don't think we've ever actually met," he said courteously. But that glance had already told her everything she needed to know. Cailan recognized her all too well.

Once rumors of Anora's barren condition had started to spread, Elissa had conferred with her father and mother on how best to manage the matter to her advantage. They had decided that until she was old enough to make a full-on assault, she would remain elusively out of sight, visiting Denerim rarely, never attending the formal royal functions under the excuse that she was still too young to be presented to the king.

That had been three years ago, when she was just thirteen. And since then, the Couslands had doled out the briefest glimpses of their young daughter to the handsome king like a miser parts with coin. A brush in passing in the corridor when he visited the Cousland estate for a dinner in his honor--where she would be seated at the far end of the table from him--a careful stroll beneath the window of his study when she walked with the ladies of the court in the palace gardens.

Mere glances, nothing more. And yet, from that look, it was obvious Cailan had been paying very close attention, never understanding that the last three years had been a slow, careful seduction as Elissa had waited for maturity, waited for the time when political pressure over Anora's childless state would force him to consider seeking a new marriage.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Elissa allowed a nervous quaver to enter her throat. All the while, her mother's voice coached her.
Cailan is a good and kind-hearted man, but he's very young and impulsive. He sees no reason to restrain himself from taking advantage of the willingness of the young women at court to gossip about how they've bedded the king. If you offer yourself to him freely, he'll gladly have you and feel no obligation to you afterward. You must make him believe you're interested, but reluctant.

Elissa did not have to feign her distress as she revealed the news of the death of her parents and Howe's treachery, and she was gratified by his eager promise to see justice done. Artfully, she allowed her eyes to widen and flutter for just an instant as she thanked him, then quickly dropped her gaze, as though embarrassed or unwilling to let him see her interest. She could practically feel Duncan's amusement as he watched the display.

Duncan had been all too good at keeping his word as their days of travel had passed, weary days resolving into endless nights filled with nothing but empty, aching longing. Nights of his fingers carefully skirting the edges of her cunt on their way to probe her ass, nights of his cock gliding between her lips and down her throat, nights of him straddling her torso, pressing her breasts together and fucking the gully between them until his discharge splashed across her chest and face, nights he'd had to wrestle her to panting submission when she would have impaled herself upon him without a care for the consequences, nights of his lips and tongue devouring her clit, bringing her to a screaming climax while she begged for him to just fuck her, fuck her, for the love of the Maker just ram his cock into her and fuck her!

Elissa bit back a frustrated growl. She'd had enough of these games. She wanted to drag Duncan or Cailan--preferably both--into the nearest tent and fuck them blind.

Instead, she affected a modest mien and awaited her moment.

Thankfully, Duncan had consented to give her one night here in camp to advance her gambit against Cailan before they got down to the matter of the Joining. If she had her way, tonight her long years of saving herself would be at an end.

"Our scouts say the darkspawn horde is still two to three days from here," Cailan was telling Duncan. "Come and dine in my tent tonight and we will discuss Loghain's latest strategies and you may tell me all the details of the events at Highever."

"I thank you for the offer, Your Majesty," Duncan said with a slight bow, "but I'm afraid I really must attend to other matters with my Wardens here tonight. However, you really should know the full story of all that passed at Highever. I believe I can spare Lady Cousland for the evening if she doesn't find relating the details too painful...?"

"That will be fine. I will gladly sup with His Majesty." Elissa played the word "sup" subtly, drew it out ever so slightly, made it more sibilant, placed a breathless emphasis around it that hinted at much filthier things. She allowed just a spark of eagerness to light her eyes before they skittered demurely away from his again. It took Cailan a long, slow moment to remember to respond, and when he did, his voice had deepened, grown rougher.

"Yes, perfect! I shall see you at sundown, then, Lady Cousland," the king said in a rush, and walked away.

"Drive him mad with desire, make him desperate to have you, bring him to the brink of crisis and then protest. Make him believe he's raped you. If he thinks he's had what you did not wish to give him, his remorse will give you a handle on him, a way to prevent him from dismissing you afterward like all the other women he beds."
Promptly at sundown, Elissa stood at the flap of the king's sumptuous pavilion. For once, her mabari was not at her side; she'd deliberately left him behind with Duncan in case he should decide to intervene. His guard rapped on a post near the opening and Cailan's groom appeared, opening the flap for Elissa and bowing. "His Majesty is expecting you, my lady."

Elissa nodded, wetting the lips she had stained subtly with rouge pigment purchased from one of the camp whores. She had dressed herself painstakingly in the simple silk gown she'd barely been able to afford with the coin she had salvaged from the treasury the night she fled Highever, knowing that once the game was joined, she would need some garb other than her armor. Smoothing her hand down her waist, she ducked inside the pavilion and found herself surrounded by candle-lit luxury. A soft bed covered in silks and furs occupied a good deal of the space, and much of the rest was taken up with a table set with a mouth-watering repast. Carefully rolled maps and parchments stored at the far end of the tent gave an indication of the table's normal purpose.

"Welcome, Lady Cousland," Cailan advanced confidently, eagerly. He had shed his armor and wore the silken garments of a nobleman instead, and everything about the setting and his manner said he intended to make a seduction out of this opportunity. Without taking his eyes from her, he dismissed his servant.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Elissa replied, finding it unnecessary to affect a nervous tremble as she curtsied. Her heart hammered in her chest. Now that the moment was at hand, she found herself anxious. She made no effort to suppress her nerves. No, she would use them to lend authenticity to her performance of the reluctant maid.

"Actually, I suppose I should be calling you Teyrna Cousland now, shouldn't I?" the young king mused. "Or did your father intend your brother to inherit the teyrnir? Either way, please forgive me if I don't use your title. I dislike titles, honestly, and I'd much rather you simply give me leave to call you Elissa."

Elissa bowed her head. "As it pleases Your Majesty."

"Oh, no, none of that! You must call me Cailan. Loghain and I don't stand on formality, and your rank is equal to his."

Elissa bestowed upon him a charmingly impish smile, as though warming to him enough to forget her innate modesty. He couldn't have left her a better opening to advance her cause. "You'll forgive me for pointing out, Your--Cailan--that you and Teyrn Loghain share a much closer relationship than you and I presently enjoy."

"And that is exactly the matter I hope to rectify!" Cailan practically pounced on the bait she trawled before him. He grasped both her hands in his, squeezing them warmly. "Your father was a dear friend and I valued his council greatly. I see no reason you and I should not further that association."

"I shall be honored to be taken into your...confidence. Cailan."

Cailan pressed a kiss to the knuckles of one of her hands, and then the other, apparently loathe to release her. "And when this is all over, when the darkspawn have been defeated and Highever is once again under the rightful control of the Cousland family, you must come to Denerim and stay at court for a time. It puzzles me that I've seen so little of you there."

"My...mother and father thought it best, Y--Cailan, to keep me apart from the court. They were afraid the decadent habits of so many there would prove a harmful influence." A wave of grief washed
over her, and she used it, let her eyes fill with gleaming tears, let her voice choke. "They were...very protective, you see. They took good care of me."

"Ah, Elissa!" Cailan drew her forward, pulling her into his arms. His tone was almost sincere enough she might have thought the maneuver impulsive, had he not been looking for that very opening. "I'm so very sorry for your loss, dear heart."

She resisted, ever so slightly, requiring him to use rather more force than he had meant to pull her body against his. Once she was embraced by him, she stood stiffly for a long moment, and finally relaxed with a sigh.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she whispered, with a nervous shiver.

"Cailan!" he insisted. She drew back to look at him with wide, innocent eyes, her face only a breath away from his, and his mouth closed urgently over hers.

Elissa pushed at his shoulders, refusing to yield to the kiss, until his tongue swept across her lips. She made a surprised noise in her throat, but her lips parted, and her hands began to caress his shoulders, sliding about his neck with carefully timed hesitation. His long hair was astonishingly soft beneath her fingers, and she found herself caressing it.

Then his tongue thrust into her mouth, and Elissa wrenched away with a startled cry, "Please! Your Majesty, I cannot do this!"

Cailan refused to release her despite her renewed struggles. "Of course you can, dear Elissa..." he murmured, his open mouth sliding down her neck even as he held her upper arms in a bruising grasp. "I know you feel some attraction for me, I've seen it in your eyes."

"Yes! I mean, no! I mean--I do. But please, Your Majesty, you must understand," she allowed her struggles to ease, allowing herself to begin feeling the warm rush of pleasure that his lips at her throat awoke within her, and her voice grew less resolved. "With my family dead, I must make a good marriage. I'm young, and fertile," she explained, as though ignorant of the importance of those concepts to a man in need of an heir. "I must begin rebuilding the Cousland line...."

"I do not gossip. No one shall ever know from my lips."

"But I have never--"

"I'll be gentle with you, dear heart," he vowed, his hand coming up to cup her breast, his thumb stirring the nipple to a peak beneath the silk of her gown. Elissa swayed in his arms with a soft moan, as though ready to swoon. His mouth crushed down upon hers, his tongue pushing insistently within, and Elissa yielded, accepting and then beginning to hesitantly return the kiss. Gradually she let her body soften, grow pliant in his arms, pressing her breast into his palm and making pleased sounds in her throat as he caressed her hardened nipple. With careful naivete she let her thigh slip between his, taking his own leg between hers.

Until his hand began tugging at the buttons of her bodice.

"No!" she gasped, jerking away from him so that the button he'd been trying to slip through its hole came off in his fingers, baring almost her whole breast as the fabric ripped. Elissa raised an arm over her shoulder as though reaching for her sword, only to realize with a panicked look that she was not armed.

Seeing the move, Cailan's nostrils flared and his eyes hardened with arrogant outrage. Whatever his title, whatever his cheerful nature, he was still a warrior. Even the hint that she would draw arms on
him awoke his instinctive battle lust, pushed him over that last edge where he would not accept her refusal, for she was now not only a woman he was seducing, she was a potentially dangerous enemy who must be subdued. Smaller than he, and unarmed, she was now his prey.

He advanced on her with a hungry look as she stumbled away from him toward the bed, seeking to cover herself with her hand. "Your Majesty! I beg you, you must not do this!"

As if by accident, her feet tangled in the plush rug and she fell upon the bed. Cailan was upon her in an instant, covering her mouth with his, covering her bare breast with his large palm, covering her struggling body with his weight. She arched as though trying to push him off, which only pressed her more firmly against the solid bulge in his breeches, drawing from him an urgent growl. He ground into her, forcing her breath from her as he pressed her down onto the bed. He caught her hand where she tried to push him away and brought it down to his groin, compelling her to cup his heavy erection.

"Feel what you do to me, sweet Elissa" he rasped in her ear, nibbling the lobe. Her body began to relax beneath his, pleasure moving through her in waves as she drew out the game of protestation and yielding.

She made him fight for each advance he made, thrashing in panic as he pushed her skirt up and ripped away her smallclothes, attempting to wriggle out from beneath him and make her escape when he pulled back to open his breeches. Seeking to rid him of any last thought of gentleness, she lunged, reaching for the sheathed sword on a weapons rack beside the bed. With a growl, he caught her by the shoulders and flung her hard back upon the bed, where she lay as though stunned, the breath driven from her.

When he crawled over her again, his cock stood proudly at attention, thrusting out from his body, seeping drops of clear fluid upon her bare thigh as he pried her legs apart with merciless hands.

"Please, Your Majesty!" she cried as he knelt between her thighs. Without any preparation, all the wetness collecting on her cunt was still trapped behind her dry outer labia where they stuck together, so that when the head of his cock probed, her flesh resisted, making penetration impossible until he parted her folds with his fingers. Triumph blazed in his eyes when his fingers came away slick with her moisture.

"Cailan!" he demanded, his voice hard.

He positioned his cock and began to push. "No!" Elissa screamed, swinging wildly, striking him across the face. Incensed, Cailan shoved her roughly back down upon the bed and pierced her to the core, sundering her carefully preserved maidenhead with a single vicious thrust.

Elissa squeezed her eyes shut, careful only to let him see the tears that escaped between her lids and not her exultation. She shook violently, thrashing her head, the pain of that sudden penetration more immense than she would have imagined. She'd been taught to accommodate pain, relish it even, but this was nothing like the sting of a whip or the bite of clamps on her nipples. For this moment of triumph, wherein her virginity was rent upon the king's pallet, it had been too critical that her anguish be genuine, and thus no attempt to prepare her had ever been made; not even a finger had ever been allowed to penetrate or stretch her virgin cunt.

And so she tore, welcoming the agony, embracing it, burning, stretching, pulsing, struggling to expel the cock filling her. Pleasure, she knew, would come later. For now, let him see her pain and know he hurt her.

Fully under the power of his lust, Cailan pulled back and surged into her again, and still it hurt, Maker it hurt! Again, and again, he filled her. Gradually, her tightness began to loosen, and her slick
juices eased his passage, leaving her with only a dull ache instead of the intense pain of those first few brutal thrusts.

She forced herself to lie there as though defeated while he fucked her, filling her so deeply his cock rammed against the very end of her passage, pounding against the entrance to her womb, over and over! She greeted the pleasure that began to come with his thrusts with a show of reluctance, suppressing her moans until she had no choice but to give them voice, beginning to move her hips with inexpert awkwardness.

Still the pleasure came, building in waves, tension mounting in her cunt and even deeper in her belly until she felt her body was drawn tight as a bowstring. It filled her as surely as his cock, and she knew if he began to touch her clit, she would shatter into a million glorious, scintillating slivers. But she'd played her part too well, and he was not thinking of her pleasure, only of conquering her. He sat back on his heels, and gripped her hips in a bruising grasp, pulling her ass onto his thighs until she lay on an incline with her shoulders beneath the level of her hips. With unyielding jerks, he pulled her hard into his thrusts as he slammed into her again and again.

He threw his head back and groaned, shuddering, pulsing deep inside her as his seed filled her quivering cunt. Clenching the bedclothes in her fists, Elissa gave a frustrated sob as her climax slipped elusively away.

Her choked sob seemed to bring Cailan back to himself, and he looked at her in horror. "Oh, dear heart, I'm sorry!" he breathed, carefully withdrawing. "It was never my intention to take you like that."

The ache of emptiness was more unendurable than the pain of stretching around his thick cock had been, and she could only hope he interpreted her bereft moan as something else entirely.

"Do you know what you've done?!" she cried, forcing herself to remember her role even though all she wanted to do was demand he help her find completion. She tried to push her gown down over her hips, to cover herself. "I'm ruined!"

Cailan stared at her cunt, transfixed. He reached for her and when he pulled his hand back, it was smeared with blood and semen. "I've hurt you," he said wonderingly. His cock began to stir again. "Let me make it better."

"There's nothing you can do," she whimpered as his hand began to stroke her, fanning the embers of pleasure where they still smoldered deep within her.

"I shall give you pleasure," he swore, sliding away from her to lay with his head between her legs. He pressed a kiss to her inner thigh. "More pleasure than you ever dreamed possible. I'm a skilled lover, dear heart. You'll never be left wanting. Only let me love you."

"But you've ruined my future," she persisted, shivering when she felt his breath cooling the seed that seeped from her cunt. "Shall I merely be the king's whore?" she spat. "Better to have died spit upon Howe's sword than endure such shame!"

"I will see justice done for your family and heap gifts and honors and accolades upon you!" He gave her throbbing clit a long, slow lick, and when he looked up again, his eyes shining with adoration, his stubbled chin was coated with her blood and their mingled fluids. "No one shall ever dare question the honor of the Cousland name."

"And what if I'm with child?"
Cailan closed his eyes, as though warring with himself. Reluctantly he wiped his face and sat up, and drew her up as well. He turned to face her, his eyes solemn.

"Many nobles, including my uncle, the Arl of Redcliffe, have begun to question whether or not I'll be able to produce an heir with Anora. It's been years now, and I've been dutiful and rigorous in my attempts to impregnate her, but she's nearing thirty and has still not conceived, and her cold bed and eyes hold no appeal for me," he sighed. "So far, I've resisted all suggestions that I repudiate her and search for a new wife, out of loyalty to Loghain and the services the Mac Tir family has done for the crown. I cannot risk destabilizing the realm with a war for the succession, but the battle over which noble family shall provide my next wife would prove nearly as vicious. Unless I prevent it by finding my own bride before they have a chance to begin lining up their daughters for that position."

"What are you saying?" Elissa asked innocently, trying to keep the triumph from her voice. Surely he could not be offering her her objective so readily and easily.

"There are many who questioned my marriage to Anora because she is of common blood, despite her father's elevation to the nobility. To marry a Cousland, one of the oldest noble families in Ferelden, none could question that. The people love Anora, but once the realm learns of how heroically you survived Arl Howe's treachery, you'll be the one bards compose ballads about. You're young and beautiful and brave. You'll be the sweetheart of the entire kingdom!"

"Are you honestly asking me--?" she let her eyes widen with feigned astonishment.

"Dear heart...Darling Elissa...How would you like to be a queen?"

She dined with Cailan, then, and left his tent wearing his heavy cloak to cover her ruined gown. She also, however, left his tent with her need still frustratingly, achingly unfulfilled. Cailan decided it was best to preserve her reputation until they wed, and not give a camp full of gossiping soldiers any ammunition to tarnish her name. She made her way back to the Warden encampment, but instead of going to her own tent, she ascertained that no one was around to see and ducked into Duncan's instead.

"It's done," she stated flatly as he sat up in his cot to watch her, his chest bare and rippling with muscle. "I'm to be queen."

"Congratulations," Duncan replied sedately. "That will be most useful for the Grey Wardens."

"Yes." She shrugged off the cloak, revealing her breast where it hung from her torn gown. She strode to his cot, hitching up her skirt and mounting him. "Now fuck me."
Gambits

Chapter Summary

Elissa meets and makes an enemy of Loghain Mac Tir.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Cailan (Elissa/Duncan implied)

Content Warnings: None

Her second day at Ostagar, Elissa made her way back to Cailan's tent. If her steps were mincing, it was with very good reason. Not only was she sore from the abrupt rending of her virginity on Cailan's bed the previous evening, but now her ass was also tender, courtesy of the punishing reaming Duncan had given her when she refused to allow him to come in her cunt for fear of conceiving a child that might not look like Cailan's issue. He'd started out with exquisite care, preparing her with his fingers and oil, and her feral, guttural moans when she felt his cock push inch by inch into her virgin ass had been loud enough that he'd been forced to cover her mouth with his hand lest she wake the entire encampment. But once he'd been seated fully within her tight rear passage, once she had adapted and begun pushing back into his thrusts, he'd given over his restraint and taken her, driving into her ass the weeks of repressed passion they'd suffered along the journey to Ostagar.

Despite the discomfort, she felt marvelous. Replete, fulfilled, thoroughly, sublimely fucked. All the endless aching years of virginity were behind her, and she could now use her body, all of her body, the way she wished to, the way she'd been trained to. She could now practice her arts fully, revel in her sensuality, unrestrained by anything other than the need for discretion.

And now that she no longer had to play the chaste maiden, she could allow Cailan to begin "teaching" her to enjoy his lovemaking, to give him pleasure. If she happened to prove an apt and imaginative pupil, well, he ought to be thrilled to discover his new bride was passionate and eager and everything that Anora was not.

Unfortunately, such lessons would have to wait for another time, which was the news she was on her way to impart.

Cailan's guard had apparently been given new instructions regarding her, for he bowed and quickly lifted the flap to Cailan's tent to admit her without first requesting permission. Within, she found Cailan and a large, dark man she knew only by reputation. Teyrn Loghain. They were bent over the table, maps spread out before them, heatedly debating strategies.

Aware that Loghain would need to be handled very delicately until Cailan officially set about the matter of repudiating Anora, Elissa bowed deeply, giving no indication of familiarity.

"Your Majesty, I come bearing a message from Warden-Commander Duncan."

The first thing she noted was that Loghain's eyes flicked briefly to the tent flap and the unseen guard outside, and Elissa's mouth went dry. She cursed Cailan for his impulsiveness in giving her such access. Loghain was no fool who would fail to note the lack of protocol.
The second thing she noted was that he was a huge man. Admittedly, she was on the petite side for a human, but he dwarfed her. He seemed to fill the tent with his presence. He looked as though he could break her without giving a thought to the matter.

Loghain was dangerous.

"What's this?" Loghain demanded. "Do the Grey Wardens now have unrestricted access to the king? Cailan, you allow these Wardens too much liberty."

"The Grey Wardens are essential to our victory here, Loghain," Cailan chided. "Who better to have unrestricted entry into my presence? Besides, if you weren't aware, this here is Lady Elissa Cousland, youngest child of the late Teyrn Cousland of Highever. Her rank is equal to your own, Loghain, and you have access."

"My understanding is that Grey Wardens don't hold titles of nobility."

"In light of the grave injustice done to the Couslands when Highever was overtaken by Arl Howe, as well as the fact that so few Couslands remain alive, it may be necessary to make an exception in this case, as it has now become a matter of honor to restore the teyrnir to the Couslands no matter what their circumstances." Cailan shook his head. "However, nothing can be decided until after the battle when Fergus Cousland returns from the Wilds. There's little point in discussing it now. Leave us for now, Loghain. I will hear Duncan's message and reconvene with you after the midday meal."

Elissa gave Loghain a polite nod of her head as he brushed past her in the confines of the tent, overwhelmed for a moment at his sheer physical presence in such close proximity. Then, as the tent flap fell closed behind him, she turned to Cailan, who was smiling brightly at her.

"Dear heart! I'm so glad you came to me today!" He enveloped her in his arms, awkward as such an embrace was with him in his gleaming armor. Her golden king. "You have been all I can think of since last night. Are you well? Please tell me I did not hurt you too badly. I shall simply die of remorse if you don't. Tell me you have no resentment toward me for my utterly boorish behavior."

"None, Y--Cailan," she gave him a shy smile and stammered breathlessly, "I...could never resent you, my--my king!"

"Oh, thank the Maker!" He pressed a fervent kiss to her brow. "Despite our wretched beginning, it is my deepest hope that you shall learn to enjoy my caresses and find pleasure in our marriage bed. I was not lying, you know. I truly am a good lover, when I'm not being an ogre."

"Of that I have no doubt, sire." She blushed becomingly, averting her gaze as though embarrassed. "Dare I admit that what happened last night has been constantly on my mind as well? And the memories have not all been unpleasant. There were moments when I was quite...swayed by your touch."

A note of deep, completely masculine pride entered Cailan's voice, and his hands began to roam her body in its tight encasement of supple leather. "Were you now? That's very reassuring. Perhaps I ought to investigate just how swayed you were."

"But I thought you didn't want to risk compromising my reputation," she murmured demurely, an aching pang of desire tightening her tender cunt.

"Ah! Royal prerogative is a beautiful thing, dear heart," he laughed. "I may change my mind on a whim and no one would dare to question it. I wish to feel you naked against me, and teach you how to ride atop me and find your pleasure. I wish to take my time and hear you scream my name as I
She closed her eyes and let the hot blood of arousal color her face. Let him think her a blushing maid, but she would let him see the arousal his words awoke. "I think I would...no, you will think me immodest!"

"I've seen your modesty, and it's becoming," he murmured, drawing near, cupping her face and bringing her lips close to hers. "Now I wish to taste your passion. Say you want me, darling Elissa."

"I think I do! Oh, my dear king, I do!" she declared breathlessly, opening her lips and surrendering to his heated kiss.

Thankfully, he had not dressed in full armor yet, and her armor was a much easier affair to discard. Soon, she stood before him bare for the first time, and his scowled when he saw the bruises his fingers had left on her body. Reaching for him, she stroked her hand across his forehead, rubbing away his frown. "I shall treasure them, Cailan," she vowed, "for they mean that I am yours."

When he met her eyes, awed by her words, she knew she possessed him utterly.

As naked as she, he sat upon a wooden chair by the table and beckoned to her. "Come, dear heart. Come and ride me."

Elissa let him pull her into his lap, straddling his lap. His cock stood upright, pressed between their bodies as Cailan kissed her hungrily, and she abandoned her false modesty and let herself return the kiss with the full measure of her passion, greedily sucking and nibbling at his lips and tongue, kissing the golden stubble on his chin and neck. His hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs stroking her nipples as she writhed upon his lap, making no effort to subdue or moderate her response. It was glorious to allow herself to enjoy his touch, to discard the need to affect reluctance or uncertainty. When he bent her backward and his lips closed over her nipple, she eagerly embraced him, pulling his head to her breast and pressing wantonly against his face.

"Do you like that, my darling?" he murmured as his fingers found her dripping cunt and began to stroke.

"Yes! Oh, sweet Andraste, yes!"

He had not exaggerated his prowess. What had been an act of brute force the night before was now one of artistry. He masturbated her with expert fingers, light, teasing touches alternating with the perfect amount of force and friction until she thrashed and moaned upon his lap, begging for more. Only then did he slip his finger inside her.

She did not have to exaggerate her hiss of discomfort.

"Is that all right, my sweet? I can stop if you wish..." but when he would have withdrawn his hand in concern, she protested.

"Maker, no!"

"I do not wish to hurt you again."

"Please, Your--Cailan. It feels good. Please don't stop..."

With an eager groan, he thrust two fingers deep within her and crooked them, and Elissa nearly tumbled from his lap at the sudden surge of pleasure so intense it was nearly too much, too overwhelming. It was a feeling unlike anything she had ever known. If an orgasm was a bolt of...
lightning, then surely this was a booming crash of thunder in a summer storm made into actual physical sensation.

So confident had she been in the thoroughness of her tutelage in the sensual arts that it had never occurred to her that anything he might do would take her by surprise. But penetration and the sensations that it could produce had never been a practical part of her instruction. Elissa stared at the king in amazement.

"Maker's breath, what was that?"

Laughing at her response, Cailan held her tighter, rubbing her clit for a long moment, and then he did it again, not relenting when she thrashed. Again, and again, bending his fingers and pushing on some spot she'd never known existed until she was certain she was going to come apart. The next brush of his thumb across her clitoris brought her to a sobbing climax that was so much deeper and more intense than any she'd ever known. The walls of her cunt had not stopped pulsating around his fingers when he withdrew his hand and gripped her waist, urging her up.

"Now ride!" he commanded, releasing her with one hand to position his cock. Still shuddering with aftershocks, she impaled herself gratefully, ignoring the residual ache for the sheer joy of being filled with his cock.

She let him guide her with his hands on her hips those first few strokes, to maintain the illusion that she needed to be taught, but soon she took over, found her own rhythm and force, she ground herself against him, rolling her hips each time she took him to the hilt. His cock knocked at the entrance to her womb and she drove onto it, her thrusts ever more wild, welcoming that hard, bruising sensation deep within. It was intense bordering upon painful, frightening and wonderful all at once. It was the very essence of everything she had craved.

It was being *fucked*.

She forgot false modesty, forgot her role, forgot to worry what impression she might be making. Instead, she fucked him. No, she *fucked herself* upon his cock, using him in a selfish quest for her own pleasure. But he was using her back, thrusting up and into her, adding the force of his hands on her hips to drive her harder each time she plunged onto him.

Cailan stiffened, grasped her tightly against his hard, sweating chest. His fingers found her clit and brought her, swallowing her screams with his kisses. Seconds later he came with short jerks of his hips, grunting against her neck.

Elissa embraced him, trembling with aftershocks of her own climax. Her arms twined about his shoulders and she let herself melt against him as he twitched and softened inside her. She let herself feel like the loving and beloved bride she portrayed in the arms of her king. She had worried she might be bored in his bed, but now she had no such concerns. He might be an easily manipulated fool, but he was a thoroughly pleasant bedmate. She would enjoy being his queen.

She sponged herself clean of the sweat of passion and the seed leaking down her thighs as she related to Cailan the mission she was required to undertake into the Korcari Wilds. He frowned, and she could tell he was unhappy with the plan, but thankfully he said no word against it. He helped her back into her armor amidst adoring kisses and made her promise to come straight to him when she returned from the Wilds the following day.

She was passing Teyrn Loghain's tent on her way back to Duncan's camp when a hard hand grabbed her and dragged her inside the tent.
"Do you think I don't know what you're up to?" Loghain's voice sneered in her ear. His hand was clamped over her mouth, his other arm holding her immobile with her back to his chest. She struggled, but he may as well have been made of iron.

Finally he moved the hand over her mouth enough to let her speak. "What is the meaning of this?" she demanded arrogantly. "You may be the king's father-in-law, ser, but I am your equal and you have no right nor authority to manhandle me!"

"Cailan may be ignorant of the rumors about the Couslands, but I am not," Loghain stated bluntly. "Your mother was a whore, your father little better than a pimp. It's said the lot of you fuck each other when you can't find anyone else."

Elissa shivered then. His expression was disdainful, but she felt a surprising tremor of arousal at his repugnance. He was disgusted by her...and it made her want him.

"Rumors are not necessarily facts, ser," she said coolly. "Surely you, as liege of the only other teyrnir on all of Ferelden, know all too intimately how vicious gossip can be."

"Duncan brought you here to seduce the king," he accused.

"Duncan seems far too concerned with the Blight to be bothered with whom the king happens to bed."

"No if it means adding more impetus to compel Cailan to disregard the advice of his councilors and bring in reinforcements from Orlais."

Elissa felt a moment of relief. He hadn't yet truly grasped her objective.

"I have no time to listen to paranoid theories."

"You don't deny you're crawling into his bed."

"I don't trouble myself to deny accusations that have no business being spoken."

"If I shoved my hand into your cunt right now, it would come away sopping with his spunk."

Her knees weakened at the thought.

"If you did such a thing, I think you would be hard pressed to explain to the king why you are sexually assaulting Grey Warden recruits--not to mention young noblewomen--mere yards away from his own tent."

Loghain thrust her away from him in disgust, causing her to stumble. She caught herself and set her chin at an regal angle. "I shall forgive your boorish manners this one time only, Teyrn Loghain," she declared recklessly. "But I'd advise you not to make an enemy of me. My vendetta against Arl Howe isn't so consuming that I can't find room for another name to add to the list. The day may come when you find yourself reliant upon my mercy."

There was something ugly in Loghain's eyes as she gave him one last contemptuous glare and then turned and stalked from his tent.
Reeling from her losses at Ostagar, Elissa finds herself outnumbered by Loghain's soldiers in Lothering and finds two new allies.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Loghain's Soldiers

Content Warning: GANG RAPE

Her confrontation with Loghain was not to be easily forgotten.

It was not forgotten in the dark cold night of the Korcari Wilds, when she crawled silently into Daveth's tent and rocked on her hands and knees before him, pushing herself greedily back onto his cock. She stifled her moans so that the only soft, vulgar slap of hips against her ass broke the silence while Ser Jory dozed on guard duty. She came, shuddering violently around him just moments before he reached his own climax, giving her time to turn and lick her cunt juices from his cock before he exploded in her mouth.

It was not forgotten when she returned to camp, reporting immediately to the king's tent as ordered. There she was quickly stripped of her armor and thrown upon the bed. But even as Cailan fucked her with his tongue, thrusting it deep into her hole as he growled and made enthusiastic slurping sounds between her thighs, she couldn't escape the memory of Loghain's piercing eyes accusing her of whore-craft.

She came with his sneering voice in her ears, horribly, deliciously aware of just how fragile her carefully laid plans were. One wrong word and all could go awry. The thrill of danger aroused her, kept her constantly wet and wound up until she was ready to shove even Alistair against a stone pillar and climb onto his cock.

The realization of her precarious position occurred to her again when Duncan and Alistair helped her to her feet and she looked down at the bodies of Daveth and Ser Jory, knowing how close she had come to meeting her end before she'd even begun.

Too many elements were beyond her control. She'd relish the game, but for the memory of Loghain's damning eyes reminding her just what the cost of failure would be.

It wasn't until she stood at the king's war council table surrounded by Duncan and Cailan and Loghain, that she understood Cailan was perched upon his own precarious ledge, that he felt the uncertainty. She was stunned when he announced he was assigning her to light the beacon in the Tower of Ishal, convinced he'd lost his mind to throw discretion to the wind and blatantly shield her from the upcoming battle. But as she met his eyes across the rough-hewn table, ignoring Loghain's glare, she understood that Cailan was buying himself some small bit of assurance in the vast void of unpredictability that lay ahead of them.

She made no effort to protest the decision.

After the council, she went to his tent one last time. Already the tight, coiled tension of battle-
readiness was upon them. When their mouths came together in fury and thunder, his breath held a bitter hint of copper coins, telling of the mad rush of anticipation through his veins.

He pushed her to the rug on the ground, not bothering with the bed, not bothering to remove any more of their armor than absolutely necessary, and drove into her tight cunt with a savagery that made their first coupling seem tender by comparison. His armor scraped her skin, his hands seized her flesh, and she delighted in it, mewled for it, begged shamelessly for more. His fingers found her clit and flicked just a couple times before she shattered in a shrieking climax, thrusting up to meet his cock as he spurted his hot seed deep within.

There was nothing of tenderness in his manner as he pulled out of her cunt, drizzling a trail of semen down her thigh, and righted his clothing and armor. His face was cold, distant, and she knew his mind was not upon her, but upon the upcoming battle. He had no room for tenderness. He stared at her as though he would a stranger, where she lay panting upon the rug, her cunt leaking his seed. He left without a word.

It would be the last time she saw Cailan alive.

Over a week later, she found herself in the company of Alistair and a strangely beautiful mage named Morrigan, looking over the village of Lothering. She'd been nearly as brooding as Alistair along their journey, cursing the Maker, cursing Andraste, cursing any incarnation of fate that had allowed the unraveling of all her plans in a single act of betrayal by a single man.

A man who had not only been responsible for the death of his king, but now--according to the late bandits whose blood still stained her armor--had branded her a traitor guilty of his own crime and set a price upon her head.

She thought she might scream. Everything she had sought to accomplish had been right there in her grasp, and all of it now undone and meaningless.

She was going to kill Loghain. One way or the other.

But first, she was going to get a drink.

"Alistair, go to the chantry," she ordered. "Be discreet and share the fact that you're a Grey Warden only when absolutely necessary. Speak with the templars about the bandits, see if there's a reward for having killed them. Don't give me that look. Yes, it was a public service, but performing public services isn't going to keep us in healing potions or get our armor repaired. And check the chantry board and see if there are any other odd jobs that need doing while you're there."

"Morrigan, make the rounds of the merchants, see what supplies they have. Haggle like a fishwife and buy them out of herbs, potions, and for the love of the Maker get yourself some shoes. I'll be in the tavern, to hear the latest news and gossip and try to drum us up a free meal or two. Meet me there when you've completed your business."

Finally, she looked at her mabari, the last living thing to survive that night at Highever. "Go do some hunting, boy," she said with a sad smile and a scratch to his ears.

So they dispersed, and she was left alone to snarl at the fates as she wound her way through the village toward the tavern. The sound of chanting stopped her, and she paused before a suspended cage and looked up...

...and up...
...and up at the enormous man within. He gripped the bars of the cage with fingers each nearly half the size of her wrist. His skin was dark, his braided hair white, and his eyes were an odd shade of violet. But it was his fingers her gaze kept returning to.

*Maker's breath, what must the size of his cock be?*

She didn't know, but she intended to find out. A giant fucking her would be just the thing to placate her fury. It didn't take much effort to draw from him the reason for his imprisonment, and when she offered to attempt to bargain for his release, he dubiously accepted the offer. She set off again, intending to cut her visit to the tavern short and catch Alistair before he left the chantry to speak with the reverend mother.

Fate, naturally, had other ideas.

"Well, look what we have here, men," a crude voice greeted her as she made her way to the bar. "I think we've just been blessed."

Elissa turned to face the speaker, a soldier in cheaply-made armor, and her heart sank to realize he wore Loghain's device. Another armor-clad man replied, "Didn't we just spend all morning asking about a woman by this very description? And everyone said they hadn't seen her?"

"It seems we were lied to." As he spoke, at least three more soldiers drew near.

She cursed herself for foolishly sending Alistair and Morrigan off on their own; surely she should have known they'd all be more vulnerable alone. The tavern was packed; she was best with her bow but in such close quarters, surrounded by so many bystanders, against so many opponents, she didn't have a chance. She simply didn't have sufficient skill with her daggers to take them all on by herself.

"Gentlemen," came a sweet, lilting voice from over her shoulder. Elissa darted her gaze to the side to see a delicate-looking woman with flaming red hair in Chantry robes approach. "Surely there is no need for trouble. This woman is no doubt just another poor soul seeking refuge."

"She's more than that," the commander of the detachment growled. "Stay out of the way, sister. You protect this traitor, you'll get the same as her."

She had to get them out of the tavern, Elissa thought frantically. Away from the bystanders, into open air where she could use her bow. Or...her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Perhaps what she needed was closer quarters, instead.

"Please, sister, don't interfere," Elissa said before the woman could argue any further. She drew her tongue slowly across her lips. "I...I surrender. There's no need to do violence here, where innocent people may be injured. I'll go with you. I'll do whatever you want."

"Now that's what I like to see!" the commander declared, his eyes warming as he perused her up and down. "She may be a traitor, but at least she knows when she's outnumbered. Get her weapons. We'll take her upstairs to one of our rooms and then leave for Denerim first light."

The chantry sister wanted to protest, but Elissa met her eyes and shook her head with a sharp frown. Then her arms were jerked roughly behind her back and she was dragged stumbling up the stairs.

She made no effort to resist, nor spoke any word of protest as she was shoved into a small dingy room, and the men squeezed in around her. The room was really too small for them all, but the pressed in anyway, all six of them. And despite her compliance, once the door closed, the commander back-handed her and sent her sprawling upon the floor.
Dazed, she pushed herself up, her tongue gently testing her split lip as it trickled blood down her chin. Before she could rise completely, he had her by the hair, slamming her against a bedpost. His hand thrust down the tight leather casing of her cuirass and clamped around her breast in a brutal grip. "The teyrn told us to do whatever we had to do to subdue the traitorous Wardens," the commander snarled, pulling at the buckles of her armor. "Such a shame, pretty as you are, you got all banged up and bruised when you decided to put up a fight."

His gloved hand was ripping her hair out strand by strand where he held her close to her scalp, and other cruel hands, amidst guttural snickers and guffaws, joined his in jerking her armor roughly from her body and shredding her breastband and smallclothes, throwing the remaining rags atop her armor in a far corner.

They pinched her, pulled at her, grabbed handfuls of her flesh in bruising grasps, and through it all, her cunt was drenched. It throbbed and ached and pulsed, pumping out slick juices. She needed this. She needed their cocks filling her, violating her, choking her, bruising her. The violence suited her bleak and turbulent mood. She needed it to purge her of the helpless and impotent fury she felt at all her plans being cast awry. Let them rape her. She'd be fucked by them all amidst the shambles of her ruined dreams and she'd spit in their eyes afterward.

She fought back just enough to make them hurt her more, and she nearly came when the commander back-handed her across the room again. She landed in front of two soldiers who had already shucked their armor and stood with their cocks jutting out and dripping pre-cum. They shoved their cocks in her face, jockeying for position, and she took them both in hand, pumping on one while the other grabbed her head and rammed his cock into her mouth.

They smelled of sweat and filth, the stench overpowering her. The effect was immediate and distressing. No trick her mother had taught her worked to prevent her from gagging. She jerked away from his cock, retching up her meagre breakfast into a corner, and for her trouble, he slapped her several times before forcing her head upon his cock once more, choking her as he fucked her convulsing throat.

She felt a hot spray across her face and hair; the soldier beside him had masturbated to completion watching his comrade rape her mouth. She blinked as gooey strings of spunk clung to her eyelashes. Her jaw ached and still he jammed his cock down her throat, choking her until her face began to turn purple and lights flashed dangerously in her vision. On the edge of unconsciousness, she was dimly aware of hands grabbing her hips and another cock slamming brutally into her wet cunt.

She came, shuddering silently as the cock in her mouth swelled and sent a bitter, acrid stream of seed that tasted faintly of garlic down her bruised throat. Then she came again when the cock in her cunt drew back and crashed into her once more, battering the entrance to her womb as she sobbed and quaked, thrashing in pleasure.

"Maker's balls, would'ja lookit that?" she heard one of them say. "I think the bitch is actually coming!"

Another backhand slap, a rough set of knuckles laying open her cheek. "If you're enjoying yourself, you traitorous slut, we're doing something wrong," the commander growled.

Vicious hands grabbed her breasts and closed upon them like a vise, bruising them like overripe peaches and it hurt, dear Maker it hurt, her breasts had never been so tender and sore. She came again when he grabbed her by the hair and bit her on the neck, drawing blood. The hard, clenching waves of her orgasm milked a climax from the cock in her cunt, showering her channel with seed. Another cock immediately replaced it, a smaller cock, sliding with laughable ease through the watery cum in her loosened passage.
I've gone mad, she thought, Desperation has driven me mad. And then she laughed at him, laughed at them all, stopping only when the soldier futilely fucking her sloppy cunt pulled out and came toward her menacingly with his fist raised. She lifted her chin defiantly, glaring at him, daring him to strike her, to beat her into unconsciousness. Instead he grabbed her head and shoved his cock--dripping with another man's seed--between her lips. He fucked her mouth, not even long enough to reach her throat, and then spent himself on her face.

"Don't bother, commander," he panted, speaking to someone behind her, his softening dick dangling in her face. "Filthy slut is looser than a two-copper whore. You may as well fuck a pudding."

"With that tiny prick, you'd find a rat too loose," she taunted, a sneering smile stretching painfully across her bruised and aching face. He raised his fist again, only lowering it at a barked order from his commander.

"Not until I've had my go at her!" the commander snapped. "I want this traitorous whore to feel every moment of it when I rip her open."

He thrust his hand into her cunt, four fingers worth. It burned unbearably, raw as she was from the brutal fucking she'd received. His fingers came away dripping with her juices and the other soldier's semen, and she felt him making jerking movements behind her as he smeared it onto his cock.

And then he was pushing at the entrance to her ass, and holy Andraste help her, now she understood the menace in his voice when he said he'd rip her open.

He was large.

He was large and she was unprepared, unstretched, barely lubricated. Even Duncan, who'd fucked her ass relentlessly when he'd been deprived the pleasure of her cunt, had taken time to prepare her. When Duncan had fucked her ass, it had been an indescribable pleasure. But Duncan's generous size hadn't been the equal to the battering ram of a cock now trying to wedge its way into that tight, unready passage.

Elissa shrieked as he rammed his way inside, not going slowly, not taking the time to let her adjust. She felt herself burning, tearing, surely she was being split apart, and everything was pain, sweet Maker, pain. She'd been so arrogant, assuming she could take them all, she hadn't known just how badly they could hurt her. But even this agony was welcome, for it gave physical manifestation to her despair.

He ripped her open as he'd said he would, and she sobbed and shrieked and flailed and bled and tried to crawl away, but the merciless hands on her hips kept dragging her back, pulling her back up to her knees when she collapsed beneath him.

"Maker's cock, somebody shut her up!" the commander snarled. "I can't bloody enjoy myself with all that noise. Give her something else to do with her mouth."

And then another cock was there, forcing its way into her screaming mouth, and she was caught between their two stinking bodies. Every battering thrust into her ass drove that cock down her throat, made her choke and retch again and again.

"Bet her cunny's a lot tighter now!" the commander laughed cruelly, and then he was gone, and her ass gaped open, cold and empty and hurting abominably. Bodies shuffled around and then Elissa was being hauled backwards, onto the commander's hairy thighs, and his brutal hands were pulling her back down onto his huge cock, rending her all over again as the bulbous head drove deep into her ass.
He leaned back, dragging her with him until she was almost lying with her back upon his chest, and his hands seized her breasts, squeezing and pinching and bruising and it hurt, her ass hurt and her cunt hurt and her breasts were covered in bruises and pain.

"Now try her pussy," he grunted, lifting her by her waist and slamming her back down upon his cock.

Another body--the lieutenant? she thought, though she couldn't be certain, lost in a delirium of pain--appeared in front of her. His cock worked its way into her sore cunt, and yes, she was tight, unbearably, achingly tight. The pleasure of being filled combined with the pain of being fucked so brutally and she came, her entire body shuddering helplessly.

Her screams were met with trollish snorts of laughter. They thought her in pain, and she was. Some pleasure was there, but it was the pain pushing her over that edge. She was coming from pain. When the two men began to move, their cocks rubbing against each other through the barrier of her flesh, Elissa came again, and again, shaking and throbbing with each movement, each spiteful pinch at her breasts, each slap across her face when she began to lose consciousness, all of it combined into one long, endless, torturous orgasm. Pierced in her cunt and ass by cocks, semen drying in her hair and face and breasts, in humiliated agony she came, over and over and over again.

The one in her cunt came first, and when his softening cock slid out, a stream of seed poured out as well, coating the balls and ass of the commander as he rammed up over and over again into her ass. A tremor began to shake his body, his fingers dug into the skin of her breasts as he twisted them, and he bit the back of her shoulder viciously, drawing blood yet again. Hot seed exploded in her bowel and he had not yet finished spurting when he shoved her off his lap, grabbing her hair when she toppled onto the floor.

"Lick it up, you filthy slut," gesturing to his cock and balls, where his own spunk and that of his lieutenant had dripped and pooled. Summoning her last trembling gasp of courage and defiance, Elissa shook her head, glaring at him. Wrenching on the handful of hair he held, he pulled her head down and rubbed her face in the slime, ground it against the cock that had been in her ass.

Still, she refused to open her mouth, even when he slapped her. This was where she would reclaim herself, she decided. This was where she would refuse the last indignity. She was Lady Elissa Cousland, the woman who would have been queen, and maybe someday she would grovel for a man when it met her mood to do so, but it would not be for Loghain's bullying swine.

He began to beat her in earnest, sending her flying across the room and into the corner where a jumbled collection of armor and weapons had been thrown. A glint of steel caught her eye as she lay there, gasping for air, every muscle in her body singing a chant of pain. He advanced on her, intent on meting out more punishment. He grabbed her hair hauling her up to face him...

...and he screamed, feeling the hot sizzle of a razor-sharp blade slicing a line up his thigh.

"Don't. Move." she hissed, pressing the flat of the blade to his sac. "I wouldn't advise that," she announced to the other soldiers as they started moving toward their weapons. "I'd suggest you call off your men, commander. They may take me down, but not before I geld you. That thick cock you're so proud of won't do you much good without these." To emphasize her point, she pressed the blade harder against his balls, beginning to angle the tip up toward him.

"Stand down!" he shouted to his men, then squeaked as the tip of her dagger bit into his sac. "For Andraste's sake, stand down!"

"Order them from the room."
"Get out! Now! All of you!"

"We ain't got no bloody clothes on!" one soldier protested.

"Perhaps that should have occurred to you before you had your sport," Elissa said disdainfully, eyeing them with a mocking gleam. "You were all so eager to discard your weapons and get your armor off, you never thought of setting a guard. Idiots. If you were troops under my command, I'd have you flogged. Now clear the room, or your commander will be the featured soprano in the chantry chorus."

Nude, they scrambled for the door. The commander stood on tip-toe, trying to evade her blade as she pressed it up just a fraction of an inch higher. His shrill, nervous scream brought a chill smile to her bruised lips.

"What was it you wanted me to do, commander? Lick you?" Slowly, she drew her tongue along his flaccid cock, and he squeaked again as she took him into her mouth, sucking hard, playing with the head with twirls of her tongue, bringing him to reluctant erection while he trembled in terror.

"There. That should make a fitting display for the tavern patrons, I think. You wield this thing so proudly when you've got an unarmed woman on her knees, I think it generous to show the whole village what you have to offer. Or, on second thought, you made me bleed, maybe it's only fair I do the same to you. Maybe I should call one of your men in here and make him rape your ass."

"Please! Don't! I surrender!"

"Very well. I want you to take a message to Loghain," she purred, rising to her feet carefully, never moving the dagger.

"Anything!"

"Tell Loghain..." she sighed, drawing her tongue across his mouth in a mockery of a kiss, "...I'm coming for him."

He screamed as she drew the dagger up, slicing a deep line up the length of his shaft. Holding his bloody cock, he stumbled from the room.

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She sank, trembling, upon the bed, weary, aching in every muscle and bone in her body, filthy with cum and sweat and blood. A moment later there was movement in the doorway to the chamber and she raised the dagger until she realized it was only the red-headed chantry sister.

"I saw the soldiers run from the tavern," she said, staring in horror at Elissa's. Something dark flickered in her eyes, almost as though the sight were familiar, and painful. "They made...quite a spectacle. Maker's breath, what have they done to you?"

"Nothing that won't heal," Elissa sighed.

"You allowed this," she murmured wonderingly. "You allowed them to do this rather than take the chance that any innocent bystanders would be hurt if you fought them belowstairs."

Elissa ducked her head, but did not correct her. Let the sister believe her motives so pure, if it pleased her.

"Please, sister...just please, summon a chambermaid for a bucket of water. My companions are no doubt going to come searching for me very soon and I would really rather they not see me in this
"Of course," she said. "I shall help you bathe and dress and while I do, I would like to tell you about a vision I had...."
Chapter Summary

After the events of Lothering and shocked by a new discovery, Elissa and company travel to Redcliffe, where she reclaims herself and finds a unique way to motivate the town militia.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Bella

Content Warning: Discussion of past rape.

Fate, Elissa thought bitterly, was a cruel bitch.

No, that didn't do it justice. Fate was a seed-swilling, gutter-dwelling, pox-ridden whore with gloopy, rancid rivers of spunk spewing from her putrid, gaping cunt.

Bad enough that she managed to successfully add a giant to her entourage at a time when she was so injured and sore that not only was she unable to fuck him, she didn't even particularly want to at present. At least that wouldn't last. True, for now, all she could do was covertly admire the Qunari, Sten, with something approaching academic intrigue, but that would change as she healed.

No, where Fate really revealed the depths of her depravity was in the fact that she, Lady Elissa Cousland, aspiring queen, had lost the king who had been poised to elevate her to the throne only to discover she had conceived his child.

The pair of them should have been the queen mother and heir to the throne. Instead they were merely a fallen noblewoman with a questionable family reputation--not to mention a price on her head--and a royal bastard.

She would have laughed had she not been so busy puking on the roots of a tree at the edge of the clearing where they'd made their camp the previous night.

Leliana was approaching with a waterskin and a cup, while behind her, Elissa could see Alistair craning his neck in her direction, a concerned expression on his face. Elissa thought she must be delirious from the insane combination of ravenous hunger and inability to keep any food down, because that frown--right there, that beetling of his eyebrows--made him look eerily like Cailan when he'd stared at her in concern after ravishing her that first night.

Madness. Utter madness.

"There," Leliana's sweet, lilting voice crooned soothingly. "I've brought you some water to rinse your mouth, and a heel of bread if you think you can nibble it. It may help calm your stomach."

"How did you know?" Elissa gurgled, struggling to hold back another retch.

"One year, Lady Cecile's niece came to stay with her at her estate out in the country. To hide her condition from the rest of the nobility, you see. I often helped her when she was sick and learned to recognize the signs."
Elissa sighed as the urge began to pass. "I see. And what happened to Lady Cecile's niece and her babe?"

"As winter approached, she gave birth to a beautiful little girl, who was given to a kind and wealthy, but childless, merchant and his wife--friends of Lady Cecile's--to raise as their own. Lady Cecile's niece went back to Val Royeaux and married soon thereafter with no hint of scandal."

"How fortunate for her. I no longer have any friends or allies in a position to help me conceal my condition."

"You may not be able to conceal your condition, but you do have friends and allies," Leliana said firmly. "And we shall help you as best we can, yes? You are an archer, so your condition should not encumber you in battle too badly. And once the baby is born, if you don't want to give him to the chantry, we shall help you care for him. Even if it means staying here in camp to take care of him while you travel as necessary. Er, assuming, that is, that you have no plans to end your pregnancy?"

Did she? The idea had occurred to her. Her mother had instructed her on how to avoid or end an inconvenient pregnancy as thoroughly as she had on any of the sensual arts, and yet....

...Bastard or not, her child was the last of the Theirin dynasty. She no longer had any hope of becoming queen, but it would be a tragedy to let the bloodline die out entirely. And once she dealt with Loghain's usurpation of the throne, she could see about winning her child back some of his birthright.

"No," Elissa said, able to inject some resolve into her voice as her stomach began to calm. Nibbling on the bread was helping after all. So long as she avoided the smoke from the campfire and the odor of whatever it was Alistair was attempting to cook, she might just be all right. "I won't be doing that."

"Oh, good!" Leliana looked delighted. "I was hoping you'd say that. Not that I wouldn't understand if you'd chosen otherwise, of course. After what those men did, I don't know if I would be able to bear such a reminder, myself."

"Those men?" Elissa stared blankly for a moment, then said in horror, "Oh, Maker's blood, no! It wasn't them. I was actually having some signs even before...all that."

"Oh!" Leliana gasped in relief.

"Quite. I'm rather amazed that I've come this far, between the Joining and what happened in Lothering."

"Who--No, I'm sorry, it's not really my business."

Elissa closed her eyes, feeling another pang of grief for all that had gone wrong, and just how close she'd come to having it all work out perfectly. "It doesn't matter," she said at last, setting her shoulders. "He's gone now."

Elissa felt the unaccustomed burn of tears in her eyes and wondered at herself. Surely it was due to the child in her womb. Not since the night her parents died had she cried; she had always been rather proud of her lack of sentimentality. Since the night everything had come undone at Ostagar, her primary emotion had been fury. Fury over Loghain's betrayal, fury over the wreck of her plans and dreams, fury over the loss of so very many lives--many of which had been the contingent of soldiers Fergus had brought south from Highever, troops she had known and with whom she had trained. It incensed her that one man, one act, was able to lay waste to so much with so little effort.
That fury had spent itself that day in Lothering, though, and now....

Now she felt a hollow, aching grief over all that had been lost. Cailan. Kind, impetuous, foolish, vainglorious Cailan. Duncan, wise, dangerous, unflinchingly pragmatic. Ser Jory. Daveth. The knights and soldiers of Highever. All of them just...wasted. And all for the sake of one man's paranoia and ambition.

"Ostagar?" Leliana inquired when Elissa looked at her again, her eyes shimmering with tears.

"Yes." That one word, choked and hoarse, was all Elissa would say on the subject.

Thankfully, by the time they reached Redcliffe Elissa's injuries obtained in Lothering had healed, courtesy of a great many healing potions. She was grateful; her bruised face and limp would not have been likely to inspire a great deal of confidence in Arl Eamon or the troops he might offer to her cause.

Alistair was finally beginning to behave normally around her. Admittedly, she hadn't been very gracious with him after the events of Lothering. Despite her attempts to downplay it, he quickly caught on to the fact that she had been raped, and he'd been horrified. His was the one response she'd been in no humor to deal with, that dithering and solicitous concern, as she limped out of the village while aching and covered in bruises.

"Do you think I've never been fucked before?" she snapped at him when he made what felt like his fiftieth inquiry into her well-being.

His eyes were wide and startled as he stammered for a reply, uncertain how to placate her. "Judging from your response, I suppose not," he finally muttered.

"It's all a matter of degrees, then, isn't it?" she continued, a hysterical, volatile edge to her voice that she hated. "It's nothing I've not experienced before, to some degree or another. I'm no chaste damsel needing rescue or comfort or coddling. I went with those soldiers, knowing full-well what they would likely do, because it was better than being outnumbered and killed in a crowded tavern where other people might be hurt. I went with them because it put me in a better position to gain the advantage against them when the opportunity arose. I took a hopeless situation and turned it to victory." She subsided with a shudder and chose to say nothing of the catharsis she'd sought, the reason she'd allowed it to go on so long when she might have gotten the upper hand earlier had she attempted it. "If you make it out that I've been somehow irrevocably broken by it, or make me out to be some fragile, traumatized victim, then you take that victory from me, and I will not have that!"

He avoided her for some time after that, and been coolly impersonal for longer still.

The truth was, Alistair was something of an enigma.

Since the day her body had announced its ascent to womanhood, she'd been taught to relate to others using sex. It was a powerful weapon and one she wielded expertly. It could insure a successful conclusion to diplomatic negotiations where there might otherwise have been an impasse. It could prove a useful distraction when one didn't want another inquiring too deeply into other matters. It could ease tensions and encourage open communication where there might have been reticence. It could placate an adversary, win one goodwill and preferential treatment from an ally, or serve as currency where there existed no interest in money.

Or, as she'd proven in Lothering, it could distract an enemy long enough for her to make her move.

Elissa unquestionably had a preference for men, but she'd been taught how to please and respond to
women as well and could find their company pleasant in the right circumstances. Women, however, often tended to be less easily swayed from their purpose by sexual considerations than were men, particularly those who had no interest in other women. Accordingly, dealing with men had been Elissa's forte.

Her instruction had left her utterly bewildered as to how to deal with Alistair.

Sex clearly was not the way in with him. Not that he was uninterested; he most certainly was, if his oddly charming attempts at flirtation were any indication. But he was more comfortable and responsive when sex was not in play. He quickly retreated if she became too aggressive with him, and not in a way that indicated he could be coaxed out of his reluctance. He grew genuinely irritated when pressed too hard.

As she found out the night she invited him to her tent. She wasn't sure exactly why she did it, except that now that she had healed she felt the need for a catharsis of a different sort, a softer, gentler fucking from a good and kind man to wash away the brutality of that day in Lotharing. That he happened to remind her occasionally of Cailan had probably also been a factor. When she wasn't hearing the archdemon in her nightmares, she frequently had erotic dreams in which she confused and interchanged Cailan and Alistair. Sometimes it was Alistair who pinned her to a luxurious bed in a graciously appointed pavilion and rent her virginity amidst her contrived protests, or it was Cailan who slyly asked if she'd ever licked a lamppost in winter when she teased him about being a virgin.

She'd stared after him in stunned disbelief as he stammered an awkward refusal and ducked into his tent alone. When she'd offered again the next night, certain he must regret his decision, he'd snapped at her and stalked away angrily.

She hadn't asked again after that.

Finally he began to speak to her again, to answer her questions about the Grey Wardens and some of his own history, and as they came down the road into Redcliffe, some level of comfortable camaraderie had been achieved between them. It was a good thing, too, for Redcliffe proved more of a challenge than she could ever have dreamed. She wasn't about to proposition a drunken old man half out of his mind with worry about his daughter. Some perverse sense of curiosity did, however, compel her to issue a half-hearted invitation to the dwarf, Dwyn, in exchange for defending the village. He'd given her a lustful perusal and then apparently decided she wasn't worth dying for.

Andraste's tits, she seethed as she stalked from his dingy waterfront shack, having finally acquired his cooperation in exchange for exerting some influence on his behalf with Bann Teagan and Arl Eamon to get his taxes and duties decreased. If this continues, I may as well make my vows of celibacy to the Chantry and have done with the business of being a seductress. I'll be a sister by my seventeenth name day.

It didn't help matters that Morrigan and Sten were both making surly remarks about her propensity for wasting time helping people, requiring her to waste time and patience explaining to them the necessity for her actions.

Thankfully, they were both placated when she strong-armed the craven barkeep at the tavern into defending the village. Offering him sex was never an option; she'd be burned alive on Andraste's own pyre before she'd offer herself to that louse to get him off his cowardly ass and out into the village where he'd do some good. Once he was gone, the tavern wench, Bella, was more than happy to comply with her request to serve the militia free ale, and their obvious joy at such a simple pleasure made her stop and wonder....
Everywhere she'd gone through the village that day, the refrain had been the same: *We won't survive the night*. No matter how much aid she offered to lend, no one seemed to believe it possible to defeat the menace coming from the castle. Their morale needed a lift, something with more weight than sweet reassurances.

"Wait for me outside," she told her companions. "I have a few words I need to speak with these men."

When the door had closed behind Alistair, she stood in the middle of the tavern and began to unbuckle her cuirass. The effect was immediate. All chatter and grousing ceased, tankards were lowered, and all eyes were upon her, including Bella's.

"What in the Maker's name are you doing?" Bella hissed.

"I'm going to give these men a reason to survive," she replied softly. She stripped off her armor and then her breastband, and stood before them in only her smallclothes and boots. Her breasts, heavier than they had been only a few weeks ago, swayed as she turned around before them, allowing them to view her front and back. The tavern was silent except for the occasional gasp.

Before their eyes, she ran her hands down her torso, cupped her breasts, softly pinched her nipples until they rose to tight peaks.

"Gentlemen," she purred. "It has come to my attention that many of you don't believe you're going to survive the night. If I believed that were true, I'd spread myself on this table here this very instant and send you to your deaths with a last fuck to comfort you. But I'm not going to do that. Not today."

"Tomorrow, however, after the battle is won, I will be back here in this tavern, on this table. And any member of the militia who survives the fight is more than welcome to join me there, if you so desire. Except, of course, for that stinking swine, Lloyd."

The cheer that rose through the tavern was thunderous. It shook the dust from the rafters. Tankards banged on the table enthusiastically as the men took up the chant, "War-den! War-den! War-den!"

Smiling, Elissa began to gather her armor. After a moment, Bella came over to help, an astonished and perplexed grin on her face.

"I suspect you're going to be a very busy woman tomorrow," Bella murmured.

"Maker willing," Elissa conceded.

"It seems I've spent every day of my life trying to avoid these men's grasping paws, but you...I could almost envy you."

"You could always join me."

"On the table?"

"It would make my work much easier. And give the men something else to look forward to. And it would give you an opportunity to claim ownership over yourself, put the decision as to whose hands get to grope you under *your* control."

"Hmm, that's a thought. But I have to live here among these men once you're gone, and that could prove...awkward. Especially if any of the ones with jealous wives decide to accept your offer." Bella pursed her lips thoughtfully. "But maybe I can contribute something...."
"Gentlemen!" Bella shouted over the lively din that had filled the tavern after the chanting died down. "Just a little something to keep you going until tomorrow...." 

With a wicked smile, she leaned in and kissed Elissa full on the lips before the gawking militiamen. For a moment, Elissa simply smiled, and then she wrapped her arms around Bella and began to return the kiss, parting the woman's incredibly soft lips with her tongue. Bella's hands came up between their bodies and began kneading Elissa's breasts with soft, sensual strokes that soon had Elissa humming into her mouth with pleasure. Another deafening round of chants shook the rough wooden walls, this time for Bella.

The tavern wench broke the kiss, blushing madly and laughing, her lips puffy and her eyes sparkling with good humor. "Stay safe, Warden," she murmured, and helped Elissa don her armor. "What was that about?" Alistair asked as she emerged from the tavern. The afternoon breeze off Lake Calenhad cooled her flushed cheeks, but her heart was light, content despite everything.

"Nothing," she murmured, "Just an encouraging speech for the militia."
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Alistair and Leliana find out about Elissa's... unusual... approach to problem-solving in a shocking way.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/militiamen, Elissa/Bella, Elissa/Teagan

Content Warnings: Consensual gangbang


Sight the next target.


Elissa's fingers and arms were abominably weary. Her bow-string twanged as she loosed another arrow, echoed an instant later by Leliana's own bow as she stood beside Elissa. The undead monstrosity attempting to flank Sten went down with an arrow in its neck, and another in its temple.

She nocked another arrow.

The waves of creatures were becoming thinner and less frequent. The ground was littered with corpses, very few of them human. Triumph began to sing through Elissa's heart as she knew, knew they had won the night.

Suddenly, there were no more undead creatures charging them, either from the lake or from the bridge to the castle. Everyone stood still, poised and alert, bows and swords ready, and still nothing emerged to attack them.

Swords drooped. Bows were lowered. And slowly, a sound began to build, the exultant cheering of dozens of victorious voices, quickly escalating to a night-shattering cacophony.

Smiling, relieved, Elissa propped her bow against the wall of the chantry and turned to approach the mayor and make arrangements to stand down the village and return the people to their homes.

She took one step and then the world swam. The ground rushed up to meet her and then everything was dark.

Tired. She was so very tired. Her arms ached. She wanted to keep her eyes closed and sleep. And yet she could hear concerned voices speaking above her. She opened bleary eyes and a masculine face hovered over her, brow etched with worry.

"Cailan?" she croaked. And then she remembered. Her eyes popped open, suddenly alert.

Not Cailan.

Alistair.
Who was now looking for all the world like he'd just been run through with a spear. His face was pale as he stared at her, his eyes wide and disbelieving.

"Lady Cousland--Elissa--are you all right?" another voice asked, and Elissa turned her head to see Bann Teagan standing on her other side. She'd been moved, she realized, and now she was lying on a pew inside the chantry.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," she reassured him, swinging her legs off the pew and sitting up. "Sorry, I just...fell asleep on my feet, I think. I dare say we're all quite tired."

Slowly, Teagan nodded. "Yes. I had thought we would try to enter the castle after the memorial service this morning, but now I see that would be quite foolhardy, not knowing what we may encounter there. We all need rest before we can make the attempt. We'll take the day to recuperate and try the castle first thing tomorrow morning."

After the memorial, Alistair fell in step with Elissa as she made her way wearily toward the small camp they'd made along the road leading into Redcliffe.

"So...being a teyrn's daughter, you knew the king pretty well, I take it?" he asked cautiously.

"I wouldn't say that," Elissa replied evasively. "I never spent much time at court. Actually, I never met him until I reached Ostagar."

"Yet you were on a first name basis with him?"

"He told me he didn't like titles and gave me leave to call him by his name."

"I see." Clearly her answers didn't satisfy Alistair, and he fell into a disgruntled silence.

Elissa cursed herself, first for her slip in calling Alistair by Cailan's name, and then for her own unwillingness to simply confess the truth of the matter to him. She could not keep her pregnancy secret from him for long, and once it was known, he would naturally be curious about the father. And yet....

His innocence made her feel awkward. She felt like she was forever having to conceal from him the very truth of who she was for fear that he would handle it badly. And right now, she was simply too weary for a confrontation.

Besides, she had a long night ahead of her.

She slept in her tent until late afternoon and awoke ravenous. Thankfully, a good deal of food had been delivered to their camp during the day by the women of the village, gestures of gratitude for their efforts in saving the town. Elissa spent much of the meal daydreaming, summoning erotic images to mind to warm herself up for the events to come, drawing on her years of lessons in sensuality to arouse herself. She imagined the glorious sensation of fullness of having a cock within her, the salty taste of semen on her tongue, the warm, rough feel of hands on her breasts. Sweet, sizzling anticipation settled in the very core of her body, poised like a tightly sealed bud ready to burst into bloom with the first warm rays of the sun.

And then Leliana's voice reached her ears. "Are you coming with us to the tavern, Sten?"

"No."

"And what of you, Morrigan?"
"Spend my evening in a tavern packed with stinking villagers? Hardly."

Elissa opened her eyes slowly, refusing to allow herself to panic and lose the delicious languor flooding her body. "You're intending to go to the tavern?" she asked, her voice deliberately calm.

"Why yes. Alistair and I heard there was to be some sort of celebration for the militia there. You don't think they'll mind if we attend as well, do you?"

"No, they won't. And yes, there is to be a celebration. I made them a promise, and I intend to keep it." Elissa pushed herself up to her feet. "Very well, then. I suppose we'd best be going."

She would do this. She would not let herself have second thoughts, or regrets. She owed these men more than to go into this nervous and reluctant.

If this was how Alistair and Leliana were to learn of the way she dealt with people, so be it. She was what she was, what her family had raised her to be—a woman who reveled in the pleasures of the flesh, who used them to her advantage. She would not pretend, and she would not be shamed.

Elissa walked silently beside them until they reached the tavern door, then stopped them. "Whatever happens inside, you are not to interfere. If you're offended, keep it to yourself or leave. My only concern is with rewarding these men, not with any of your delicate sensibilities that might be injured. Do not interfere, do not make a spectacle, do not spoil this, for me or them."

"What--?" But she opened the tavern door before Alistair could complete his question.

The roar that greeted her was staggering. Bella quickly appeared at her side and pressed a foaming tankard of ale into her hand. She was dragged away from Alistair and Leliana, and from the corner of her eye she saw them make their way to a far table. Bella escorted her to a long table in the center of the tavern and helped her climb atop it.

"Gentlemen!" Elissa cried, lifting her tankard high. "To victory!"

Another deafening round of cheers, as she raised her tankard to her lips and drank deeply of the mellow amber ale.

She handed the tankard back to Bella and looked out over the exuberant crowd as they fell silent to hear what else she would say. "I cannot express my joy at seeing how many of you have made it through, nor my indescribable sorrow at the fact that there are some who did not make it to be with us tonight. Those men will be mourned in their good time, however. Tonight, on the other hand, is for those of us who have lived. Now...I believe I made you men a promise, did I not?" she asked with a teasing smile, and was answered by more clamorous shouting and applause.

Her hands loosened the laces of her simple linen tunic and slowly, making a show of it, she drew it over her head and tossed it to Bella, then spun slowly, her arms spread wide, giving them all a good look at her breasts. In the far corner, she could see Alistair's stunned expression, his face deep crimson. Leliana looked somewhat less astonished, but then, despite her deep personal faith, perhaps she was possessed of an Orlesian's decadent sensibilities.

When the whistles and catcalls died down, she untied the drawstring of her breeches, bending over much further than was strictly necessary to make sure they got a fine view of her ass and just a hint of her cunt. She pushed them down her legs, revealing the fact that she wore no smallclothes beneath. Then she stood, her face flushed with excitement, and her heart giddy.

"While the promise I extended was to each and every one of you, I think, perhaps, it's not inappropriate to grant first honors to certain notable individuals without whom the defense of the
village would not have been possible, wouldn't you agree?" Her eyes landed on a familiar face in the crowd. "Mayor Murdock?"

Once the shouting died down again, he shook his head, blushing. "My thanks, Warden, but my wife would have my balls."

"Very well then. Dwyn, as my personal thanks for your valiant defense of the village?" she looked over at the dwarf who sat between his henchmen, watching the spectacle avidly.

"Heh, damn right I'll have my turn, but you'll want to warm up a bit before you take me on, missy," he chuckled.

Elissa arched a brow at him, giggling gaily. "Oh, a challenge! Very well, then, shall you draw straws?"

"Let the virgin have first go!" a voice shouted. Alarmed, Elissa looked over at Alistair, who was being physically restrained from interfering by Leliana's hand clutching his tunic. But then another voice called, "Yeah, let Tomas have the honors!"

Tomas? Elissa's eyes scanned the crowd and landed upon the brilliantly blushing lad that had greeted them when they first approached Redcliffe, who slowly came to his feet as another riotous burst of cheering rocked the tavern. "Take 'is cherry, Warden!" a third voice yelled.

Elissa gave an exaggerated bow of assent, extending her hand to the suddenly trembling young man. "Tomas?" she said kindly. "I shall be honored if you would join me."

Tomas took her hand, stepping up onto the table beside her, and she drew him in for a kiss. Beneath the roar of approving cheers, she murmured to him, "You may feel free to refuse, if you wish."

Unable to speak, he shook his head emphatically and with a merry laugh, Elissa began to unlace his breeches. Then her mouth went dry, and another chorus of shouts rose as the crowd got a view.

The lad was...rather generously endowed. Not enormous, but certainly larger than average. Another pang of warm tension cramped between her legs as she envisioned taking that into her still-tight body.

She smiled and pushed him down onto the table. She thought of stroking him with her hands, or her mouth, but no...the young man looked fit to burst already; he'd not likely last long if she stimulated him any further. So instead she kissed him again, deeply, as she straddled his body. She positioned the head of his cock between her folds, and slowly, oh so slowly, began to lower herself.

Tight...so tight. She carefully stretched around him, aware that she would have to go slowly and gently if she ever wished to make it through the night in relative comfort. Every nerve in her cunt sang as the head of his cock passed into her. She bit her lip, her eyes closed with ecstasy, stretching...oh, oh Maker, stretching...Already a sheen of sweat made her skin glow in the warm lantern-light of the tavern as inch by inch she took Tomas's cock into her body.

She became aware of some abrupt, violent jostling and opened her eyes just far enough to see Alistair pushing his way frantically toward the door of the tavern, a large wet stain on the front on his breeches. The sight sent a pang of sadness through her, but she dismissed it with an impatient shake her her head. He was not her concern right now. She looked down at Tomas and his rapturous expression as he slid the last inch into her, filling her...sweet Andraste, so full!

"Here, Tomas," she said, settling over him. She took his hand and placed the flat of his thumb directly on her clit. "This is where you pleasure a woman, right here. No matter what else you learn
about lovemaking, always remember that."

Tomas groaned, giving an involuntary bump with his hips, and pressed his thumb into her nub. A small orgasm rippled through her almost instantly. Seeing it, the men cheered, and Elissa began to laugh. She laughed with pleasure, with relief, with the sheer joy of being alive, with the blissful glory of being filled with cock. She reveled in being young and alive and at the power her sensuality gave her. Right here, right now, she owned these men, even the ones who would never touch her, tonight or ever. She had brought them through a nightmare alive, and they were hers.

The bouncing spasms of her laughter brought young Tomas to a quick end, bucking frantically as he spent within her, and the feeling of his shudders and spurts dragged more peals of laughter from her. She giggled against his mouth when she kissed him one last time before rolling off him. Discreetly, she wiped the seed from her thighs with a towel Bella provided and came to her feet atop the table once more. She grabbed the nearest tankard and drained it.

"Who's next?" she shouted triumphantly over the din of cheers and tankards slamming on tables.

The evening went on and on. She made a point of learning the names of every man who approached her. And they did approach her, sometimes two or three at a time. She took them all, even the ones who came back more than once. She took them in her cunt, in her ass, deep in her throat. Hands stroked her hair, her breasts, her clit, bringing her to one orgasm after another. She rode one with another in her hand and yet another in her mouth. She rocked between two men, felt them stroke one another through the membrane between her cunt and her ass while the one behind her kneaded her breasts and a third man sprayed an insane quantity of semen on her tongue.

She enjoyed them, let herself have fun with them, flirted and made bawdy jokes with them. She played with their balls, fingered their asses, drank their seed like it was the finest vintage of wine, and through it all, giddy bursts of laughter erupted from her with each orgasm.

She was intoxicated. Drunk on ale. Drunk on sensuality. Drunk on the thick, musky scent of cum. Drunk on freedom and life and power.

Dwyn was as good as his word, taking his turn. His cock was much like the dwarf himself, short but incredibly broad and strong. It was a struggle to get her jaws around him, and when he pushed her onto her back and thrust into her cunt, riding her with furiously vigorous thrusts, she came immediately and loudly.

As exhaustion began to set in and she began to reach the point where she was certain she could not possibly take another cock, Bella stepped up, her eyes shining and ale on her breath. She stripped off her tunic and skirt and lay beside Elissa for a long moment, kissing her deeply, softly, her silken skin stroking over Elissa's as her hands found Elissa's tender breasts and gently pulled at her nipples.

She shimmied up Elissa's body and Elissa took Bella's nipple in her mouth, stroking it with her tongue. She alternated hard, deep sucks with short, shallow pulls where she just barely passed the nipple quickly between her lips, until Bella was shuddering and pumping her hips restlessly, humping Elissa's thigh, slicking it with the fluids seeping from between her folds.

She knelt above Elissa on the table, her knees on either side of Elissa's head, and bent forward, bringing her mouth down to Elissa's cunt as she lowered her own cunt onto Elissa's face.

Elissa drove her tongue deep into Bella, lapped at her clit, sipped the tangy, smoky essence from her folds. Bella's tongue stirred Elissa's weary clit gently back to life and when her fingers delved into Elissa's seed-filled cunt, the vibrations of Elissa's moans on Bella's clit sent an answering ripple through Bella. The avidly watching men groaned and fondled themselves as they saw Bella taste the
cum leaking out from Elissa's body.

Elissa reached down and gently rolled Bella's nipple between her fingers with one hand, while the fingers of her other hand slipped inside Bella and began fucking her, slowly and gently at first, then hard and fast. Bella forgot about licking Elissa's cunt and lay her head on Elissa's thigh, moaning and rolling her hips. She yelled and thrashed when Elissa's fingers crooked within her and came screaming and sobbing, with Elissa's tongue jabbing her clit, three of Elissa's fingers fucking her.

Bella's lips tasted of Elissa's moisture and salty semen when at last she rose from the table and bestowed upon Elissa one last languorous kiss. Leliana came forward then and helped Elissa to her feet, helped her dress when her weary hands fumbled with her clothing. She escorted Elissa out of the tavern amid raucous cheers and into the strange silence of the night outside.

"Well," Leliana said at last. "That was...interesting."

"You don't seem shocked."

"One sees many things when entertaining Orlesian nobility," Leliana shrugged. "I admire what you did, giving those men a reason not to despair, giving them hope to see them through last night's battle."

"It's not like I didn't get anything out of it myself," Elissa said wryly.

Leliana gave a thoughtful hum. "Yes, I could see that as well. It was a very...affecting demonstration."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Oh, I did indeed. Your tastes appear to be much the same as my own; I've made no secret of the fact that I enjoy the company of women, no?"

"Are you trying to proposition me now?" Elissa asked, smiling.

"I'm very tempted to, but...I think it would not work, between us."

"Whyever not?"

"You seem more capable than I of enjoying lovemaking without love. Not that I haven't had my pleasures, but I prefer a certain amount of exclusivity, you see."

"Ah. Yes, I'm afraid exclusivity is not really my forte."

"But I did enjoy the performance," Leliana said with a hint of mischief. "Very much so."

Alistair was brooding by the campfire when they returned to camp. Despite the fact that Elissa wanted nothing more than a bucket of warm water and her bedroll, she knew she would have to deal with him and sat across from him at the fire.

"I almost left tonight, you know," he said at last, as though begrudging the necessity to speak. "I almost took off and left all this behind. If it weren't for the Blight and my duty as a Grey Warden, I would have. How could you--why would you--I don't even know what to call that! 'Perversion' seems a good word to start with."

"Really?" Elissa asked, arching a brow at him. "Says whom? The men in the tavern tonight obviously didn't find it perverted."
"Well, the Chantry, for one."

"Really. The Chantry. Hmm."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I find it interesting that you would find the Chantry's opinions on this subject so inviolable," she mused. "Tell me, what's more perverse? Offering desperate men the hope of an evening filled with free and enjoyable sex as a reward for surviving a near-hopeless battle? Or forcing young, healthy men to adjure all hope of sex and companionship for the rest of their lives and then addicting them to lyrium, condemning them to eventual madness, essentially enslaving them so that they might hunt and imprison other people whose only crime is having been born with the ability to do magic?"

"One has nothing to do with the other!" Alistair protested.

"No? If the Chantry is wrong with regards to how they treat templars and mages, why can't they be wrong about sex, as well? Clearly, the philosophies of the Chantry are fallible on any number of fronts."

"I'm not going to debate theology with you," Alistair said wearily. "Maybe you're right, maybe the Chantry has got it wrong. But that doesn't make what you did tonight any less of a disgrace. If nothing else, it reflects badly on the Grey Wardens. Don't you care what people may think of us? Duncan would never--""

"Duncan recruited me knowing full well what I was."

"And what is that?" Alistair asked snidely.

"A woman who uses sex to achieve her ends."

"You mean a harlot."

"You might call it that, if you chose," Elissa shrugged. "I don't sell myself for money. But I do use my body for any number of reasons, and often simply because I enjoy it. Duncan didn't recruit me solely for my skills with a bow."

"You're lying. Duncan was not a panderer. He would never have done such a thing."

"He would and he did," Elissa insisted. "Duncan was a kind man, a good man. I respected and admired him very much. But he was also a man of passion, and a devout pragmatist. He was willing to do whatever was necessary to further the cause of the Grey Wardens and end the Blight. He cared about results, not about some arbitrary set of rules known as morality. I was to be his 'goodwill ambassador' and help ease matters on the diplomatic front."

"Are you saying he--""

"Fucked me? Oh, yes," Elissa purred, taking some cruel satisfaction in shocking him, for his condemnation injured her more than she cared to admit. "And my mother as well, while my father watched. He was a great friend of the Couslands and my parents were always happy to entertain him."

"Maker's blood! Why am I listening to this?" Alistair rubbed a hand across his brow. His next question came reluctantly, as though he was compelled to ask against his own will. "Your parents? Honestly?"
"You must understand about my family. I started receiving tutelage in the erotic arts just before I turned twelve years old—initially simply in theory, of course; no one touched me at that age. I was taught by my mother, who had at one time indeed been a whore. She and my father were great partners. They loved each other deeply, they loved their children deeply, and between Father's skills as a diplomat and negotiator and Mother's more sensual abilities, they were able to bring a great deal of wealth and prosperity to the Cousland name and Highever. They had such success using sex as a part of their dealings with others that they felt it was imperative to pass that skill-set on to their children."

"When I became a woman, I began my tuition. At first, I simply read erotic texts, books that had been banned by the Chantry. I was taught about my own body, encouraged to explore myself and find what brought me pleasure. I was never asked to do anything I was unwilling to do, and it was made very clear to me that if I did not wish to learn I was not required to do so. As time passed, I acquired more practical skills. I began to practice fellatio using small, warmed yams and cucumbers. I learned cunnilingus using peaches that had a very narrow slice removed so that I had to delve inside to reach the pith with my tongue, the sweet juices dripping down my chin. It wasn't until I was fifteen that I was permitted to exercise my skills on another person, and even then I remained a maiden up until the day I arrived at Ostagar."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I won't change, Alistair. I won't change, and I won't be shamed. Not by you, not by anyone. This is where my area of expertise lies. I'm good at it, and I'm proud of it. And if using these skills of mine will keep us alive and get us through this Blight—as Duncan intended me to do—then that is what I will do. Moreover, I would fuck Maferath himself right next to Andraste's own pyre if it will put me in a position where I may mete justice to Arl Howe and Teyrn Loghain. You can either accept it, and accept me, or you can remain silent, because I will not be lectured by you, of all people, on the morality of the Chantry."

Rising, she stretched, uncomfortably aware of how sticky she was. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going down to the lake to bathe. I'd recommend you get some rest. We'll likely have a long day tomorrow, depending on what we find in the castle."

Her heart was heavy as she made her way down to the lake. Conscious of the signs advising against swimming, she stripped on the pebbly shore of the lake and waded in the shallows. The water was frigid with the approaching winter, but she braved it nonetheless, finding it bracing after the heat of the tavern and so many bodies. She splashed water over her body, washing away the sweat from her skin, and the seed from her thighs. She poured a bucket of water over her hair and washed it with a mild soap until the odor of smoke and ale and sex was gone. The cheer and exultation she'd felt in the tavern had fled, leaving her as morose and introspective as the water left her chilled and shivering.

Alistair's accusations had hurt, despite her confessed pride. She was not ashamed of who she was, and yet...his opinion mattered to her. He was a truly good man. She wanted him to think well of her, admire her, respect her. She was deeply afraid that he never would again, and that loss meant more to her than she cared to admit.

She dried herself and dressed in a clean tunic and breeches, but felt a strange reluctance to return to the campsite. Instead, she wandered the village until she found herself outside the chantry. Sighing, she opened the door and entered the darkened sanctuary.

All was silent within. All the townsfolk had returned to their homes, and Mother Hannah had retired to her small rectory cottage behind the chantry proper. Elissa walked to the front of the chantry and
sank down upon a pew, pulling her feet up to rest her chin on her knees. She yearned for her mother and father, to tell her she had done well and that there was no shame in using her body for the purpose the Maker had given it. She yearned for Duncan and his understanding pragmatism, for the approval he would certainly bestow upon what she had accomplished. She yearned for Cailan, that she might tell him about the child within her and see his exuberant glee at the news.

"Lady Cousland? I mean, Elissa?" a soft, rich voice inquired, and the shadows leading to the back rooms of the chantry resolved themselves into a human shape.

"Bann Teagan? I'm sorry, I didn't know anyone was here. I hope I didn't disturb you."

"No, not at all. I was just...wandering. After so many nights of fear and uncertainty, I am finding it hard to rest."

"That seems to be a common theme, tonight."

"Well, I imagine most of the militiamen staggering out of the tavern tonight will rest well," he said with a sly grin.

"Ah. So you heard about that."

"Yes. I was tempted to attend myself, but I figured it would be...inappropriate. Those men were the heroes who saved the village, not me."

Elissa stared at him. "Really? So I'm not going to receive another chastening on just how shameless and disgraceful I am?"

"After what you've accomplished here? I'm hardly going to question your methods."

Disquieted, Elissa rose and paced to a bookcase, scanning the titles on the spines of the volumes within. None of the tomes with which she was most familiar were there, and she shook her head in amazement, wondering why that was. Not that she really needed to wonder. She and her parents had shared many conversations about the conflict between their open acceptance of sexuality and the Chantry's attempt to repress it.

To maintain such a rigid control over a population that you can dictate their very beliefs, pup, you must somehow exert control over their basest, most fundamental instincts, her father's voice lectured. Make them believe that their primal impulses require the approval of the Chantry to fulfill, and people will do anything the Chantry demands to win that approval.

Hands closed over her shoulders, interrupting her maudlin turn of mind, and she found herself drawn back against Teagan's chest. He pressed his face against her still-damp hair, and murmured, "I didn't attend, but I wanted to. And if you're willing, I would like to have my turn now."

Elissa drew a deep breath, warmth suffusing her body as he kissed the back of her neck, his hands stroking down her shoulders.

"No," she whispered. His hands fell away immediately.

"I'm sorry--"

"I will not let you fuck me, Teagan," she said, turning to look at him and laying a hand alongside his face. "However, I should very much like it if you would make love to me."

His kiss was gentle, sweet, clean. Slowly, they stripped one another of their clothes and made their
way back to the front pew where she'd sat, and there he knelt between her knees and bent over, bringing her to a soft, shuddering climax with his lips and tongue. When he straightened, her legs locked around his waist, her ankles crossed above his backside, as he guided himself between her folds and entered her with slow, exquisite care. His hands weighed her breasts, thumbs stoking skillfully over her nipples as he moved within her. He kissed her face, her neck, her shoulders reverently.

When the building waves of her orgasm next broke through her, it came like a blessing, a benediction, the light of Andraste's own grace shining down upon her. Peacefully, she subsided within his arms and as she felt the warm rush of his seed within her, she knew joy.
Chapter Summary

Morrigan proposes an alternative solution to the problem of Connor's demonic possession.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Morrigan, Elissa/Dog

Content Warnings: Bestiality

"This, in your lexicon, is what is known as an option?" Elissa asked, her voice soft with shock, staring at the blood mage in disbelief.

Jowan sighed. "It's the most I can offer--"

"Oh, Maker's cock!" she snapped, erupting suddenly from her numb astonishment. "Clearly the Chantry has been right about blood mages all along, if this is how cheaply you hold life!"

"But--"

"No! This is not a discussion. I am not killing a child, and I am not sanctioning the commission of human sacrifice. Or elf or dwarf or mabari sacrifice, for that matter. Honestly! Have we all gone bloody insane?"

Bann Teagan looked as green as Elissa felt. "I'm not happy with either option, but nonetheless, this demon clearly must be dealt with before it wreaks more havoc."

"Then I will cross the lake and seek help at the Circle of Magi!"

"And how many people will die before we get back?" Alistair challenged.

"There was no attack on the village last night, and we have dealt with all the menaces in the castle we have encountered thus far. The knights and militia should be able to keep matters in hand until we return."

"And if they can't?" he persisted. "What if the demon summons some new menace while we're gone? We could return to find the entire village slaughtered."

"Then you do it!" She rounded on him in fury. "You slit that woman's throat. You drive a dagger into that boy's heart. You decide who will die, and you execute them accordingly. Well, what are you waiting for? It's not nearly so easy to be pragmatic when the blood is going to be on your own hands, is it?"

Alistair fell silent, and finally said, "No, you're right. I'm sorry. That's...not an option."

"I need--" Elissa put a shaking hand to her head, afraid that she might suddenly be ill before them all. She could feel all their eyes upon her, insisting that she render her decision, and suddenly she felt unequal to the burden they had laid upon her. "I need time to think. Please. Just--give me a moment, all of you."
She turned her back and walked away from them, out the heavy portal leading to the front courtyard of the castle, into the fresh air. Her nausea began to subside once she was free of the heavy reek of death and decay that pervaded the castle. Her head began to clear. Her mabari nudged her hand, and Elissa stroked his ears absentmindedly.

Killing Isolde was not an option. Killing Connor was not an option. Taking the time to travel to the Circle of Magi was, at best, an extremely poor option. Where did that leave her?

"I believe I may have another option," a voice said at her shoulder, "if you're willing to keep an open mind."

Elissa turned slowly to face the witch, who stood entirely too close. It was the first time Morrigan had come any nearer than required for polite conversation, but there she stood, her body practically brushing Elissa's.

Elissa's brow furrowed in confusion. Up until this very moment, she would have sworn Morrigan had no interest in women whatsoever. However, Morrigan had described a certain willingness to use her sexual appeal to get her way; it was perhaps the only way in which she and Elissa thought alike. Which meant her sudden intrusion into Elissa's physical space could portend only one thing: Morrigan wanted something.

"I'm listening."

"Lyrium and blood are not the only substances capable of producing powerful magic. Sex, and specifically the male and female fluids which result from it, generate an enormous amount of power."

Elissa sagged in relief. Sex. Yes. Sex she could do. "Enough to get you or Jowan into the Fade to confront the demon?"

"No."

"Oh," she sighed, defeated, closing her eyes again.

"However, with a modest amount of bloodletting on top of the sexual energy, we should have power to spare."

"Very well," Elissa agreed eagerly. "Just tell me what is required."

"Jowan cannot be your partner," Morrigan said bluntly. "He must conduct the ritual, just as he would were we to use a human sacrifice. Though women are not my preference, I must be a part of the sexual activity, as I will be the one being propelled into the Fade once the requisite amount of power has been gathered. Beyond that, we also need a male partner, someone who will discharge a generous amount of seed, who is capable of sustaining orgasmic energy for a considerable length of time. To that end, he should not be anyone who has experienced release recently."

"Well, let's see...that rules out, well, most of the men in the village."

Morrigan smirked. "Yes, I had heard something to that effect."

"Even those who weren't in the tavern last night no doubt celebrated in their own way. In a similar vein, Bann Teagan is not an option. Nor, for that matter, I suppose, is Alistair. Um...Sten?"

"No," Morrigan shook her head. "While bloodletting would most certainly be guaranteed--assuming we could gain his cooperation--if the roar I heard when I was prowling the woods in animal form last night is any indication, he also does not meet the final requirement."
"Oh, indeed?" Elissa asked, her eyebrows arching. At Morrigan's complacent nod, Elissa pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Well then, I suppose we could try the knights...."

"If I may make a suggestion...?" Morrigan ventured, and her eyes dropped to the mabari at Elissa's feet.

_I will not be ashamed_, Elissa repeated to herself, remembering her words to Alistair all too clearly. And yet, her face was crimson as she ordered her companions and the knights and nobility from the main hall of Redcliffe castle.

"Everyone except Morrigan and Jowan out," she snapped, praying her stony expression would discourage any inquiries.

Alistair braved it nonetheless. "You're not going to let them use you as the sacrifice!" Beside him, she saw Bann Teagan immediately tense up, ready to argue.

"No, I will not," Elissa answered. "There is another way, but our mages require quiet and concentration."

"And what if you run into trouble?" Bann Teagan asked. "What if the mage who goes into the Fade returns as an abomination as well? You should have at least one armed person standing by, just in case."

He was right. Elissa knew he was right. And yet she quailed at the idea of doing this before any more of an audience than strictly necessary.

But someone must remain. Who?

Surely not Alistair. His templar skills were certainly the most useful weapons she could hope for in such a scenario, but he would absolutely die of shock and disgust. Not Leliana, either. If something went amiss, their appointed guardian would need to be someone skilled in close-quarters combat. Sten? No, his attitudes about mages and magic could prove disruptive. And she didn't know the knights well enough to trust their discretion.

But this was something else entirely. Among the many lessons her mother had imparted to her, one of the most crucial was in recognizing that just as there was a time for shamelessness, there was also a time for discretion, lest a loss of respect undo the ends she was trying to achieve. It was why she had concealed the extent of her erotic knowledge from Cailan. Had he made her his queen, she would also have had to carry on discreetly, for while a philandering queen was not a new concept, the people would only stand for it as long as they could somehow manage to politely pretend it was not happening.

In the end, there was only one person whose maturity and discretion she could trust. It hurt to think he might be disgusted or lose respect for her, but she could at least trust he would recognize the necessity of her actions.

"Very well, Teagan. You may remain. Everyone else must leave. Now."

As they filed unhappily from the room and sealed the massive doors behind them, Elissa crouched beside her mabari, scratching his ears and letting him snuffle her face, sweetly licking her flaming
cheeks.

"I need your help now more than ever, my friend. Do you understand what I need you to do?"

The dog gave a bark of assent, waggling his tail. Elissa looked up and met Teagan's eyes.

"You said you wouldn't question my methods," she sighed. "I am afraid I must test that theory here today. Believe me when I say that this is the best of all our options for dealing with the demon without avoidable loss of life. It is my...sincerest wish that when all is said and done, you will still be able to look me in the eyes."

Turning from him, Elissa began to strip, only to find Morrigan doing the same, apparently having explained the requirements of the ritual to Jowan. The blood mage looked nervous, fingering a small golden dagger. Elissa shuddered as she realized the purpose to which the dagger would soon be put.

Her stride slow and even, Morrigan approached Elissa. "Explain to me again why you can't be the one to do this, in animal form?"

"Because I will be going into the Fade," Morrigan replied calmly. "If I am wasting magic maintaining my animal form here on the mortal plane, I may not have enough to accomplish what I need to do once I am there. Furthermore, in no possible form do I have the slightest interest in allowing myself to be mounted by that mangy cur of yours. Unless you can find a willing surrogate, I'm afraid it must be you."

Drawing a deep, reluctant breath, Elissa nodded and gave the mabari's ears another rubbing. He gave an affectionate whine in response, licking her hand.

"I shall begin by kissing you," Morrigan announced tartly. "Do not mistake it for affection; kissing generates a great deal of sexual energy, and that is all."

And then Morrigan's mouth was upon hers, the witch's tongue parting her lips. Somehow, even her mouth seemed cold, distant. And yet she was a skilled kisser, her lips soft and supple, and Elissa found herself responding, opening to Morrigan's exploring tongue, arching into the hands that rose to cover her breasts.

Over Morrigan's shoulder, she saw Teagan, suddenly looking as though the room were far too warm. She closed her eyes, blocking him out. She must forget he was there, or else she'd never be able to do what needed to be done. She wrapped her arms around Morrigan, letting her kiss deepen, letting it settle into the very core of her body, warming her, making her fluid, pliant. Morrigan's fingers delicately pinched Elissa's nipples, creating just enough sensation to border on pain, and then Elissa gasped into her mouth as she felt the quick, hot stroke of Jowan's dagger on her shoulder. She shuddered and tensed at the sudden pain as Jowan began chanting, but even so, wetness made her thighs slide slickly against one another.

She could feel the trickle of blood running down her arm as she brought her hands around to cup Morrigan's breasts, drank in the witch's own shuddering sigh as Elissa's fingernails scraped softly across her nipples. She felt something shift within Morrigan as arousal began to take hold, overriding her grim sense of purpose. Morrigan's body suddenly softened, melting into her own. Her arms embraced Elissa, fingers skimming over the satiny skin of Elissa's back. Their soft breasts pressed together, pliable flesh rubbing against pliable flesh, as Elissa took hold of Morrigan's hips and pulled her in closer, slipping her thigh between Morrigan's legs.

Her head fell back, her hair stroking across her skin and Morrigan's arms as Morrigan began to trail a stream of soft, sucking kisses along Elissa's neck. And then the dagger stuck again, making another
small slice on Elissa's other shoulder. This stroke was deeper, and a steady stream of warm blood began dripping down her arm and onto the floor.

Elissa cried out, but whether from the pain of being cut or the sudden sensation of Morrigan's cool mouth on her breast, she could not say. Morrigan, for all her professed disinterest in women, made a satisfied sound as she drew Elissa's nipple into her mouth, sucking on it skillfully. Elissa stroked Morrigan's shoulders and arched into the tug of her mouth with a needy moan, each pull of Morrigan's lips creating a pulse of need between Elissa's thighs. And then Morrigan's hand was at her hip, sliding around, dipping into her sex, stroking her nub. Pleasure mounted, coiling ever more tightly in her belly, but suddenly Morrigan's fingers were gone, leaving Elissa trembling on the cusp of release. She felt Morrigan reach out her hand, away from their entwined bodies, and she heard a lapping sound.

The mabari was licking Elissa's juices from Morrigan's fingers.

"Ah!" Elissa screamed softly, tears starting in her eyes, as the kiss of the dagger struck her again, this time on the upper curve of the breast Morrigan's mouth had abandoned. Blood flowed down her erect nipple. Morrigan took her other nipple into her mouth while simultaneously luring the dog closer, encouraging him to push his head between Elissa's body and her own. His soft tongue began to lap at Elissa's thighs, seeking more of the fluids he had tasted on Morrigan's hand.

With a sob of humiliated pleasure, Elissa let her thighs relax, let her feet shift apart, let him wedge his muzzle between her thighs and lap at her folds.

Morrigan knelt, and her long, slender fingers slid up into Elissa, causing Elissa to sway on her feet, dizzy with confusion and arousal. Another slice of the dagger, on her opposite breast. Another trickle of blood down her belly. Another stroke of her mabari's tongue, this time brushing over her clit. Another press of Morrigan's fingers within her body and suddenly she was coming, her body tensing and shivering helplessly.

Morrigan roughly scraped the nails of her free hand down the inside of Elissa's thigh as the mabari lapped harder. Another orgasm followed on the heels of the first and suddenly Elissa's legs would not support her. Morrigan helped guide her to the floor, spread her out, urged the dog to abandon his caution and lick her exposed cunt vigorously. She leaned over Elissa again and kissed her, deeply, her hands returning again to Elissa's nipples, which were now slick with small rivulets of her own blood. She was unaware of Jowan kneeling beside her, still chanting, until the dagger sliced across her upper arm, biting deep. More blood flowed, and another orgasm rocked her body.

"Get onto your hands and knees," she dimly heard Morrigan's voice instruct. As she complied, Morrigan rose to her feet, her slick, musky sex before Elissa's face. She took Elissa's head in her hands and pressed her hips forward, giving a low moan as Elissa's tongue immediately found her clit and began to flick at it. Morrigan's hips began to shift and pump, seeking more of that pressure, and Elissa gave it, sipping her slippery fluids, grinding the flat of her tongue against Morrigan's nub. She hardly noticed the next bite of the dagger on her other arm, nor again almost immediately afterward on one buttock and then the other.

But then the felt the paws and claws of her mabari on her backside as he crawled over her, felt something hot and hard prodding against her cunt, smaller than a human, but still substantial. The ministrations of her mouth on Morrigan's clit faltered as she hung her head and shuddered, feeling a wretched arousal that wanted this even as her mind railed against it and covered in humiliation at the spectacle she must surely present. Morrigan's hands grabbed her face roughly. "Do not interrupt the buildup of the power," she commanded, and forcefully shoved Elissa's face back into her cunt.

Sobbing, Elissa licked and sucked on Morrigan's clit, bringing the witch to a hard, bucking orgasm.
And then she screamed with her own climax as, at the same moment, the mabari's cock nudged its way into her cunt and Jowan's dagger drew a long, shallow line down the back of her shoulder.

The dog gave only a few very short, brief pumps and then suddenly, Elissa felt him swelling...swelling, growing thick and bulbous at the base of his cock, stretching the narrowest part of her cunt beyond what even a human cock would do as the mabari grew very still. Confused, Elissa tried to pull away, but found herself suddenly immobile.

"A paralysis spell," Morrigan said. "Only a very minor one; I really cannot afford to waste any mana here. You have never mated with a canine in any form, so perhaps you are not aware. Right now, the mabari is swollen and locked within you, and unless you remain still and wait, he will not discharge and all this will have been for naught. It could be some minutes, perhaps as many as twenty or more. It is imperative that you remain still and allow him to reach completion, and that as he does so, we continue to generate more sexual energy. When the dog reaches his climax, when his fluids are released, there will be an explosion of power and I will be propelled into the Fade. Until then, you will continue to pleasure me to keep the energy flowing. Now I will release you. Do as I say!"

Tears flowed down her face as Elissa obeyed, wriggling her tongue into Morrigan's slick cunt as the witch ground her hips into Elissa's face. All the while, she felt that odd pressure of the dog's bulbous cock filling her, giving her a pleasure she did not want. And yet...it was needful. As her lips and tongue manipulated Morrigan's clit, her own fingers found the nub of her pleasure and she began masturbating, working herself into a hard, brutal climax as Morrigan grabbed her hair and humped her face.

Each time the flow of her blood began to taper off, Jowan sliced her again, and she was aware that her body was now cold and sticky with drying blood, the carpet beneath her stained. An eternity dragged by as the dog's inflated cock remained lodged within her, an eternity in which she forced herself to embrace her sense of humiliation, dragged reluctant ecstasy from it.

I will not be shamed! her pride insisted, even as the thought of Bann Teagan's eyes upon her drew another wretched, sobbing orgasm from her.

And suddenly, it felt as though there was too much air in the room. Her ears popped, her skin felt tight and constricted, the hair of her body prickled and stood on end. She felt a hot rush of fluid deep within her cunt, and as her dog began to shrink within her, Morrigan stiffened, her body elevating off the floor in a rigid arch. She shimmered and her body became translucent, obscure and hazy.

The mabari withdrew from Elissa's cunt, and she quickly sat upon the floor and curled into a ball, unwilling to display her body or the dog's seed seeping from her slit. Anxiously, he whined at her and nudged his muzzle against her face, and with a sob, Elissa scratched his ears. "Thank you, my friend," she whispered. "Good dog."

She refused to meet Teagan's eyes as she drew her clothing and armor over her bloody skin. She opened the doors to allow the others within, and then stood in the corner, apart from the others, refusing to answer all questions about her bloody condition or Morrigan's nude state as she awaited the witch's return.
Night had settled over the castle before Elissa was able to retire to the guest chamber to which the servants directed her on Bann Teagan's orders. Before she could do that, she was required to consult with Teagan and Isolde at Arl Eamon's bedside while Connor played in the next room, and the decision was made to go after the Urn of Sacred Ashes. She and her companions would leave Redcliffe at first light and would cross Lake Calenhad to the Tower of the Circle of Magi to invoke their treaty rights with the mages, and from there would travel on to Denerim.

This night, at least, she would have a clean, soft bed to sleep on instead of a hard bedroll on the rocky ground.

Servants arrived with buckets of hot water for a bath, and she frowned, troubled as they went about their labors. She had fully intended to call for a bath but not done so yet; someone else had done it for her. Turning from them, she critically stared at herself in the polished silver plate that hung on the wall of her chamber. Dried blood and vivid red lines stood out on her pale skin where Jowan's dagger had kissed her, but the blood had stopped flowing. A few of the deeper cuts still seeped slightly, but even they did not require bandages, much less healing potions or magic.

What was not reflected there was any hint of the sense of depravity she felt she'd touched upon this afternoon in the Great Hall when she'd knelt on the floor and been fucked by her dog before Bann Teagan's eyes. But still she felt it. Despite her resolve never to be ashamed, she felt...something. If it was not shame, it was uncomfortably close.

Humiliation can be a powerful aphrodisiac, my dear, her mother's voice whispered in her mind, an echo of a evening not long before Elissa turned sixteen. Eleanor had said this quite conversationally over the supper table as her mother, father, Fergus and Oriana had dined. Oren had already been sent to bed under the care of his nurse, and Elissa was not eating. Instead, she sat on the table as her mother had instructed, her hands clasped behind her back and her legs splayed, her knees bent and parted. She'd sat there, nude, her breasts and cunt fully exposed to her family while they ate. She had felt terribly self-conscious, horribly aware of her exposure. It had not been helped by Fergus' smirk. He'd had much these same lessons at her age, and remembered them well.

Do not shrink from your humiliation and seek to escape it, that ghost of a voice murmured. Instead, use it to fuel your passion. That sick, nervous feeling in your belly, does not also feel much the same as desire, the way you feel before receiving a first kiss or caress? Does it not make your heart race and your cunt wet?

It had, and she'd been aware of that as well, knowing they could see her wetness, certain they could smell it over the aromas of their meal.
But what if the person I wish to seduce is revolted? Elissa had asked nervously, attempting to focus her mind on her lesson and not her self-consciousness. Wouldn't that defeat my purpose, if I'm attempting to sway them?

If they are revolted, 'tis most likely because you've touched upon some desire they are afraid to acknowledge, even to themselves. That, too, can be turned to your advantage, for it will make them crave you, beyond any other who does not awaken that desire. Any whore can satisfy a request, but the woman who fulfills the desire a man dare not speak aloud will have that man at her feet. The trick is to find a desire they hide, but not one which they fear so deeply that it will send them running so far from you that you cannot lure them back. Always use your sense of discretion.

As unconventional as she knew her upbringing had been, however, until today she had never felt depraved. She wasn't sure even her mother had ever imagined there might come a time when she'd let herself be mounted by a dog before an audience. Elissa wondered if she would feel the same if she'd had a choice in the matter. What if she'd let herself be fucked by the dog because Teagan has asked it of her? Would she still have felt so degraded, if she'd had the option of refusing? She rather doubted it.

The problem, Elissa mused, was not that the act had been committed, but that she'd had no real control over the matter. It had been the best of an array of bad choices. That was why she suddenly felt so self-conscious, why she found herself wondering if she'd lost Teagan's admiration. She hadn't worried herself over the matter when it turned out he'd known of her activities in the tavern, but now she was concerned that she might lose him as an ally.

That would be disastrous. She needed Teagan. She had no idea what to expect when, or if, Arl Eamon recovered. She needed Teagan's support and influence, with both the Arl and with the Landsmeet. The bath she had not summoned spoke to her much more clearly than words could possibly have done. If she had lost him, she must win him back. She must reconcile him to what he now understood about her, and quickly.

Resolved, Elissa ignored the bath. She wrapped herself in Isolde's borrowed dressing gown and left her chambers in search of her prey.

Though it was the middle of the night and all the rest of the castle asleep, she found him in Arl Eamon's study, seated at a large desk going over correspondence that had long been left neglected during the Arl's illness. On the desk beside him was a nearly empty bottle of wine and a goblet. He came to his feet as she entered, his cheeks flushed—though from the wine or her presence she couldn't be certain—suddenly all nervous attention.

"Lady Cousland. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Ah. It's 'Lady Cousland' again, now."

"I'm terribly sorry. Elissa, then. How may I help you?"

"So very polite, Teagan," she mocked softly. "Are you normally so courteous with those who disgust you?"

"You don't--"

Elissa raised a hand, cutting off his denial. "I'd rather the truth than a dutiful lie, Teagan. I am many things, but rarely am I dishonest, and I ask the same from others. You now find me repulsive."

He turned his back to her then, with a visible shudder. "Yes. And I loathe myself for such a
unworthy emotion, after all you have done for us..."

"And just what is it I have done?"

He looked over his shoulder at her, incredulous. "You saved us. You saved Connor and Isolde. You could have allowed them either of them to die, rather than subject yourself to that...indignity."

"I didn't do it out of the goodness of my heart," she said frankly. "You, and Arl Eamon, and Redcliffe have something I need very badly. Troops to battle the Blight, and political influence to bring down Teyrn Loghain."

"You give yourself too little credit. You could have met your ends and still allowed Connor or Isolde to die. I saw you, as you argued against killing either of them. You fought for their lives when the easier and less personally degrading road would have been to allow them to die."

Unable to deny the charge of altruism, Elissa stood there, silent, willing him to continue. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides and he began to pace.

"If I ought to be disgusted by anyone, it's Isolde," he snarled in frustration. "So many people have died because of that bitch's actions. I'm furious with her. I find myself wishing you had allowed to her sacrifice herself rather than...."

"...Be fucked by a dog like a bitch myself?"

"Don't say that!"

"Why not? It's true," she persisted, stalking toward him. "Last night I fucked a tavern full of men like the lowest strumpet. I had no great skills as a military leader with which to inspire them, so instead I used sex. Alistair accused me of being a harlot, and perhaps he's right. But I'd rather be a harlot with live allies than face the coming turmoil alone and supported by naught but my high ideals and chastity."

Teagan whirled on her, his eyes wild and desperate. "You must not say such things about yourself!"

"It was easy to pretend last night in the chantry, wasn't it, Teagan?" Elissa purred, drawing ever nearer. "You hadn't actually seen me in the tavern, the slut servicing any man who came to her. When I came upon you I was clean and freshly bathed, without the seed of a score of men dripping down my thighs. It was easy to pretend I was pure and noble when the extent of my depravity was merely an abstract concept. But today, you saw it. You saw me there on my hands and knees like a bitch in heat, saw me coming, saw the dog's seed on my cunt, and now you can't pretend anymore."

"You shouldn't have done it!" he shouted, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her until she staggered. "You shouldn't have had to do it. If not for Isolde, none of it would have been....."

"Isolde has nothing to do with the fact that I am a slut. I was cast in that mold long ago. Sex is my stock in trade. It's what I do. I fuck my way through problems."

"But that bitch...."

"...Is not the one you saw fucked by a dog today. Tell me, which troubles you more, that you are disgusted by what I did, or that you want me even more for it? If I am depraved, what does that make you?"

"No...."
"You can accept me for all that I am—the pure and the wanton—or you can despise me. But if you despise me, you despise yourself. I know very well all that I am and all that I am not. I am no hypocrite, Bann Teagan Guerrin. Are you?"

His mouth crashed onto hers, and she opened beneath him, eagerly, hungrily, letting herself be devoured and devouring in return. He tasted of wine and desperation. His hands around her upper arms may not have been those of a hardened warrior, but they were strong nevertheless, and had closed upon her with bruising force.

"Whore!" he panted, pressing kisses across her face.

"Yes."

His mouth traveled down her neck, licking and biting. "Slut!"

Elissa closed her eyes and let her head fall back, let passion wash over her, blaze through her, hoping it would incinerate her humiliation in its heat. "Yes...." she breathed.

His hands made short work of the belt of her dressing gown and he wrenched the garment off her shoulders in hard jerks and tugs, letting it fall to the floor. "Bitch!"

She opened her eyes and raised her head, tilting her chin proudly. Her hand dropped low and cupped his erection through his breeches. "If I am a bitch, then it is a bitch you desire."

His own eyes opened then, met hers, dark with rage and lust. They widened as they took in the sight of her, the brown flakes of crusted blood smeared and trailing across her skin, and he looked down, down to the thatch of hair at the apex of her thighs, as though he could see the seed dried between her legs. His nostrils flared. "You have not bathed."

"Does a bitch bathe herself, or does the kennelmaster do it for her?" she asked, canting her head to one side.

Grabbing her upper arm cruelly, he began to drag her from the study, only to stop and fling her to the stone floor. "If you're a bitch, then come to heel, crawling on your belly as is proper."

Her face crimson, Elissa obeyed, slowly crawling after him as he crossed the wide corridor where any servant still about his or her late-night duties may have seen her, nude and shuffling along on her hands and knees. He mounted the wide stairs to the upper chambers of the castle. Her progress was slow, the stones rough and cold and painfully hard beneath her bare knees, and he awaited her impatiently at the top of the stairs. Still she crawled, past the guest chambers where her companions slumbered to her own chamber.

Once inside, Teagan sat on the bed and pulled off his soft hide boots and the wool stockings beneath. "A good bitch licks her master's feet, does she not?"

Elissa shuddered as a cramping surge of desire rocked through her at his words. She squeezed her eyes shut, exulting in this new debasement, letting it feed her lust, sending new waves of moisture seeping from her tingling cunt. She slowly turned on her hands and knees and dipped her head, stroking the top of his foot with a long, slow sweep of her tongue.

His skin was soft and thin, made rough only by a thin patch of coarse hair. Teagan groaned, his hands fistling beside his thighs on the bed, and Elissa understood that the caress was actually pleasurable for him. She turned her attention to the other foot, taking her time as she dragged her tongue along it. As she began licking up the sides of his feet, and poking daintily with her tongue between his toes, he gave a strangled sound and drove his fists hard into the bedding. A quick glance
at his straining breeches showed he had not come, but by the quaking of his body it was apparent he was on the edge. She opened her mouth, intent on sucking one of his toes....

"No!" he gasped. He surged abruptly to his feet and hauled her bodily up off the floor. He carried her across the chamber and dumped her unceremoniously into the tepid bath.

Scarcely had she caught her breath after she rose from beneath the water, spluttering and coughing, then he took up a linen cloth, soaped it, and began to scrub her. He spared no effort for gentleness, rubbing her so roughly at times it felt he would scour off her skin, until every nerve on her body tingled and burned. Her wounds opened and began to bleed again, creating small rivulets down her body as the blood sluiced down her skin with the water. The cloth soon turned pink, and still he scrubbed, until the only blood on her was fresh and new, all the old flakes melted and washed away.

Elissa cried out when he shoved the cloth between her legs and began to wash her cunt, with cruel, hard swipes. It didn't take long until she trembled on the brink of orgasm, rocking her hips in time to the strokes of the cloth. When he dropped the cloth into the water and abruptly thrust two fingers into her cunt and spread them, opening her channel wide to let the water rush in and clean her out, clean away any hint of the dog's semen, she was undone. Overcome by shame and sensation, with a ragged sob she came, seizing around his fingers, shuddering as small pink drops of bloody water made their way down her skin. Her shaking had nearly eased when she felt his tongue on her shoulder and realized he was licking the fresh blood welling from her wound. She came again, a choked cry erupting from her throat, clinging to him until his silken doublet and breeches were wet and stained.

With the scouring, Elissa felt her sense of mortification wash away. If his treatment of her was degrading, then this, at least, was a degradation she had chosen, and she reveled in it, let it sweep away the loss of control she'd felt that afternoon on the floor of the Gain Hall.

He kissed her, thrusting his tongue into her mouth like a spear, and she could taste her blood on his him. His fingers pumped in and out of her, but if the water and scrubbing had washed away the leftover traces of seed, it had also washed away most of her own fluids, and there was more friction to the caress than she was accustomed to with only the water to lubricate the passage of his fingers into and out of her cunt. She was soon mewling in discomfort, seeking to pull herself out of the water.

"Do you want me to fuck you, little whining bitch?" he hissed in her ear.

"Yes...Maker, yes please," she begged, rising up on her knees in the water, her hands greedily pulling at the laces of his breeches.

"Do you honestly believe for an instant I'd stick my prick in that filthy cunt?" His hand stroked down the deeper knife-wound on her buttock and she hissed in pain. Rather than pull back, however, he rubbed harder, and harder, until she could feel his fingers grow slick and each touch brought a pained whimper to her lips. Only then did he stop, and seconds later she felt his finger probing at the tight bud of her ass, lubricated by her blood.

"Oh, sweet Andraste," she groaned, her head falling to lay on his thigh as his bloody finger slid into her. The blood soon became dry and tacky and insufficient to its purpose, making it difficult for him to press another finger inside her. He took up a vial of bath oil the chambermaid had left and poured it along her cleft, working it in with his fingers as they slid slickly into and out of the tight passage turning and rubbing, opening her ever wider.

Abruptly, he rose to his feet. She would have tumbled back into the bath had she not caught herself, and she looked up as he peeled off his sodden breeches and doublet, his cock springing free, looking
furiously engorged. Teagan stroked it slowly with his hand, and Elissa watched, transfixed, as she realized the oil had been tainted red with the blood he'd had on his hand. Teagan's hand, and soon his cock, looked like something out of a nightmare as he smeared that red-tinged oil over himself.

"Shall I fuck you on your hands and knees like a good bitch?" he mused. Elissa's cunt pulsed in approval of the notion, beyond caring for inane matters such as her own degradation if it meant she'd have his cock within her soon. Obligingly, she rose and stepped from the bath, sinking to her knees on the rug beside the stone pool. Suddenly his blood-coated cock was before her face and she stared at it in fascination before slowly opening her mouth and extending her tongue. Beneath the lavender essence of the bath oil was the bitter tang of rusted iron.

Teagan pushed at her head, shoved her seeking mouth away, pressed her down to the floor. She buried her face against the rug, suddenly noticing that it, too, was stained with pink droplets of bloody water from the bath.

Then he was behind her, his cock prodding her. Another spasm of desire rocked her as she imagined the image she must present, groveling there on the carpet, all but begging for his cock with her ass thrust up in the air, streaks of blood leaking from her wounds and large smears of it trailing across her skin where his hands had touched her. And yet...there was something pure in this debasement, something that made her exult in it rather than cower in shame.

He worked his cock into her ass with slow pushes and nudges, giving her time to adjust and open for him, pushing past the point where she hissed between her teeth at the brief but inevitable burn until he was seated deep within her, the sharp bones of his hips pressing against the knife wounds on her buttocks. The salt of his sweaty skin stung the open slices, but the discomfort was lost amongst the cascade of sensation, the nearly unbearable sense of fullness from his cock in her ass, stretching her, filling her.

She shuddered and rocked against him, her clitoris throbbing, awaiting just the smallest touch to send her reeling into an earth-shattering climax. Teagan pushed back in response, lodging himself even more deeply within her and they moaned in unison. Already she could feel his cock beginning to swell and grow even harder, and she knew he wouldn't last long. Impatiently she wriggled against him, seeking more. At last he drew back, and back, all the way out. Elissa sobbed in frustration, suddenly unbearably empty, but just a quickly he pushed in again, through the stinging ring of muscle that had started to contract. He pulled her hips back to meet his thrust and he rammed into her with no attempt at restraint.

"Yes..." she hissed, rocking back and forth on her hands and knees, fucking herself upon him, meeting the hard, sharp thrusts of his hips to drive him ever deeper within.

"Is this how the bitch likes to be fucked?" Teagan grated. "Or is it more like this?"

He leaned forward, his arms bracketing her ribs as he leaned over her, pressing his chest to her back, and suddenly he was fucking her with short, quick, rapid thrusts just as a dog would. She felt the sting of his tongue on the knife slice on her shoulder at the same moment his hand snaked around her hip to find her clit. She disintegrated, screaming, sobbing, driving back upon his cock with her hips as spasm after spasm rolled through her until all she could do was press her face into the rug and moan.

As the waves began to subside, Teagan pushed himself back up and began to fuck her with deep, hard thrusts, filling her over and over as she moaned and clenched around him. At length, he groaned, his body going rigid, wracked with shudders. She felt him pulse and throb deep within her ass, felt the hot flood of his seed, and suddenly she began to weep, somehow feeling cleansed and shriven.
Teagan placed kisses along her back, his sweaty skin sliding against hers, and it was a long moment before he pulled his softening cock out of her body. Elissa pushed herself up, wiping the tears from her face as she rolled over to sit and grant some reprieve to her aching arms and knees. Teagan looked a sight, smeared with nearly as much blood as she herself was, and yet...when he opened his eyes, they were calm and kind once more. He reached out, touched her face tenderly, drew her close and gratefully she went to him, moving into his kiss.

They bathed together, then, rinsing the blood from their skin. Teagan gently washed her wounds and salved them with dabs of healing potion, and then, over her protests, he bore her to bed and wrapped himself around her, kissing every part of her that he could reach as he held her with her back against his chest.

"You're so young for all you have done, all you have to do," he murmured. "And yet...I could fall in love with you."

"I beg you not to," Elissa whispered, a shiver running through her. "There's very little certainty in my future, but it's a virtual guarantee that none of what lies ahead of me shall be conventional. There's no way I can be a wife, or even a proper lover, and you will only come to hate me for what I cannot give you."

"I know," he answered. "Instead, I will pray that you come through it all safely, and I shall always be grateful for everything you have done already. Promise me you will come back and be with me again, even if you don't stay."

"I promise you, I will try." 

*****

It was the first night she ever spent in a man's arms, and Elissa slept soundly, untroubled even by nightmares of the archdemon. She rose before dawn and dressed as Teagan summoned a tray of breakfast for her. Thankfully, he had left her chamber before it inevitably came back up again.

The sun was just appearing over the horizon as she and her companions departed Redcliffe upon a small sailboat that would take them across Lake Calenhad to the Tower of the Circle of Magi. Morrigan was as impassive and acerbic as ever, but it was clear she was not pleased to be going into what she deemed to be a prison for mages, one firmly under the control of the templars of the Chantry. If she had been at all affected by what had passed between her and Elissa in the ritual, she did not show it.

Leliana seemed more at ease with Elissa now, as though their mutual agreement that there could be nothing between them gave her comfort. Sten was as blunt and unresponsive as ever, and Alistair was....

...Decidedly anxious. She had expected sullen disapproval, and instead he seemed nervous. Unable to bear his furtive glances any longer, she straightened her shoulders and took the initiative.

"Is there something troubling you?" she asked bluntly, as though daring him to confront her once again.

"Quite a bit, actually," he replied, "though it's not what you're assuming."
"That's uncharacteristically cryptic of you."

He sighed, rubbing his head as though pained. "Look, there's something I need to tell you, something I really should have told you before we even got to Redcliffe, but I kept putting it off and then there were all those undead and our...disagreement...at any rate, it never seemed like the right time. The fact that Arl Eamon is ill actually made it easier to put it off, but if we're going to heal him, then you really ought to know before he recovers."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"I don't know. I doubt it. I've never liked it, that's for sure." He began to pace, looking out over the side of the ship at the retreating silhouette of Redcliffe Castle on the bluffs high above them. "I told you how Arl Eamon raised me, right? That my mother was a serving girl at the castle and he took me in?"

Elissa nodded, a strange feeling of foreboding settling in her belly, making her fear she might be sick again.

"The reason he did that was because, well...because my father was King Maric. Which made Cailan my...half-brother, I suppose."

He turned back to look at her then, to gauge her reaction, but all Elissa could do was stare at him, dumbstruck. And then she began to laugh.

It was not a happy sound. There was an edge of hysteria to the laughter that reminded her of what had passed in Lothering when she had feared she'd gone mad. And still she laughed, as Alistair stared at her in consternation, laughed until she was breathless, until she had to sit on the deck of the boat for fear of toppling over the rail into the lake, until tears ran down her cheeks.

"You...you are Cailan's half-brother?"

"Um...yes?"

"Of course you are!" she gasped as another helpless peal of insane laughter doubled her over while Alistair looked on helplessly, his carefully prepared speech abandoned.

Fate was indeed a cruel bitch.
Knight-Commander Greagoir clearly hadn't slept in days. For all his attempt to convey composure and certainty, he had the jittery, haunted look of a man operating on nothing but panic and well aware of the fact. He was acting merely to be doing something, anything. It was reflected in his eyes when he announced he had sent for the Right of Annulment that he wasn't certain it was the right thing to do, but that he was certain it was the only thing he could do.

And Elissa was just as certain that she could not allow him to carry out his plans.

She'd always felt a certain kinship to mages, born of the common ground of the condemnation of the Chantry. But since the day Alistair had told her what the Chantry did to its templars, her disaffection with the Chantry's methods bordered on obsession. Were it not for the Blight and her duty as a Grey Warden, she would have been on a personal crusade to see the Chantry brought down and the mages freed from its control.

Now, happily, her duty coincided with her moral inclination. She needed the mages. As well-trained as the templars were, the mages would comprise a much more powerful force with which to confront the archdemon. She could not allow them to be exterminated like vermin.

"I beg your pardon, Warden, but I fail to see why you insisted on speaking with me privately," Greagoir announced as they entered the guardroom off the entryway to the tower.

"You!" Elissa snapped at a nearby templar initiate, "Bring your commander some food. Real food, not rations. I don't care if you have to cross the lake to get a proper meal from The Spoiled Princess, just do it now."

"Warden, you have no authority to give my templars orders."

"Your templars are in a sorry state," she said bluntly. "There's not a single one in this tower who isn't hovering on the brink of panic or collapse, and that includes yourself. How do you expect to think rationally, much less fight effectively, in such a condition?"

"And what would you have us do?" he challenged. "Curl up on our cots and take naps while the abominations break down the door?"

"I would have you think on this matter as something other than a templar for a moment," she said sedately, taking off her cloak and draping it across the back of a tall chair. "No matter what lies Loghain may be spreading, the fact is, there is a Blight coming. King Cailan was foolish and rash to think it could be defeated so easily that he didn't summon all his available forces to combat it. At least some of the blame for that falls upon Teyrn Loghain's shoulders, not only for abandoning the field at
Ostagar but also because he argued endlessly against sending for reinforcements. But, in the interest
of fairness, some of the blame also belongs to Duncan, the late Warden-Commander, for he was not
insistent enough upon the necessity of marshalling a greater force before confronting the darkspawn
horde. Instead, he took the conciliatory road and obeyed Cailan's whim, and now they are both dead
as a result."

"That may all very well be true, Warden," Greagoir said, "but none of that is my concern until this
matter here in the Tower is dealt with."

"It is your concern, Knight-Commander," she insisted. "Do you think if the Blight continues
unchecked it shall somehow spare the templars? What is occurring here in the Tower is a mere
inconvenience in comparison to the devastation the Blight shall bring. The mages are a powerful
force, ser. Possibly powerful enough to provide a decisive victory. They are too valuable to be
slaughtered out of hand."

"These are all very compelling arguments, but the matter is out of my hands."

"It is not. You could allow me and my companions to enter the tower and search for any surviving
mages before the Right of Annulment arrives."

"Absolutely not," he said bluntly as the initiate Elissa had sent in search of food returned with a tray
of fruit and cold meats. She took it from his hands and dismissed him, shutting the door once he had
gone. "Those doors will remain sealed until the Right of Annulment arrives. For the safety of
everyone."

"Eat, please, Knight-Commander."

As the templar began to inhale the food--no doubt the first actual meal he'd had in days--Elissa
moved in behind him. He flinched when she placed her hands on the sides of his neck and began to
rub the tense muscles above his plate armor.

"Just what do you think you are doing, Warden?" he asked, and she was encouraged by the fact that
he did not move away nor make any attempt to stop her.

"If you must know, I'm leading up to an attempt to seduce you."

"That's...honest," he snorted, amusement heavy in his voice.

"I attempt to be honest whenever I possibly can. It's much easier than trying to remember a
complicated web of lies."

"You do realize that templars take an oath of chastity?"

"I do," Elissa answered calmly, "which is why I entreated you to think on this matter as something
other than a templar for a while."

"I don't see what you hope to accomplish."

Elissa sighed, digging into the muscles in his neck with her thumbs. "It's really quite simple. You're
overwrought, Knight-Commander. You're not eating properly, not resting sufficiently, and every
instinct within you is demanding you act now even though there is absolutely nothing you can do
now. It's a potentially disastrous combination and it's preventing you from considering other options.
I'm offering you a chance to relieve some of that tension in the hopes that once you do so, you'll see
matters more rationally."
"Not a year has passed since I became a templar that some mage hasn't attempted to seduce me for one reason or another," Greagoir said. "What makes you think you'll succeed where they've failed?"

"The fact that I am not a mage. You have no reason to be concerned that I will create a conflict of interest for you. Well, aside from the pesky matter of your chastity vow, and considering how sanguine you are about the matter in the first place, I'm now quite certain that has been broken before. In addition, I'll succeed because you know I'm right. You know you're acting out of panic, and you fear that you may be acting precipitously as a result. You may be a devoted templar, and a determined man, but unless I'm reading you entirely wrong you are also, on the whole, a reasonable person. You will do anything you deem necessary to be sure your course is the right one. And finally," Elissa leaned in close, her lips brushing his ear, "I'll succeed...because you haven't yet said 'no.'"

"Then what's to keep me from having you and afterward refusing your request?"

"Absolutely nothing. If you decide afterward that the Right of Annulment is the only course of action you can reconcile yourself with, then naturally you must do what you think is right. I'm willing to take the chance, however, that once you are in a calmer frame of mind you'll come to see things my way."

"Perhaps," Greagoir said slowly, pushing his empty tray aside. "I ought to first see what it is you have to offer."

Smiling, Elissa began to unbuckle her armor.

Lyrium, she thought sometime later, musing at the taste of cinnamon and something bitter that lingered on her tongue.

Alistair refused to look at her as the massive doors slammed shut behind them with the ring of finality.

Without knowing how she came to be there, Elissa found herself in a lavishly appointed bedchamber.

"Oh, darling, I'm so proud of you!"

She whirled at the voice, amazed to see Eleanor standing behind her, smiling. Amazed...Elissa shook her head. Why shouldn't her mother be here?

"Mother? What--?"

"I know you've had some reservations, but this is a fine marriage, and it will benefit the Couslands greatly," Eleanor effused.

"The king?"

"He's already retired for the evening, darling."

"Retired? But--"

"You mustn't be insulted. With the queen so close to delivering her child, no doubt he felt it necessary to retire early for her sake."
"The queen? With child? I don't understand...I was to marry the king. I carry his child."

Eleanor laughed. "What a vivid imagination you have, darling! I know you entertained some girlish fantasy of Cailan setting Anora aside and picking you as his new queen, but surely you've put that behind you. As for carrying his child, don't be ridiculous. Your father and I have seen to it quite well enough that you are going to your wedding bed a virgin, as is proper for a girl of your station."

"Mother, you sent me to Ostagar to seduce the king, to--" To what? Elissa could no longer remember why such a thing would have happened.

"Ostagar? Send our daughter into an army camp full of rough soldiers? To seduce the king, no less! What a ridiculous notion. You were in Highever helping me finalize the betrothal agreement when the king and the Grey Wardens won their great victory there and ended the Blight," Eleanor shook her head in confusion. "Are you feeling all right, darling? I do hope you're not getting ill on your wedding night."

"The Blight is over?"

"Of course! The celebration lasted for a month, surely you remember that. Honestly, it was quite exhausting to go from all that celebration and then turn around and plan a wedding."

"But what about Duncan and the Grey Wardens?"

"Heroes, naturally, after they brought down the archdemon and set the underground lairs ablaze, insuring there shall never be another Blight. I know Duncan was as dear as an uncle to you, but he simply couldn't come all the way from Weisshaupt Fortress for your wedding. He did send a draft of the history of the Final Blight he's composing, however."

"This doesn't make any sense, Mother! Duncan's a warrior, not an historian!"

"Oh, darling, you're just being argumentative because you're nervous," Eleanor said impatiently. "Your groom shall be here soon. In fact, I think I hear the wedding party coming up the stairs now. You look beautiful, sweetheart. Remember, you've made us all very proud."

Eleanor pressed a hurried kiss to Elissa's cheek and rushed from the room. Moments later she heard voices out in the hall, cheers and well-wishes and ribald advice. Smoothing her silken nightrail down around her hips, Elissa straightened her back and prepared to meet her husband. Despite her confusion, she could feel the hot blood of arousal beginning to run through her veins, sending a flush creeping across her skin as she anticipated the passionate adventure that lay ahead of her. Her heart pounded in her chest, echoed by a faint pulsing between her thighs, and she became aware of the fact that she wore no smallclothes beneath her semi-transparent gown. She embraced her nervous anticipation, savored it, let the tense heat begin building deep within her belly, preparing her....

...And then the door opened, and ahead of the wedding party entered Arl Rendon Howe.

"No!" Elissa gasped, horror freezing her in place as Howe closed the door on the cheering well-wishers.

"Ah, my beautiful bride!" Howe approached her, something that she supposed was meant to be a jubilant smile on his rat-like face, that rather came across as a leer. She felt queasy at the sight of his crooked yellow teeth.

"No," she whispered again. "This is wrong. Mother and Father would never do this to me."

"The contract was negotiated in good faith," Howe said, stopping before her. "You were there when
we signed it. I had to cede several miles of coastland to Highever as part of the deal. If your father ever takes it into his head to build a port there, it may well rival Amaranthine as a port town. The arrangement was quite profitable for your family, my dear wife, thanks in large part to your insistence on the terms. You Couslands have always known how to get the best end of a bargain. No doubt that's a long-standing skill of Eleanor's. And now that the words have been spoken in the Chantry, it's all official."

"No," she repeated yet again. "This is all a mistake. I shall go to the Revered Mother tomorrow and explain the matter..."

"You will do no such thing," he replied, grabbing her arms and pulling her close. His foul breath slashed across her face. "Now remove your gown. Or I shall be forced to invoke the other clause of our bargain. Don't you remember, my dear? The private agreement your parents know nothing about?"

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you've not forgotten already," he taunted. "Imagine the shame and disgrace the Cousland family would suffer if it became widely known that your mother was once a common whore."

Elissa scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. Gossip has abounded about my mother for years; unsubstantiated claims, nothing more."

"Yes, but I have proof, as you well know. Now, the gown, if you don't mind? I should dearly hate to ruin the good name of my old friends and new in-laws."

With trembling hands, Elissa pushed the gown off her shoulders and let it slide to the floor. Howe's eyes were fever-bright as they settled upon her breasts, and he reached out and began to grope them roughly, crudely. There was no artistry in his touch, no intent to arouse or please her. He handled her like a slab of meat. Elissa closed her eyes against a wave of nausea and humiliation when his disgusting mouth closed over her nipple and he began to use his teeth, worrying it like a mabari pup with a teething toy, drawing pained whimpers from her.

Abruptly he pushed her away and began stripping off his silk and velvet doublet, revealing a wrinkled and emaciated chest. He unlaced his breeches and pushed them off his pale, flabby flanks. Disgusted, she looked away, unwilling to see more.

Howe seized her hand and brought it up between his legs, and only then did she open her eyes as she realized his member was soft as he ground it against her palm. She shuddered in revulsion, trying to draw her hand away, but Howe grabbed her head, pushing on her, trying to force her to her knees.

"Use your mouth. You're the daughter of a whore; surely you must have some skills at pleasing a man."

"No!" she shouted, jerking away from him. "I will not!"

"I realize your father allowed you a great deal of latitude, but I assure you things will be quite different as my wife. I will suffer no disobedience," Howe announced coldly.

"Then beat me if you wish," Elissa lifted her chin. "But you will have to pummel me unconscious before I allow you to put that disgusting little worm of a prick anywhere near my mouth."

"Oh no," Howe sneered. "While I am quite certain I will have to beat you frequently, and even more certain I will take great pleasure in doing so, I have other ways of breaking you first. You will get down on your knees now and put that sharp tongue of yours to use on my cock, or tomorrow after
our wedding guests leave Vigil's Keep, you will kneel naked in the courtyard outside the stables before all the servants and retainers, tonguing the assholes of every dog in my kennel. As you do so, the maids will empty the chamberpots upon you, and every servant down to the lowest stableboy will be commanded to piss on you. You will sleep tethered nude upon a manure pile to be bitten and stung by horseflies. And that's just the highlights of the first week until you learn obedience."

Scalding tears flooded down Elissa's cheeks as she sank to her knees. Howe nudged his unaroused cock against her face, gripping her jaw to force her mouth open. Sobbing, she licked at it and when he snarled another command, began to suck on it, taking the entire squishy mass into her mouth. Still, he remained flaccid, flopping wetly against his own ballsack when Howe thrust her roughly away, cursing her.

"Ignorant slut!" He growled. "I will not be humiliated before my guests. Get up on the bed and spread your legs."

Shaking, Elissa did as she was bidden, desperately attempting to ignore the slapping sound as Howe tugged urgently at his cock, trying to bring himself to erection. He was still only half-hard when he climbed onto the bed beside her and thrust his other hand between her legs, rubbing rudely at her cunt.

Grunting, he stretched his cock out only to have it flop limply back down again and again.

Prying her folds apart, he began forcing his fingers inside her, spitting on his hand when she proved too dry. Still, they burned, stretching her unready cunt, and impatiently he slammed his fingers hard up her sheath, tearing through her maidenhead abruptly.

Elissa screamed, squeezing her eyes closed against the pain, and suddenly a different vision swam across her mind, one of Cailan's flushed face, framed by his long, golden hair, moving over her as her body adjusted to the aching intrusion of his cock. She remembered the game she'd played with him, the teasing and reluctance, deliberately pushing to use force and violence. Confused, her mind tried to reconcile the memory of losing her virginity to Cailan with what was passing now.

Howe apparently enjoyed her screams and tears, because he was almost succeeded in working himself to an erection. He crouched over her and masturbated furiously, and Elissa realized he no longer cared about fucking her, only that he left stains upon the bedding as proof of his manhood. Frantically she scrambled out from beneath him, seconds before he ejaculated atop the smudges of blood on the sheet.

"This is not real," she said at last, pushing herself away from the bed as Howe slumped over, panting. Ignoring the burning pain between her thighs, she cast her eyes about the room, finally espying a weapon rack. She rushed for it, pulling a sword from its sheath before he could react.

"Foolish girl," Howe complained, "I have given you everything you could possibly want and you throw it back in my face."

"This is not what I wanted, not what my family wanted."

"Your war against the darkspawn is over, your king alive and well. Your family is respected and prosperous, and still you insist on defying me! So be it. If you will not obey, you will be broken!"

Elissa fell into a fighting stance as he charged, and seconds later he lay skewered upon the sword at her feet.

"Now you've given me what I truly desire," she sneered, jerking the blade from his corpse. As she
did so, the bedchamber around her faded and she found herself in a strange, barren, rocky land approaching a figure in mage’s robes, who introduced himself as Niall.
"It's a dream. But it's a good dream."

Elissa shook her head at Sten. "How very fortunate for you," she muttered, remembering all too well the rubbery texture of Howe's flaccid cock in her mouth.

Sten continued to stare at her impassively, unmoved by her envy. "It's still a cage, Sten," she finally said. "Just like Lothering."

"Here, or Lothering or Orlais, it's all the same. Far from home, one place is no better than any other."

Elissa sighed impatiently. She needed to get out of this place and erase all she had seen from her mind, hopefully by indulging in a good, stiff fuck. She had no idea who the lucky person was going to be--perhaps Greagoir might be up for another tussle--but one way or the other, this needed to end.

"I'm still in charge, Sten. On your feet. We're leaving."

"You do not give orders," Sten said, sounding vaguely amused. "It is not your way. We have discussed before your weaknesses as a leader."

"You're right. I don't usually give orders. Usually I just offer sexual favors," Elissa snapped. "I want out of this place. If I promise you the fuck of your life, will you please, for the Maker's sake, leave here with me?"

"Fuck? I do not know this word."

"Oh, Andraste's tits! Fuck. To copulate. To fornicate. To have sex. To couple."

One of the images of the dead Qunari let out a deep, rumbling laugh. "Do you hear this? I think the little thing wants to mate with the sten."

The other Qunari snorted. "Then the little thing seeks death."

"Parshaara!" Sten snapped at the illusions before turning his steady gaze back to Elissa. "As intriguing as your offer is, you would not survive the experience."

"I heard you say as much to Morrigan," Elissa countered, suddenly no longer feeling as flippant as when she had first issued the offer, "but I think you're bluffing. Killing one's mate is a singularly
ineffective way to ensure the survival of one's race."

"Qunari women would have nothing to fear," Sten replied. "They are large, and strong, and take
great pleasure in duress. But you are small and weak."

"Perhaps not as weak as you think," Elissa murmured. "You saw me as we left Lothering. What sort
do you think I endured there?" she leaned closer to Sten, and whispered conspiratorially,
"And I still managed to come. Many, many times."

"If the sten doesn't want the small one, the karashok and I will have her. For as long as she lasts, that
is."

"I don't fuck demons," she sneered at the illusions.

The other Qunari chuckled. "Is the ashaad going to let this little runt of a female speak to him this
way?"

The one referred to as the ashaad began to rise to his feet. Elissa's bow was in her hands, an arrow
drawn and nocked, as Sten barked, "Stand down. I would hate to see you all die again."

"No, we won't let you leave us again!"

The demon-Qunari fell with an arrow shaft jutting from its forehead before it could advance more
than a few paces, while Sten charged the other. With seconds, that one was dead as well, and Sten
stood panting over the corpse from whose chest his sword protruded.

Contemptuously, he kicked the corpse aside and strode angrily toward Elissa, his violet eyes burning.
Instinctively, she dropped her bow and fell into a fighting stance without even realizing she had done

When his massive arms reached for her, Elissa was not there, sidestepping his direct advance nimbly
and delivering an elbow to his throat as he passed. Choking and coughing, he whirled on her,
disbelief writ plain on his face.

"I may be small, but I am not helpless," she snarled, arousal and battle-lust making her blood course
through her veins like liquid fire. She had no interest in playing the victim. If he was going to have
her, let him fight for the privilege. She wanted wanted his blood to race at the same pitch as hers,
wanted him beyond thoughts of restraint or control. "We shall see who comes out of this broken."

It was an uneven match, all told, and Elissa knew it. She was a capable fighter, but combat prowess
was not her strongest skill. Speed and agility were on her side, but strength was on his and his reach
was nearly double hers. The best she could hope to do was to get her licks in before he overpowered
her.

The next time he came at her, he was better prepared. Her attempt to evade his grasp was only
partially successful. She managed to kick his knee out from under him, but not before the arm that
had been meant to seize her instead struck a stunning blow to her head as she attempted to duck
beneath it. She staggered, and his arm snagged her around the middle before she could regain her
footing and put some distance between them.

Being pulled against his armored form was like being thrown against a stone wall. The breath was
driven from her and she thought her ribs might crack from the force of that single arm pulling her in
close. Even kneeling he was nearly as tall as she was and suddenly she realized that a single one of
his hands covered most of her back. The thought made her quail in sudden fear and she had to
remind herself that she had no actual physical form here to be injured and that neither she nor her
babe were in jeopardy.

The other gigantic hand closed about her throat, pulling her up until her toes barely brushed the ground as he rose to stand himself. Elissa clawed at his hand, desperate for breath, attempting to kick him. His other hand came up and grabbed at her armor, tugging at the buckles. The dream-quality of the Fade became apparent as they seemed to magically fall open at his touch, responding to his will rather than his fingers, and he jerked her cuirass from her body and tossed it aside. Her smallclothes and breastband were shredded as they were ripped away, leaving her dangling in his hand wearing only her boots. Only then did Sten drop her.

She fell to the ground, gulping huge, ragged breaths of air through her bruised throat as Sten stripped off his own armor in a fraction of the time that removing full plate should have taken. Elissa froze, then, as she looked up, and up, and understood just why Sten had feared he could kill her.

His cock was unlike anything she'd ever seen, bigger even than her imagination had permitted her to envision when she'd first thought on the matter. It was larger even than the biggest of the Orlesian _objets d'amour_ with which her mother had demonstrated certain skills for her, some of which had been molded using horses and oxen as models. Even the hood of skin from which the head peaked out seemed heavier than it should have. And as he stroked himself, sliding the skin back, the head that emerged was a nearly as large as her fist.

"Maker's cock!" she breathed in horrified admiration.

"No," Sten replied patiently, as though speaking to a dunce, "that is _my_ cock."

Elissa's brain screamed that there was no possible way she could take that...that.... Her cunt, however, announced just as adamantly that she most certainly _would_. It pulsed in anticipation, sending an unending stream of slick fluid to trickle down her thighs. When Sten reached her, she swung her legs out, sweeping his feet out from underneath him and sending him crashing to the ground beside her. Before he had a chance to catch his breath, she was straddling his thick chest, thrusting her tongue into his mouth as she ground her cunt against him.

"I do not understand," he gasped as she peeled her mouth from his to bite him on the neck, just over the artery where his pulse thundered. "Where did you learn of Qunari mating practices?"

Elissa chuckled deep in her throat but did not release the pressure of her teeth on his skin until he grumbled, his hands closing on her arms, his fingers digging in painfully. He pulled one of her arms to his mouth and holding her wrist in an unbreakable grip, set his teeth into the flesh of her forearm, biting, _biting_ even as she howled in pain, writhing on his chest as she coated his skin with her own cunt juices. He could have ripped a chunk of flesh from her arm, she knew, but he stopped when his teeth just broke the skin and brought blood to the crescent he left there. Still, it was enough; tears burned her eyes and she whimpered as he licked the blood from his lips with a satisfied smile.

"As you have marked me, so I shall mark you," he rumbled. "It is our way. As life is both pain and pleasure combined, so must mating be."

"Then it is an uneven exchange," she replied, her voice clogged as shudders of pain continued to ripple through her in time to the pulsing ache in her arm, "for I did not draw blood."

"Then you must," he insisted, baring his throat to her. "It is your due. You must claim your toll for the pain of childbearing."

Elissa went still, staring at him in shock. "You know!"
"Of course I know," Sten answered, unmoved by her astonishment. "Parshaara! Do we fuck or not?"

Elissa hovered on the brink of indecision, the animalistic fury that had carried her to this point falling away. Sten gave an impatient growl and shoved a hand between her cunt and his chest, finding her clit with little trouble. Elissa’s head snapped back as a lightning-sharp wave of sensation sizzled through her. Sten's other hand closed over the back of her head and pulled her down into a kiss that involved far more teeth than she was accustomed to, but which began to awaken in her the frenzied lust which had guided her to her present position. Soon her lips were raw and swollen, and she wrenched her mouth from his in a quest for air and relief.

Closing his eyes, Sten tipped his head back, exposing his neck once more. Elissa licked her way down to the junction of his shoulder, marveling at the fact that his neck was larger than her thigh. There was something primal about the odor of his skin, and it awoke her most basic and instinctive desires, desires which cared nothing about love or affection and concerned themselves only with finding a mate, claiming, owning, marking, fucking.

Her teeth sank into the tendon where his neck met his shoulder and Sten tensed and shuddered beneath her, but made no effort to stop her. Harder she bit, and harder, until she heard the soft, crunching sound of meat being torn, and the taste of rusted iron coated her tongue.

Then Sten did seize her, pulled her away, and she licked his blood off her lips as he pulled her down to his mouth once more.

His finger on her clit moved expertly, causing Elissa to wonder if Sten might not be quite a popular man amongst his own people, for she knew about pleasure and soon she was mewling into his mouth, sliding her cunt against his chest as pleasure mounted deep within her belly, drawing tighter that knot of tension that she knew would soon snap and send her careening over the precipice. When he raised his head and his mouth found her nipple, it did and she came with a breathless scream, bucking on his chest.

When a second finger joined the first, however, she felt herself begin to stretch and burn, her nerve endings screaming too much! even as instinct made her hips move, rolling and pushing to drive herself deeper upon his probing fingers. When the two fingers were seated deeply within her, his thumb brushed her clit and Elissa came, moaning and shivering, feeling herself loosen around his fingers until the burning eased and all that was left was the sensation of being full. Yet another orgasm washed over her when he pulled those fingers back and then thrust them in again, filling her once more in a single determined stroke.
In and out, in and out his fingers worked, insistently but patiently. "Is this what was meant to break me?" she asked between moans, pleasure erasing any hint of derision that might have made her words mocking.

"I do this neither to spare you pain nor bring you pleasure," he answered, pulling his fingers from her. When they returned, she realized he'd added a third and hissed through her teeth, feeling so unbearably stretched she thought she might tear. "I will couple with you, and you will find it an ordeal. But it will not be possible until you are prepared."

He pushed with his fingers, stretching her wider, filling her fuller than she'd ever been filled before. It burned and ached and yet she felt herself moving her hips again, urging him deeper. The sting of salt from his skin made her aware of the fact that his fingers were absorbing and rubbing her moisture away despite how insanely wet she'd been to begin with, and reaching behind her, she used one of her own fingers to lightly tease the entrance to her ass, caressing the ring of muscle, nudging it open before poking within ever so carefully.

Almost immediately another flood of lubrication from her cunt loosened her and made the passage of his fingers into her body easier. She came again as they slid home, his massive palm resting against her clit when his fingers were as deep within her as they could possibly go. The burning was almost gone, his hand was drenched with her fluids, and she thought she might burst from those huge fingers filling her. Then he began to fuck her with them, and the world dissolved into lunacy as one orgasm after another rocked her until she was wailing, sobbing, her hips bucking and thrusting as she sought to impale herself harder, faster, deeper.

"Now you are prepared," Sten announced, and when he withdrew his fingers she felt so achingly, agonizingly empty she thought she might die. He lifted her leg and scooted until it was no longer his shoulders between her thighs but his hips as he lay on his side between her legs, his enormous body nearly perpendicular to her own, and his cock pressing against her entrance. Without waiting for approval from her, he slid the head of his cock between her folds, gathering up moisture. With a nervous shudder, she once again reached back and teased her asshole, feeling her cunt clench and become even wetter. And then her head rolled from side to side on the ground as he began to push into her.

"Oh, Maker, please," she sobbed, not certain what she was asking, not certain she could bear it. Even with all the preparation he'd done, it still seemed too much. Stretched as she was, she felt tighter than a virgin. The pressure of his cock pushing against her without yielding, mercilessly parting her tight flesh. She was going to split in two, her hips would break, her flesh would tear, surely it must, surely she couldn't possibly take any more of that massive cock into her body....

And still he pushed. He went slowly only by necessity; there was simply no other way to proceed, no other way to force her body to accommodate him but with gradual persistence. Had he gone faster, tried to ram his way in, he would merely have injured her and created pain for both of them, but it would not have won him any deeper entry.

Elissa came again, screaming, as she felt the hard ridge of the head of his cock pass into her cunt. Sten began to give soft, snarling grunts in time to a tight jerking of his hips, withdrawing slightly each time only to slide in deeper with the next push. Another climax rippled through her, and another. Elissa found herself sobbing, her hair clinging to her sweat-and-tear dampened face as her fist pounded the ground beside her head. She braced with that fist and pushed, using it as leverage to shove herself further onto his cock, and then another devastating orgasm tore through her body when at last she felt the head of his cock rap against the entrance to her womb.

"Oh, Maker, oh Andraste, oh sweet fucking mercy...." A litany of curses and invocations fell from
her babbling lips. She felt like she was impaled upon a tree trunk, uncomfortably aware of the fact that she could feel his cock rubbing against her pelvis through the thin layer of her flesh. It was at once painful and sublime, and she shuddered and moaned and begged for a reprieve which he would not grant her even if she had really wished him to do so.

His fingers closed upon her hip and pulled her toward him at the instant he drew back and surged forward again, and then she was lost. She came again, and again, sometimes silent, sometimes shrieking, sometimes lapsing out of consciousness entirely for several seconds until his next thrust roused her and started the process all over again.

Sten rolled onto his back, hauled her over him as easily as he would a rag doll, and thrust up into her so hard he crashed against the door to her womb, drawing a long wail of agonized pleasure from her. She hadn't the strength nor the leverage to ride him effectively and so he lifted and lowered her as effortlessly as he might have dragged his own fist up and down his cock while masturbating. When friction began to build, he took his cue from her earlier actions and used his finger to stimulate her asshole and again her cunt flooded. The fear and shock of feeling that massive finger prod her tight bud brought her to another mind-wracking orgasm. She fainted, and when she roused it was to find she had collapsed on his chest and he was still thrusting up, pulling her down, fucking her limp and unconscious body.

He pushed her off him, then, shoving onto her back and plunging into her as he hooked his arms under her knees, rearing up and driving deep. Whether it was the new position or if Sten was growing thicker and even harder in preparation for his own climax, she didn't know, but suddenly it was too much. Everything ached, everything was too intense, and even the spasms of orgasm had become painful.

"Stop!" she begged, "Oh, Maker, please stop!"

"I cannot!" he growled, plunging into her again.

"Please," she panted, another small climax rippling through her, and in desperation she seized upon another idea. "I want to taste you when you come."

Sten's furious thrusts came to a shuddering halt, his arms quivering with tension as he braced himself above her. Sweat rolled off his body in torrents, but he withdrew from her. Carefully, aware of her aching body, Elissa slid out from beneath him. He remained braced on his hands and knees, and Elissa turned, crawled under him and lifted her head to run her tongue along the ridge of his cock.

With a groan, Sten rocked. Aware that she could not possibly take him into her mouth, Elissa used her own saliva and the smooth glide of the skin of his cock to pump his shaft while she plied the knob with her tongue and lips, dipping into the slit with the tip of her tongue, caressing his balls with her other hand. Now within her hand she could feel him swelling, growing impossibly hard and tight, and as a quaking began in his body and a long, low groan rumbled up from his chest, she covered the slit and as much of the head as she could with her open mouth, sucking hard.

The salty taste of semen flooded her mouth, erupting from him in a burst that quickly filled her mouth to overflowing, more than she could even swallow in just the first spurts. His seed flowed from her mouth down her face and mouth and chest, dripping onto her breasts, and when she pulled back, choking, great ropey strands of thick pearlescent fluid shot across her face and shoulders in hot torrents. On it went, and on, spasm after spasm until Elissa was covered with more seed than she could have expected from half a dozen men at any one time. Sten took himself in hand and the last few short, milky bursts spent themselves on her belly as she lay there stunned, her skin and hair plastered in dripping sheets of his cum.
At last he pushed himself up and back, coming to rest on his knees before her, panting. She wiped huge congealing globs of seed off her eyes and blinked at him in astonishment.

"Andraste's cunt, you might have warned me!"

Sten began to laugh, a deep, satisfied, completely masculine sound, and in the next instant he had disappeared and Elissa was alone in the Fade once again.
Understanding

Chapter Summary

Elissa encounters Alistair in his Fade dream and the two gain new insight into one another.

Chapter Pairings: None

Alistair stood down the hill from her, resplendent in the shining armor of a templar. He did not look up at her approach, instead staring longingly at the demonic illusions around him. They were all female and they were all dressed in mage robes, and yet...not. Each robe was cut differently from the style Elissa normally associated with the mages of the tower. There one left the arms of the mage bare and was cut extremely low, revealing almost all of her breasts. Another ended just below the mage's hips, revealing all her leg, the rounded curve of her lower buttocks, and just a hint of shadow near her cunt.

As Elissa watched, Alistair licked his lips nervously, standing very properly at attention, trying to pretend he wasn't staring. Another templar came by, this one wearing the device of a knight-commander. He handed Alistair a vial and left after Alistair dutifully drank the contents. Alistair, though visibly calmer, looked utterly miserable as he went back to staring.

Two scantily-clad mages strolled past him arm in arm. "Good evening, Ser Alistair," they simpered, giggling when he mumbled a shy greeting, his ears turning red. Their hips swayed as they walked away, and as they put their heads together and whispered, looking back over their shoulders at Alistair, Elissa noticed something else.

They each bore a resemblance to her.

They were not identical, or even close. But this one had Elissa's high cheekbones and the arch of brow, that one the color of her hair and the fullness of her lips, and still another wore her hair in a style very similar to Elissa's own.

*Alistair,* she smirked, approaching him. *How very interesting your imagination is.*

"I can't quite decide," Elissa began, startling Alistair as he whirled to face her. "whether this is your dream or your nightmare."

Alistair opened his gauntlet to reveal the empty lyrium vial within. "Definitely a nightmare. You don't seem to appreciate how close I almost came to this."

"Really?" she canted an eyebrow at a mage with bits of her anatomy strategically exposed. She considered making a derisive remark about the improbability of a tower filled with sparsely clad nymphs all intent on driving him mad, but considering her own nightmare, refrained. "Oh, Alistair," she sighed instead. "What a conundrum you present."

"In what regard?" he asked.

"Clearly the idea of a lifetime of chastity--seeing all the women you might have had but can't parading before you--scares you witless, yet you get so smugly self-righteous when confronted by
someone who freely embraces sex and pleasure. You wish to experience those pleasures yourself, but when given the chance you run from them and hide behind your virginity."

"Isn't there any room for a middle ground in your philosophy?" Alistair challenged. "Sex without the excess? Maybe with a touch of, I don't know, affection? Or commitment?"

"Are you asking me if I'd consider monogamy?"

"Yeah, I suppose I am."

"I honestly don't know. My parents never saw the need. My father embraced my mother--despite the fact that she started as a whore--and adored her until the day they died. Once they were wed, however, her approach to things changed. She made certain she never conceived a child that was not his, and that when she had sex with another it was with his consent. She'd use sex to benefit father in his dealings with others, and often just to please him, because he loved to watch her receive pleasure without being distracted by his own need. But he never asked her to do that which she was unwilling to do. They used sex with others as a tool to benefit the partnership they had formed, and also to enhance the pleasure they experienced with one another." Elissa looked at him curiously. "Does that strike you as a relationship lacking affection?"

"I don't know," Alistair muttered. "Never having met them, I suppose I couldn't say."

"Well, allow me to assure you, they worshipped each other," Elissa said, her voice tight, feeling her eyes burn with a grief she thought she had left behind her. "My mother stayed willingly behind to die beside my father rather than flee without him. Their last words spoke of the good and joyful life they'd had together, and how much they loved one another. Does that strike you as a relationship lacking commitment?"

"No," he answered, looking stricken at the sight of her tears. "No, it doesn't."

"So, to answer your question, no, I don't suppose I ever have considered monogamy. I'd always assumed that once I married, I would do much the same as my mother, and use sex judiciously to advance the prosperity and standing of my family, and that my husband would be a willing participant in that plan."

Alistair had no response to that, but Elissa was pleased to note his defensive posture had softened. When he looked once again at the demons masquerading as scantily-clad mages, his eyes were speculative, as though seeing them in terms of what pleasure he might derive from any or all of them, rather than simply the torment of what he could not have. It was a long moment before he met her eyes again, but that guarded reserve that had been there since that night in Redcliffe was gone.

Alistair swallowed hard. "I'm not saying you're right. I'm not saying I could ever...be like your father was with your mother. But...I think I understand a little better now just where you're coming from. I can't guarantee much success, but I will try not to make such a scene about it in the future, even if I don't really approve. And I'm sorry."

Elissa blinked. "Whatever for?"

"For your parents. For your loss. For being an ass and calling you a harlot."

"Thank you, Alistair," she answered, her voice choked. "I...regret that you discovered the truth about me the way you did. I can see how that must have been shocking for you, and I'm afraid I haven't been very understanding, nor terribly respectful of your boundaries. You didn't consent to be witness to that display in the tavern, and I should have found a way to warn you rather than forcing it upon
Alistair nodded in acceptance of her apology, and they fell silent for a moment as he stared particularly intently at two female mages who seemed to be getting very comfortable with one another. "Well...if it hadn't been such a shock, I might have enjoyed it far more."

"You seemed to enjoy it well enough," Elissa flung him a flirty smile and was pleased to see him blush.

"Yeah, for all of five seconds. Then came the red face and the agony of humiliation."

"You just haven't had the opportunity to practice," she shrugged. "As with any other physical endeavor, stamina and endurance improve upon repetition."

"Riiight. I'll be sure to add that to my daily routine, immediately following sword practice."

"And why not?" she asked crisp, a trifle annoyed, and at her tone he turned his eyes from the pair of cavorting mages to meet her gaze. "It's all well and good to want to cling to your virginity until you find the right person and the right time. Believe it or not, I actually did much the same--though admittedly my definition of 'right' had less to do with sentimentality and more to do with opportunism. But there's nothing to keep you from pleasuring yourself while you wait."

"I do--I mean, I have...sometimes. Occasionally. I think that falls into the category of activities frowned upon by the Chantry for templar initiates," Alistair replied, squirming. His eyes darted back to the mages, one of whom was presently sucking the breasts of the other. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard, forcing his gaze back to Elissa.

"Yes, well, we've already been over my opinions on that particular matter, and I don't think they bear revisiting."

"Fair enough," Alistair nodded. "I suppose you're right there as well. If this says anything about me, it says just how much I didn't care for the Chantry's insistence upon celibacy."

"Then for Andraste's sake, quit letting it have such a hold over you! If not for yourself, think of the enormous favor you'll be doing the woman you someday decide to sleep with." Elissa paused then, temptation stirring within her. She drew a deep breath, poised to speak, then shook herself and swallowed what she had to say. "No. No, I'm not going to do that."

"Do what?"

"I'm trying to respect your boundaries," she said primly. "I don't have your consent to seduce you with words any more than I do to employ more physical or visual means."

He shuddered then, and when he opened his eyes again, his pupils were dilated, consuming the honey-amber iris. "You seem to be doing a fairly good job of that without even trying."

"You're an easy target."

"Much to my chagrin." Alistair sighed, then, clenching his jaw. Finally, after a long moment of indecision, he gritted, "Oh, Maker's blood! Please, just...say what it is you were going to say."

"You're sure?" At his tense nod, Elissa smiled, her voice dropping to a purr. "I was just going to encourage you to remember this scene the next time you're alone in your tent."

"I doubt there's much chance I'll be able to forget," he replied, his voice strained. The mage who had
been enjoying herself with the breasts of the other was now on her back, her knees bent and parted, while the other mage blew a teasing hint of magical frost across her folds.

"Ah, but there's remembering, and then there's remembering. And when you do so, let your hands to explore your body, much as those two are doing there to one another. Imagine your hands belong to someone else, perhaps one of them, or perhaps to someone else you desire. Don't just go straight for your shaft and rub yourself to completion. Take your time with it. Allow your hands to wander, to seek out what is most sensitive. What's ticklish? What makes your gut clench with a sudden surge of arousal? What makes you hard?

"Is it the curve of your neck, where it meets your shoulder? Or perhaps the shell of your ear. Or maybe your nipple. Does it respond to a light, teasing touch? Or to something harder? A firm stroke, such as you might receive from a tongue? A pinch, fingers closing gently around it as it becomes erect, then squeezing, harder, until the touch hovers on the brink of pain. Or, if you are so inclined, even crosses that line."

"Oh, sweet Andraste...." Alistair breathed.

"Run your hands down your belly, feeling the skin ripple and twitch. Those hollows just below your hip bones, let your fingers dance across them, let them run lightly over the soft skin where your hip meets your belly. Ah, and now you want to take hold of your cock, but don't. Make yourself wait. Enjoy the anticipation. Tease yourself. Reach back behind your cock and stroke the skin of your sac, softly, oh, so softly! Run your fingernails lightly down the inside of your thighs. Cup your balls and squeeze gently.

"When you finally turn your attention to your cock, explore it. Know every inch of it like you would your best beloved. Feel that hard tendon on the backside just above where it meets your balls. Know the slide of the foreskin as you slowly pull it back and let the head emerge. Know the ridge at the base of the head, and don't neglect the frenulum, that sensitive spot on the back of the shaft where that ridge tapers down into the shaft itself. Tease the slit in the head, using the fluid that emerges to enhance the pleasure of your palm rubbing slow circles against the tip."

Alistair's eyes were closed, his fists in their gauntlets clenched on his thighs. His attention was no longer on the two illusory mages fucking one another. Instead, he swayed as though mesmerized, his body trembling. Elissa watched him, unwilling to move even a little and break the moment. Her own cunt clenched and quivered with longing, and she wanted to escalate the matter, make her words reality. She wanted to take him into her hands and listen to his moans, to stroke him to completion and lick his seed off her hands when he was done. Instead, she used words and ignored her own arousal to concentrate on his.

"Only when you can't stand another moment do you take the shaft in hand and begin to stroke. Slowly at first, and then gaining speed. Imagine that the gliding of your skin up and down the shaft is the sheath of your partner, that you're sliding inside her, that the clench of your fist is the muscles of her sex closing around you, embracing you. Hear her moans in your mind, her sighs, her soft whimpers for more. As you feel your climax approaching, try to fight it off, force it back, so that you may give your lover just one more moment of pleasure. Hold it off as long as possible and let it build, and build, and build until control is lost and it bursts forth. Envision your lover taking your seed inside herself, tasting you on her tongue. Taste yourself, to know what she experiences."

Alistair's face reddened. His head fell back and he gave a low growl, shaking violently. Beneath the long crimson skirt of the templar armor, she could not see the results her words had wrought, but his ragged breaths as he panted told her what she needed to know.

"Maker's breath, how did you do that?" he gasped at last.
"Words and images can be very potent weapons," she said, smiling softly. "Wielded properly they can bring enormous pleasure, and my education was no less attentive to that aspect of seduction than to any other."

"I don't know whether to be mortified or to beg you to do that again."

"Do it for yourself, next time you're alone," she answered. "That is how endurance and stamina is built, and also how you learn to please your partner. How can you ever expect to give a woman pleasure if you don’t know what pleasure is yourself?"

"I can hardly wait to get back to my tent."

Elissa laughed. "Then my work here is done!" she announced. "I'll make a proper libertine out of you yet." She gave him a moment more to absorb her words, then rose. "Now...are you ready to leave this place?"

The mages stopped pleasing one another and were approaching, obviously intent on attempting to stop them from leaving.

"Definitely." It wasn't until he rose that Alistair grimaced and squirmed uncomfortably. "Oh, of all the bloody--How exactly am I supposed to fight like this?"

"Don't worry," she assured him. "It will disappear when you continue to whatever comes next here. Really. You should have seen the state I was in after I located Sten...."
Nadir

Chapter Summary

Elissa resorts to desperate measures to save the mages of the Circle Tower, and Alistair unexpectedly comes to her rescue.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/abominations

Content Warnings: Sex with demonic beings

Disgusted, Elissa looked down at the corpse of the templar at her feet. Another person dead. Dead through no fault of his own. Dead because he'd simply had the mischance to be enslaved by a demon.

"Such a bloody waste!" she cursed, throwing her bow down with a clatter. Her companions looked at her in consternation as she stalked about the chamber looking for something she could hit without breaking her hand.

"We're going about this all wrong," she muttered, looking at them with wild, haunted eyes. "Too many people are dying. This is no way to build an army. We're murdering the very people we need to be saving! Each abomination we kill used to be a mage who might have been able to help us defeat the Blight, just like these enslaved templars might also aid us."

"Might I point out that we don't have a great deal of choice?" Alistair ventured, and she turned to glare at him. "They were trying to kill us. We're not going to get very far in defeating the Blight if we're dead."

"No, you're right. That's a very valid point." She covered her face with her hands for a moment, sighing. And then she looked up. "But what if we could release them instead? Like we did with Connor."

Her eyes sought Morrigan, and the witch looked thoughtful. "It would be a simple matter to go back into the Fade, especially here where the Veil is so thin. We wouldn't even need lyrium or blood to supplement the amount of magical energy the ritual would generate. But finding the specific demons inhabiting these abominations and slaying them would be impossible for only a single mage in the Fade. Also, these abominations are different than Connor was. Connor seemed to retain at least some of his humanity; these abominations are nothing but mindless destruction."

"But would they be if they were exorcised of the demons?"

"I...don't know," Morrigan answered honestly. "It could be that the mage they inhabit has been forever warped by the demonic possession, but the fact that Connor wasn't seems to indicate at least some ability to recover one's humanity once the demon is gone."

"All right. That's a start. Until we prove otherwise, let's proceed on the assumption that at least some of the mages can be saved if we can destroy the demon inhabiting them."

"These abominations were blood mages," Wynne interjected. "Even were they still fully human, they would not have been your allies."
"That is not necessarily true. Jowan was very cooperative and willing to help; he wished to make amends. As did the blood mage we encountered earlier in the Tower. She agreed to fight for us in exchange for her life," she stared down Wynne's disapproving look. "I don't particularly care what kind of magic they practice, if they can help me defeat the Blight."

"And what if they refuse to aid you once you have freed them?" Wynne persisted.

"They will aid me or they will be summarily executed for their actions here," Elissa replied coldly. "If they won't fight for me, they're useless to me and I have no compunctions about dealing them justice for the wanton slaughter that has occurred in this tower."

"We have also not discussed the desire demons who have already crossed the Veil and are here in their physical form," Morrigan pointed out. "Those still need to be dealt with, and those are the ones enslaving the templars. We can't kill them without killing the templars they have enthralled."

"Right." Elissa nodded. "Very well, then. As much as it pains me, we have to consider those men to be a loss. But if we can avoid any more needless slaughter, if we can salvage anyone out of this situation, we must do so."

"However, my first point still remains," Morrigan said. "Finding the specific demons in the Fade and eradicating them would be an impossible task. It was easy at Redcliffe because there was only one demon and one mage being inhabited in that particular physical location. This is another matter entirely. Even if I were to try, it would be a futile effort. I'm sorry."

"Damn," Elissa sighed, gritting her teeth against the urge to burst into tears. To be so close....

"Unless...." Morrigan's voice trailed off, and when Elissa looked at her, she appeared uncertain.

"What? What is it?"

"Before, we were trying to propel me through the Veil and into the Fade," Morrigan said slowly. "If we could, instead, propel the demons themselves back into the Fade, the connection between the mage and the demon would be severed."

"But in order to propel you into the Fade, you had to be part of the--" Elissa's eyes grew wide and she stared at Morrigan in disbelief. "Oh, no! Are you mad? I do not fuck demons!"

"What?" Alistair's voice rose an octave as he shouted. "Exactly what kind of magic are we discussing here?"

"Magic that calls upon sexual energy, as opposed to blood or lyrium," Morrigan explained. "Tis a source of power Flemeth learned to harness long ago, while she herself was still human. 'Tis why the legends tell of her being a great and seductive beauty."

"Oh," Alistair turned as crimson as the dead templar's skirt. "Well, I guess that explains why you were nude that day in Redcliffe Castle."

"Quite." The witch looked at Elissa again. "If you could find a way to seduce the abominations, I could conduct the ritual harnessing the power generated by the sexual energy, as Jowan did for us. When they reached release, I could force them back into the Fade. The demon would still live, but it would be contained in the Fade again, unable to come across until it found another mage willing to accept its bargain."

"I...I can't! Even I have my standards. I don't fuck demons. It's as simple as that."
"Very well," Morrigan shrugged, unconcerned. "It matters not. Let us be off, then. No doubt we have many more abominations to slay."

"Damn you!" Elissa hissed at her.

"Please tell me you're not actually considering doing this," Alistair begged, his expression sickened.

Elissa looked at him, her eyes shining with tears. "What choice do I have? Slaughter our whole army before we've had a chance to gather it? What will my virtue or dignity matter in a land consumed by the Blight?"

"This is unwise," Sten said. "If the abominations should become violent you would risk injury to yourself or your child."

"WHAT?!"

"Oh, Maker's balls!" Elissa moaned as Alistair practically screamed. She glared at Sten, who seemed utterly unimpressed with her displeasure. Leliana moved closer, put a comforting arm about her shoulders.

"You're--you're with child?" Alistair spluttered. "How--? When--? Who--?"

"None of that matters right now, Alistair!" Leliana cut him off firmly. "There will be time for questions later. I have to agree with Sten," she said to Elissa. "Saving these mages is a fine goal, but without you we cannot combat the Blight. This will all be for naught if the abominations prove...brutish."

Elissa sank down to the grimy floor and pulled her knees to her chest, resting her forehead on them. "Everyone just...be silent! I need to think."

Her child. Cailan's child. The one remaining shred of hope she held for the fulfillment of the plans she and her parents had assiduously laid over those years in Highever as she came to womanhood learning how to use sex to her advantage. How could she possibly jeopardize it? And yet...how could she not? Unless she found a way to end the Blight, the well-being of her child would be an utterly moot point anyway. The only possible hope for saving him would be to flee Ferelden ahead of the Blight and that....

...That she simply could not do.

She supposed she could continue slaughtering everything in the tower in the hopes that a handful of mages might yet be alive and unaffected, but the mages she might manage to exorcise of their demons could very well spell the difference between victory and defeat when they faced the archdemon.

"All right," she whispered, lifting her head. She stared at her companions with bleak eyes as Alistair groaned softly. "All right. We'll do it."

"This is a mistake," Sten grumbled. "I will not permit this."

"You will. You gave your word to help me battle the Blight, and without the mages, I cannot do that. However," she looked at each of them in turn, taking in their confusion and reluctance, "if I'm going to take this chance, we don't just banish the demons. We destroy them."

"We wouldn't possibly have the power to do that," Morrigan argued. "Push them back across the
Veil, yes. And once they're out of the mages, there would be an instant of vulnerability in which we would know exactly where in the Fade they are and could slay them before the tear in the Veil is mended and the ritual completed, if we could act against them at that very second. But it would require an incredible amount of power, more than you could generate just having sex with them."

"Then we'll supplement with lyrium," Elissa said firmly, rising to her feet. "If that's not enough, I'll provide some of my own blood."

Morrigan shook her head. "Still not enough. If we were to sacrifice a person, perhaps it would be enough, but that would rather defeat our purpose here. We'd need a massive amount of orgasmic energy and sexual fluids, in quantities that could only be obtained by a dozen or more people all reaching climax at once."

"Sten?" Elissa turned to look at him. "Your physical body did not achieve release while you were in the Fade, did it?"

"No, it did not. But I will not participate in this."

"I'm not asking you to have sex with demons, or even with me while the demons are present. I want you to hang back, near Morrigan as she conducts the ritual, but apart from the activity, preferably where no one will notice you. Then all you need to do is bring yourself to release, if you can," she arched a brow. "I do hope you can...?"

Sten huffed, insulted. "Of course I can," he snapped, and Elissa allowed herself a moment of satisfaction at the predictability of masculine pride regardless of race. "Very well, I will do it."

"All right then," Elissa nodded briskly. "Leliana and Alistair, you're on guard duty. You, too, my friend," she said, rubbing the head of her mabari. "If any abomination looks like its about to get too eager and cause me serious injury, it dies. Don't worry if I merely look like things are unpleasant, because I certainly don't expect any great pleasure from this. Minor injuries are acceptable if they seem to be creating a greater amount of arousal for the abominations. We do need to generate sexual energy here, so let them have their fun so long as it doesn't appear to be putting my safety in jeopardy.

"Wynne?" she turned her attention to the elder mage, who was watching the proceedings with a fretful look. "You will heal me and rejuvenate me if my stamina seems to be flagging. But more importantly, do you have any offensive spells in your arsenal? Something that could be released in one large, amplified burst if you were to draw upon the power Morrigan is harnessing, and flung after the demons as they are pushed back into the Fade, injuring or destroying them?"

"I..." the mage hesitated, then shook off her indecision and answered. "I have one such spell, but it's much more effective on targets that have been frozen or petrified, and I am afraid I haven't studied those skills."

"Morrigan?"

"I have the ability to freeze targets, but I will be conducting the ritual and will be unable to cast."

"Irving can petrify targets," Wynne said. "If we can get to him, release him, he and I could cast in sequence to get the best effect."

"Then that is what we will attempt to do," Elissa agreed. "If it proves impossible, however, do the best you can with what you have."

"I understand," Wynne nodded. "And, Warden--"
"Yes?" Elissa snapped, surprised at how cold and hard her own voice seemed to be. She felt numb, shut off from the horror and disgust and despair she felt at the prospect of what was to come. She had no warmth or kindness to share with anyone.

"What you are doing—attempting to spare lives, even those who might not actually deserve is, and at such cost to yourself.... Well, I...whatever happens, I thank you."

The mage's words cracked something in that hardness Elissa felt around her heart. She trembled, feeling weak and unresolved. And then she straightened her shoulders, damming the breach before uncertainty and fear could flow forth and undermine her determination.

"Thank you," she said, her voice flat.

"Then I suppose all that remains," Morrigan said complacently, "is to gain the cooperation of the abominations.'

Elissa gave an unpleasant smile and began to remove her armor. "And that is where my particular skills come into play."

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"I could give you this gift, Wynne," Uldred cajoled. "You and all your mages. It would be so much easier if you just accepted it. But some people can be so stubborn."

There it was. Elissa's eyes glowed with bitter triumph. Her opening.

"It's not stubbornness that prevents them from joining you," she told the abomination Uldred. "They merely know that I can offer them something much better."

"Nonsense!" Uldred scoffed. "What can be greater than the power I offer, the power of the demon?"

"Magic with a near-limitless source of power," she replied, sauntering sensually forward. "No blood needed, to earn one the enmity and fear of the people. No lyrium needed, to keep one prisoner to the Chantry or illegal lyrium traffickers. No danger of horrific, monstrous transformation to forever brand one as an abomination to be hunted. All the power, perhaps even more than your demons offer, with none of the cost. Power so subtle it can be exercised freely without fear of exposure, because the Chantry doesn't even know it exists."

"You lie! If such power existed, I would know of it!"

"Would you, indeed? If you cannot sense it on me, then perhaps you're not so powerful as you think."

Uldred drew near, pressing his face close to hers. He breathed in deeply, smelling her. "Oh my, yes. You have been touched by some powerful magic. And yet, I don't detect enough lyrium in you to account for it. Nor enough bloodletting," he eyes narrowed, and his voice lowered, his tone almost seductive. "Whatever have you been meddling with, girl?"

"You'll find out soon enough, when I use it to defeat you."

Uldred laughed. "Defeat me? I could destroy you this very instant if I desired. Tell me now, or I will do so."

"Destroy me and you'll never know what it is."

"Very well, then, I shall simply possess your mind instead."
"With me in possession of the Litany of Adralla? I don't think so."

"You will tell me what this power is, or I will kill these pathetic wretches right now," he barked, gesturing at Irving and the few remaining mages.

"Why does it matter to you?" Elissa taunted. "You seemed so very confident a moment ago that you had all the power you needed."

"With this new magic of yours in addition to what we already possess, we will be unstoppable!" Uldred declared. "You will tell me!"

Elissa paused, pretending to ponder her options. "Let the remaining unconverted mages go," she said finally, "and I will tell you."

"You wish to bargain with me?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps I'm just stalling, trying to buy enough time for Greagoir and the templars to charge in here with the Right of Annulment in hand." She smiled sweetly. "I'm not the only one in a difficult position, you see. Unless you can complete your work and get out of here shortly, an army of templars will come sweeping in here and they will end you."

Uldred glared at her, his face suffused with rage. Elissa returned his look unblinkingly, her hands clenched before her to still their trembling.

"Very well," he said shortly. "They can leave...except Irving. I nearly have him swayed to my side, you see. With your magic, I should have no problem convincing him to join us."

Elissa nodded once, grimly, and the handful of mages bound beside Irving suddenly sagged as their bonds disappeared.

"Wynne," Elissa instructed, "escort them to the door. Make sure they join the others downstairs."

Wynne acknowledged the command with a nod and, murmuring to the others, urged them to their feet and toward the door. Then Elissa turned to face Uldred again.

"Now you will tell me what I want to know," he commanded.

"Very well," she said, allowing herself a triumphant smirk. "The apostate mage there knows a ritual to harness magical power from sexual energy. Anyone participating in the sex act gains the power once it is unleashed. There. Now you know my secret." Elissa laughed, as though enjoying a cruel joke. "I will point out, however, that it's useless to you. You don't know the ritual, and even if you did, I find the notion of the lot of you acquiring a willing sexual partner...highly unlikely."

"You will perform the ritual with us!" Uldred growled in frustration.

"No. That is not going to happen."

"I am not the only one who will be ended when the templars arrive!" the abomination screamed. "They will not take time to differentiate the innocents from those possessed by demons! Your only hope of getting out of here alive now rests in helping us get out as well."

Elissa cursed and spun away from him, pacing as though agitated. She could feel the eyes of her companions upon her, carefully impassive lest they give away the game, leaving the theatrics up to her. She herself felt nothing, not even glee that her ruse seemed to be working so well. She could not allow herself to feel, or she'd no doubt begin screaming in horror.
Finally, she gave a dramatic sigh and turned back to Uldred. "Very well. But you will release Irving as well. He will participate in the ritual with us and serve as my protector. If you or any of your...pets there gets any ideas of becoming brutish and injuring me, he and my companions will kill you."

She allowed her eyes to slide slowly over them, as though evaluating their merits. One of the monstrous abominations, she noted, had already opened its heavy, flesh-like robe and was stroking its...no, she could not call it a cock. Cocks were enjoyable things, things from which she derived her pleasure, and surely there would be none of that here. Very well, then. Its phallus. It was stroking its phallus, which was, thankfully, fairly normal in appearance, if a disgusting mottled brownish-red color, like clotted blood. Perhaps slightly larger than the human norm, but nothing extraordinary nor potentially injurious.

Elissa closed her eyes, trying to block out the sight of the abominations, trying to find that core of desire deep within her that was always ready to take the opportunity for sex when it was to her advantage. Instead, she felt nothing. Not fear. Not disgust. Not humiliation. Nothing she could turn to arousal or from which she might derive pleasure.

She was empty. There was no tension in her belly, no moisture on her cunt save for the oil she'd found in a vanity in the templar's quarters with which she'd prepared herself in the hopes of preventing pain and injury.

As she stood there in the center of the Harrowing chamber, she heard the moist, deep breathing and shuffling steps of the creatures as they drew nearer. Uldred's voice came from right beside her, and she could smell his foul breath as he spoke. "Remove her clothing," he snapped at one of the abominations.

As the monstrosity shredded the loose tunic and breeches she'd worn under her armor, Morrigan began chanting.

She felt hands on her breasts, cold hands, but soft. Human hands. Uldred. "Very nice," he murmured. "I often forget that humanity does indeed offer certain benefits." He pinched her nipples, hard, his talon-like fingernails digging in, and Elissa cried out in pain. Off to the side, she heard Alistair's sword clearing its scabbard, and the creak of Leliana's bowstring. Her mabari began to growl.

"If you injure me, you die," she reminded him, gritting her teeth. Not even the pain, which she sometimes enjoyed, moved her to desire.

"A little blood loss is hardly an injury," Uldred chided. "And surely it will only help to build the power, as that is where our magic derives. And we must, after all, have our pleasures, mustn't we?"

This had not been part of her plan, but Elissa quickly grasped the advantages of increasing the available power. "If you wish to emerge from this alive, I'd suggest it remain a very little blood," she grated. "And release Irving. Now."

She opened her eyes to see Irving collapse, free of his restraints, and walked over to him, kneeling before him. Without looking at Uldred and the others, she leaned forward and kissed him deeply, as the First Enchanter sat there frozen, unresponding. She kissed her way up his grizzled jaw to his ear and nuzzled him, whispering soft instructions punctuated by nibbles on his earlobe. As he began to comprehend her intent, his hands closed over her shoulders and stroked down her arms, caressing as though responding to her seduction. She rose and drew away from him, reaching out to beckon him toward the center of the room, but he stood there as she had instructed, wavering and indecisive.

Uldred laughed cruelly. "Perhaps your charms are not what you thought they were, my dear," he
taunted. "Or perhaps Irving here is a lover of boys."

"No matter," she shrugged. "He can act as my guardian without participating. Now, do we do this or not?"

In an instant, the four abominations surrounded her, pawing and groping. Except for Uldred, their hands were hot, feverish, far warmer than any human touch. One large, deformed hand clasped over her breast, another insinuated itself between her thighs. Uldred's talons drew four rows of shallow furrows down her back, causing her to scream in pain. And all the while....

...Nothing. No desire. No craving. No pleasure. Only the intense, cerebral longing to be away from all this, to be rid of the hands upon her body. If she hadn't known better, she might have believed she'd somehow been made tranquil.

"Oh, by Flemeth's beard!" Morrigan cursed, interrupting her own chant. "You are not generating enough sexual energy. They lust for blood and power, not sex and he," she gestured to Irving, "is too afraid to be aroused. Without intense desire, there can be no ritual. You must do better than this."

Elissa's eyes flew wide, looking at Morrigan in alarm, but the witch merely looked irritated and resumed her chanting with a scolding glare. Over Morrigan's shoulder, she saw Alistair and Leliana whispering urgently at one another.

Surely not! Elissa thought, panicked. Surely they could not fail, having come this far, because she was unable to allow herself to respond to these creatures!

If desire lay anywhere within her, it lay behind the wall she'd erected to shut off her terror and revulsion, and if she released it, she would surely go screaming mad with horror the next time one of those creatures touched her.

She couldn't do it. She knew without a doubt that it would break her, break her more surely than the murder of her family or the brutality of the soldiers in Lothering or the indignity of allowing herself to be fucked by her dog could ever have done.

Elissa closed her eyes again, felt the hands creeping over her flesh once more, and thought surely she might weep if she were capable of feeling anything. She would fail here, she thought desperately. The best she could now hope for was that her companions could slay the abominations before they had a chance to collect themselves once they realized the ritual had failed.

Another hand brushed across her skin; calloused and warm, but human. It stroked the curve of her neck, the shell of her ear, and a body pressed close, a bare muscled chest pressing against hers as a scent with which she was unfamiliar overrode the stench of the abominations. Soft, inexperienced lips found hers, and her eyes opened as she made a whimpering sound of amazement against that hesitantly inviting mouth.

Alistair!

He'd laid aside his sword and shield, removed his breastplate and the tunic beneath. Elissa brought her hands to his shoulders, clinging to his desperately, as though she were drowning and he were the only thing keeping her afloat. With a soft cry of gratitude, she brushed his lips with her tongue and when his mouth opened, allowing her entrance, she shuddered and released the dam she'd been holding in place, letting everything she'd been trying to suppress come flooding forth.

Fear, horror, revulsion, humiliation all spilled over her, threatening to suck her under into madness. She gripped Alistair tightly, allowing her hands to delight in the feel of his muscles beneath her
fingers as she devoured his mouth. With that delight she felt the tingling of arousal in her cunt, the tension of building desire in her belly. As disgusting as the monstrous hand between her thighs was, she now felt pleasure as it roughly brushed her clit, making her body go rigid in an excess of sensation. When another set of horrible, hot fingers forced their way into her cunt, she was slick and ready, and able to enjoy the sensation of having something within her, filling her.

Down. She was being pushed down, and dragged away from Alistair. She sobbed and clung to him, unwilling to release the safety and sanity he represented, but the hands of the abominations were insistent. Her last glance was of him kneeling on the filthy floor of the Harrowing chamber, his hand reaching for her, offering her something to grab. Then one of the deformed abominations was before her, its phallus thrusting against her face. With a shudder of repugnance, she opened her mouth and took it inside.

In short order, another phallus was there, pushing into her hand. She clasped her hand around it and began to stroke. She employed no eroticism or artistry, using hard, long pulls intended to bring it to climax in the least amount of time. Hands lifted her bodily off the floor and a wizened, naked body crawled beneath her. Uldred. She was lowered again, and then he was inside her.

Shame and disbelief threatened to overwhelm her when she felt her body shudder in an grudging, reluctant orgasm as Uldred's phallus filled her, barely larger than the fingers of the abomination had been. Tears ran down her face and she tore her mouth away from the monster thrusting into her face, seeking a way to look around the creature's body as her free hand reached around it, grasping desperately at the air until warm, calloused fingers interlaced with hers. She felt moist breath brush her fingers, a soft kiss touching the back of her hand followed by a hot tear. She wept then, great sobs of humiliation and horror as demon hands drew her mouth inexorably back to the long, hard phallus near her face and something else began prodding at her backside, seeking entry to her ass.

She screamed in her throat as it worked its way in; fortunately, she had prepared herself with oil and her own fingers before leaving the templar's quarters, and the pain was minimal. Then there was only fullness and stretching, and another agonizingly shameful orgasm as her body responded to all the sensations from which she'd been taught to derive pleasure. Her body was rocked violently back and forth, hard hips slapping against her, claws harrowing her skin. The phalli in her cunt and ass pushing her harder against the one forcing its way into her throat. The last creature thrust hard into her hand and she gripped it firmly, letting the monster do all the work, letting her hand become the sheath it fucked. Its pre-ejaculate slid down her fingers.

And all the while, she clung to Alistair's hand as though it were the only tether keeping her anchored to her very life.

She came again as she sensed a shift, power building in the room. A low, angry grunting and a slapping sound reached her ears as somewhere out of sight, Sten worked himself toward a climax. The creatures fucking her felt it, too, and she heard their triumphant growls and groans as they began to thrust harder, gathering the power, unaware of what it would do once it reached its zenith. Alistair's hand gripped hers harder, squeezing, and she knew that his templar senses felt it also.

The room began to rumble, as though with an earthquake, as scalding hot semen shot from the phallus in her hand, splashing across her shoulders and the side of her face. Uldred followed soon after, pulsing in her cunt. The phallus in her mouth began to swell and harden as the one in her ass suddenly quivered and twitched and throbbed, shooting seed deep into her. As the first bitter, sizzling jets hit her tongue, running down her chin as she immediately spewed it back out, a primal roar sounded, and the chamber exploded in chaos.

Uldred shrieked in dismay beneath her as the bodies around her were picked up, pulled out of her,
lifted into the air. She tumbled to the stone floor as Uldred, too, was lifted, and immediately Alistair was there, pulling her safely away. Unlike the time in Redcliffe, the pressure of power buffeting her did not immediately abate, but continued to build, and beneath the cacophony in her ears she could hear Sten still grunting.

The forms of the abominations grew vague and indistinct as they levitated there, caught helplessly in the pull of the Fade. A rush of power slammed past her from the area where she'd last seen Irving, and a split second later, another surge, this one from Wynne's location. The bodies in the air all gave agonized screams in unison as those of the monstrous creatures suddenly transformed into human shapes and all of them plummeted to the ground. The Veil sealed with ear-popping finality.

Four naked, unconscious mages lay on the floor of the Harrowing chamber, and as Alistair helped Elissa to her feet, they began to stir.

"Dagger," she croaked to Alistair, and immediately one was pressed into her hand. Naked and dripping with the seed of the abominations, she knelt beside Uldred and pushed him back to the floor with her hand on his throat, cutting off his airway as the other mages sat up, looking around in confusion.

As if compelled by the force of her will, they all looked at Elissa, and when she was certain she had their attention, she plunged the dagger into the hollow at the base of Uldred's throat. He gurgled blood and his body stopped thrashing seconds later.

"I don't know which of you were willing accomplices to Uldred's schemes, or which of you were compelled against your wills, and Maker help me, I don't care. I am the Grey Warden Elissa and I am seeking aid fighting the Blight. Just how much assistance the Tower can render shall be decided between Irving and myself, but as for you three, you will come to aid me when I call for you, or you will die this very instant, here on this floor. Until I summon you, you will be imprisoned here in the Tower under Irving and Greagoir's supervision, but you will not yet be made tranquil. Once the archdemon is defeated and the Blight is over, you will return here to the Tower and submit yourselves to the justice of the templars. Serve me well and I will use all the influence at my disposal to seek clemency for your crimes. Am I understood?"

Only one of the mages protested, trying to rise and summon power to cast a spell. He fell with one of Leliana's arrows through his heart.

A cloak was draped over her shoulders--Wynne, she thought, though her perceptions were growing increasingly dim--and with her last ounce of willpower, she met Irving's eyes. "First Enchanter, I beg you give me time to bathe and dress. I will meet you downstairs and then we will discuss the terms of how the Circle Tower will fulfill its treaty obligations to the Grey Wardens."

She attempted to push herself to her feet, but the cloak felt like a leaden weight, dragging her down. She staggered beneath it, losing her footing, and as the world grew gray, Alistair's arms were there, catching her, lifting her to carry her from the chamber.

Her last conscious but utterly irrational thought, before everything faded to darkness, was that she had begun to fall in love.
"Are you ever going to tell me what all that on the boat was about?"

Elissa looked at Alistair as they and their companions departed the Spoiled Princess Tavern after the first hot meal they'd had since leave Redcliffe. They had been well-provisioned in Redcliffe, but any opportunity to have a fresh meal was to be taken, and the food in the Tower had been lacking.

Alistair's words dragged her back to the moment and out of her musings on the events of the tower. Since what had passed between them in the Harrowing chamber, she and Alistair had been conducting a careful, silent dance around one another. He kept his distance, though it was not the disdainful avoidance he'd maintained after Redcliffe. Instead, his manner was one of fearful yearning, as though he wished to approach her but wasn't certain how. As for Elissa....

... she wasn't certain she should encourage any more closeness between them, as much as she might desire it.

For the first time in her life, Elissa found herself afraid for her heart.

Had Alistair been anyone else, any other man, then once she found out he'd been Cailan's half-brother and thus--despite his denials--heir to the throne, she would have pursued him mercilessly. She would have taken up where she left off with Cailan, seduced him without hesitation or compunction, used every weapon in her arsenal until he belonged to her. But that would not have worked with Alistair; he'd already proven that the more aggressive she was, the more reticent he became.

And that had been before he'd come to consider her a degenerate harlot.

At no time would falling in love with him have been part of her plan. But something had shifted between them, first during their conversation in the Fade as they came to understand one another better, and then again when he came to her rescue in the Harrowing chamber, helping her find the safety and unlock the desire she needed to accomplish what she had set out to do.

Now that those feelings had begun, she found herself at a loss. If she allowed herself to love him and it turned out that he could not be reconciled to who she was--or worse, that he despised her because of it--she would be destroyed. She could not renounce what she was without turning her back on all her parents had raised her to be, and she would not betray them that way.

She was no longer certain pursuing Alistair was an option. It might be best to avoid him altogether, or as much as she could, considering. For a while, it seemed Alistair was of much the same opinion, but now he appeared to have worked up the nerve to approach her.

"I'm sorry?" Reluctantly, Elissa dragged her attention back to Alistair. "What was what about?"
"The other day. On the boat. I'm was all, 'hey, I'm King Maric's bastard' and then... you laughed. Until you vomited over the side of the boat."

"I was seasick!" Elissa protested, unwilling to remind him of her pregnancy.

Behind her, she thought she heard Leliana giggle.

"Riiight. That doesn't explain the laughing, though."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have laughed," Elissa bowed her head in apology. "Clearly you were very nervous about telling me, and I didn't react well. I apologize."

"Still... not an explanation? Or is it?" He shook his head. "Now I'm all confused."

"I was just...." she paused, struggling with indecision. It would be so much easier to tell him everything, how Cailan had meant to marry her, how she bore his child, how deeply ironic it was that she should have found herself fallen from that position only to discover her single-most indispensable companion was, in fact, Cailan's half-brother. But she couldn't.

What if he decided she only wanted him for his connection to the throne? What if he despised her for how deliberately she'd set out to seduce Cailan and earn herself a crown?

"I was taken aback," she said at last.

Alistair gave her a dubious look. "Taken aback? Taken aback is 'Oh, wow, there's a surprise.' It doesn't usually involve tears and nausea."

"You have a point. I--"

She was rescued from answering by a shout ringing out through the shallow canyon.

"The Warden dies here!"

*****

From her first conversation with the Antivan assassin, Elissa knew that Zevran was her masculine counterpart.

Here was a man who was as unashamed of his sexuality as she was of her own, someone who used his sex appeal to achieve his own ends as ruthlessly as she herself did. Here was someone who would never judge or question her sexual choices.

It would have felt incredibly safe and comforting, if not for the fact that she wasn't entirely certain he wouldn't try to poison her or slip a knife between her ribs.

The moment the elf became a member of their company, Alistair retreated from her. And that, she decided as they began their journey east to Denerim, was for the best. Until she felt confident that Alistair could accept her for all that she was and all that she had done, it would be best if they did not grow any closer.

Nevermind that the hesitant touch of his lips on hers had seared a brand onto her soul in a way no cock that ever crossed her lips had.
For all that he had been hired to kill her, Zevran was a much safer option. Which made it strange that, as days spun into weeks on the road to Denerim, she felt an awkward reluctance to invite him into her tent. But as they put Lake Calenhad behind them and began crossing the Bannorn, she found herself with an empty bedroll despite her desire to erase from her body what had happened in the Circle Tower.

She'd subjected herself to too many extremes lately. She was tired of it. She wanted a simple, uncomplicated fuck, free of angst and uncertainty and perversion. Since Lothering, the only sex she'd had that hadn't been somehow fraught had been the moment in the chantry with Teagan, and even that had been diminished by what had come afterward.

But each time she considered taking Zevran to her bed, her mind returned to the feel of Alistair's questioning lips upon hers, his tear upon the back of her hand. To his words about commitment and monogamy. She found herself wondering if this feeling was akin to the reason why, after her marriage, her mother had never fucked another man or woman without her father's blessing.

Groaning, she retired again to her lonely bedroll.

Crossing the Bannorn proved to be difficult, as they avoided the main highways for fear of encountering Loghain's patrols and instead traveled cross-country. Roving bands of darkspawn, bandits, and even gangs of wolves were regularly encountered. During one such struggle near White River, Elissa was wounded with a deep slash to her shoulder where one a bandit had managed to flank her company and ambush she and Leliana where they had taken their places at the rear with their bows. Wynne fusscd over her like a mother hen, but Elissa was determined to continue their journey east that very day, before the deep midwinter snows made their passage more difficult. The weather was already frightfully cold and snow dusted the ground regularly along their travels.

She staggered through the day with her shoulder aching despite Wynne's healing spell, and her belly twinging from the changes the babe had wrought inside her body. Nausea was not the only inconvenience she struggled with. Cramps and muscle aches were common occurrences, and she regularly found herself squirming uncomfortably from the oddest poking sensation deep inside her womanhood at the entrance to her womb, as though someone were stabbing her lightly with the sharp quill of a feather.

She often wished for her mother during those times, that she might discuss these symptoms and changes with Eleanor and be reassured that they were all very normal. Even the most mundane of activities seemed to bear some new, unintended consequence. Cleaning her teeth had become an ordeal, and all Eleanor Cousland's careful tutelage on how to disable the gag reflex seemed to avail Elissa nothing when she attempted to use her small, stiff-bristled brush and the fine mint-imbued powder she'd brought in her pack from in Redcliffe.

As day progressed into evening with her shoulder abominably sore, she detected a faint hint of sulfur on the air. Her first reaction was queasiness at the odor, but it was quickly overridden by joy as she realized what that scent portended.

"I think there is a hot springs nearby!" she announced.

Leliana gave a squeal of delight. "Oh! I haven't been to one in years!"

"Me either," Elissa replied. "There is one in the Coastlands, between Amaranthine and Highever. I've been there a few times and I recognize the smell. We'll see if we can't locate the spring and make camp near it. With any luck, there will be a pool fit for bathing."

Finding the spring turned out to be a simple matter of following their noses. It was located in a
sheltered glade, closed in on one side by a high stone bluff. To the glee of just about everyone, there was a wide, shallow pool perfect for soaking. The party quickly made camp at a nearby freshwater stream and once supper was eaten, Wynne and Leliana and Elissa claimed feminine prerogative and secured first access to the springs for themselves.

The pleasure of the steaming water was sublime. It warmed them after so many long days of traveling in the cold. It soothed Elissa's aches, but as Leliana effused about the pleasures of the Empirial Baths at Val Royeaux, Elissa once again realized she was missing her mother.

Her first trip to the Coastland springs had been years ago in the company of her mother, in celebration of her ascent to womanhood shortly before her twelfth birthday. There, as the hot water had worked its magic upon the young Elissa's cramps and discomfort, Eleanor had gifted her with her own treasured copy of *The Art of Passionate Love* and had explained to Elissa what the changes she was experiencing presaged, what marvelous feats her woman's body would someday accomplish, and the pleasures it could afford. That night, in the soft bed in her room at the inn near the springs, her body relaxed and languid from the hot water, Elissa had replayed her mother's words in her mind. That night, for the first time, her hands had begun to explore her body and discover its secrets.

"Are you all right, my friend?" Leliana asked in concern, and Elissa opened her eyes to realize she'd half-dosed while the other women had talked. Wynne was now wading out of the pool, claiming weariness.

"Yes," Elissa said softly, letting the mineral-rich water float her. "It's just nice to have a while without everything aching at intervals."

"Ah. I noticed as you were getting into the pool that you are starting to show your condition a little."

"Really?"

"Yes, but just a very little. The tiniest bump, really. Still, it will not be long, no?"

"I suppose not," Elissa sighed. "One wonders how I'll manage to fit into my armor."

"Oh, do not sound so glum about it. I find women with child quite beautiful. And I'm sure Alistair will agree..."

"I beg your pardon?" Elissa found herself sitting up straighter, becoming more alert. "Just when did this conversation become about Alistair?"

Leliana looked surprised. "I thought that after what he did for you in the tower, the two of you might be growing closer, no? He no longer seems as uncomfortable with you as he did after that night in Redcliffe, at least."

"What he did in the tower... was that your idea?"

"No, not at all," the bard denied. "When it became apparent that you were having difficulty, he insisted we must find a way to help. When I told him that I could think of nothing else other than to somehow arouse you, he told me my bow would be more useful if the demons needed to be stopped quickly than would his sword, and stepped in. I did advise him to remove his shirt, thinking you might need the touch of skin, but other than that, it was all his doing, you see? And quite romantic, yes?"

"I don't think 'romantic' is exactly the word to apply to those circumstances," Elissa muttered uncomfortably, knowing she lied. Indeed, while she could hardly imagine worse circumstances
under which to share her first kiss with a man for whom she was developing such improbable feelings, it had still moved something within her.

"Ah, but you did not see the look on his face as he carried you from the room!" Leliana gave a theatrical swoon.

"Oh, Maker, Leliana! Please. I cannot possibly endure any matchmaking at this time."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Leliana looked surprised. "I thought you were interested in Alistair. Was I mistaken?"

"Well, no, not entirely. But the matter is much more complicated than that."

"Ah, because of the baby's father? You are still mourning him, no?"

"Well, I..."

Elissa was rescued by the need to answer by the sudden intrusion of Alistair into the clearing that housed the pool. She canted an eyebrow at him as he stammered an explanation. "It's getting late," he shrugged. "If we want to break camp at daybreak and still get a decent night's sleep, we can't wait much longer, so Zevran has declared he's coming whether or not you two are done. I thought I'd give you a bit of warning."

With a reluctant sigh, Leliana began to wade from the pool. "It's time for me to retire anyway. Good night, Elissa, Alistair."

"Good night, Leliana," Elissa murmured, then gave Alistair a stubborn glower while studiously looked in any direction other than where Leliana was dressing with soft Orlesian curses about the frigid air. "If you want to use the pool, feel free. You'll just have to resign yourself to my presence because I have no intention of leaving just yet."

"Oh. All right then." She closed her eyes and drifted for a long moment, but a soft splashing disturbed her and she opened them a crack to see him wading into the pool in his smallclothes. Laughing softly, she wondered just how long it would take them to dry, since they'd likely end up frozen solid in his pack after he removed them.

Suddenly Elissa became keenly aware of the seductive situation. The languid warmth of the water, the lack of clothing. Alistair, sitting there across from her looking excruciatingly shy and so damnably fuckable all at the same time. She had to grit her teeth against a sudden pang of arousal, a nearly undeniable impulse to wade across to him and slide her body against his in the water. To feel him grow hard and eager under those smallclothes as she explored his mouth in a way she'd not been able to do before.

The core of desire that had been dormant since that day in the Circle Tower was now voraciously awake, and all Elissa could do was curse its timing. She closed her eyes, forcing her mind to focus on the relaxation of the water, rather than its more erotic properties.

Alistair cleared his throat and asked, "Um... When I came into the clearing, did I hear correctly? Was Leliana asking you about the, uh, father?"

Elissa gave a quiet snort. How long had he been waiting for the opportunity to bring that up? "Yes, Alistair. She was."

"She said you were mourning him. Was he from Highever, then?"
"No, he wasn't from Highever," she said slowly, sighing in resignation. She looked at him again as he studied her carefully from far across the pool. "He was lost at Ostagar."

"Oh, that's right, you said you...." A frown touched Alistair's brow for a moment, and then his eyes widened and a delighted smile began to curve his lips. Elissa could almost read his thoughts.

"No, Alistair," she said gently. "No. It was not Duncan."

"Oh." His crestfallen expression did nothing to ease her conscience at dashing his hopes. "But you said you and he--"

"Yes, we did."

"And that you were--"

"A virgin until we reached Ostagar, yes."

"Then--?"

Elissa closed her eyes again, too relaxed by the water to muster much frustration at the necessity of explaining. "Do you really want the details?"

"No, not really, but... Oh, blast it! Yes, all right? Yes, I do. Maker's breath! You were only at Ostagar for a few days!"

The undercurrent of judgment in his words irritated Elissa and provoked her to be cruelly specific. "It was not Duncan who had my virginity, or at least not my maidenhead. I did not wish to conceive Duncan's child, so I did not allow him to release his seed near my womb. I took him in my mouth, or in my ass, or even on my breasts, but never there." Her chin lifted defiantly. "Is that what you wished to know?"

Alistair shook his head in disgust, squirming uncomfortably. "I had to ask...." he sighed. "All right, I'm sorry. My tone was uncalled for. I'm just... I'm trying to understand. There was someone else at Ostagar?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't mind conceiving his child?"

"He intended to marry me."

"You were... engaged?" Alistair asked, aghast.

"Not formally, no, but it was to have been formalized after the darkspawn had been defeated. Clearly he... never had that chance."

"And even though you were practically engaged, you still slept with Duncan?"

There it was again. That slight undertone of condemnation. Elissa bristled once more, and retaliated with the weapon she had at her disposal, using his prudery against him. "If you must know, things progressed... precipitously... the night I lost my virginity. My needs were unfulfilled, and I went to Duncan to remedy that situation, which he did. Quite admirably, I must say."

"Oh, Maker's blood!" Alistair cursed. He squirmed again, and Elissa took some malicious satisfaction in knowing he was likely fair to bursting out of his smallclothes beneath the water. "I'm not trying to be an ass about this, really I'm not, but...."
"For not trying you've succeeded remarkably well," she answered rigidly, then sighed, letting the water soothe away her tension once more. The rare and unexpected pleasure of the hot springs was too wonderful an opportunity to waste making herself and Alistair angry. "I'm sorry, Alistair. I don't want to quarrel with you, I really don't. I realize that who I am, what I do, is unexpected for you. My attitudes and behavior are... unconventional even by a fairly liberal accounting, and your expectations with regards to sexual behavior are--really through no fault of your own--far from liberal. But I won't be judged by you, Alistair."

"I'm... trying. I am. I want to understand." Alistair fell silent, glancing awkwardly away. Finally he drew a deep breath, and asked, "Did Duncan know?"

"That I was to be married?" At Alistair's grim nod, she answered, "Yes. Duncan knew everything, long before we left Highever. I went to Ostagar with the intention of finding the man I wished to marry, the man my parents had planned for me to marry, and seducing him until he proposed to me. Duncan was aware of this and complicit in the scheme. He felt the political connection made by such an alliance would benefit the Grey Wardens. It's why I arrived at Ostagar a virgin in the first place, otherwise it's virtually certain Duncan would have had my maidenhead back in Highever, or at the very least along the road to Ostagar."

Alistair looked unhappy about that, and Elissa found she could almost pity him. It was one thing to condemn her, whom he hardly knew. But it was quite another to find fault with his hero and mentor. Perhaps Duncan's complicity would help assuage Alistair's qualms and help him find his own acceptance.

"I thought the Grey Wardens were supposed to be a politically neutral force," Alistair said finally, searching for a topic less fraught with tension.

"Duncan wasn't naive enough to believe that to be a realistic possibility," Elissa answered. "Oh, he mentioned that that was the mandate from Weisshaupt when the Wardens were reinstated here in Ferelden, to avoid any chance of another banishment, but it was a ridiculous goal. The Wardens cannot possibly be politically neutral. They are too dependent on the nobility to provide tithes and recruits, and that means playing at politics, forming strategic alliances with the most powerful nobles. Neutrality was never any sort of achievable option. The best he could possibly hope for was to minimize hostility, convert those who might be adversaries into allies, and engender as much goodwill as possible. Which was why recruiting me was so advantageous. And had I made the marriage I intended to make, well, the possibilities would have been endless."

"I notice you refuse to name the man you meant to marry," Alistair observed.

"You're right."

"You really have no intention of ever telling me who the father of your baby was, do you?"

"Quite the opposite. I have no doubt you will learn everything in time. But I really don't want to have that discussion tonight, especially since we're trying so hard to be polite."

"Oh."

"Ah, what have we here?" Zevran's voice rang through the steamy air surrounding the pool. "You see, Alistair? I told you this selfish minx would not be finished yet. Well, if she will not be considerate and vacate the pool, we shall simply have to claim it for ourselves!"

Elissa gave him a narrow look. "I'm. Not. Going. Anywhere. You will have to drag my sleeping form from this pool tomorrow at daybreak. I haven't been this warm or comfortable in months."
"Ah, now that presents all kinds of interesting possibilities!" he declared. Before Alistair could react to his presence, Zevran had stripped to his skin and waded into the pool, seating himself halfway between Alistair and Elissa, barely far enough away from either to not be considered intrusive.

"This is the way I prefer it, personally," Zevran announced with a playful leer at Elissa. "No silly little games of modesty, hiding the women from the men! It is foolish, is it not?"

Elissa closed her eyes again, unconcerned. "Well, at this point everyone else in the party has seen me in the skin the Maker gave me, so it hardly seems to matter."

"Oh? And just what naughty games have I been missing, I wonder, joining your merry band so late?" Zevran's speculative gaze passed Alistair over, who bolted upright as though he'd been stung. He quickly began wading from the pool.

"I think I've had enough soaking," he announced, scurrying for his clothes in the frigid air, taking pains not to let them see what was surely lurking under his smallclothes. "Goodnight see you in the morning."

Elissa couldn't help but smile, shaking her head as Alistair pulled his clothing on over his wet smallclothes. "Alistair," she called softly before he left the clearing. "Please don't forget to lay your clothes out by the fire tonight, or else you're going to be desperately uncomfortable tomorrow."

"Right," he nodded, rushing off.

Which left her alone and quite naked with Zevran. Elissa realized the low hum of arousal that had begun to pulse in her belly with Alistair's presence hadn't left when he did.

"And here we are, alone at last, my beautiful Warden," Zevran sighed.

"So it would seem," she murmured, feeling her cunt throb in response to his implication. A bead of sweat slid down her face, despite the chill of the air outside the water.

"I have had the feeling you have been avoiding me," he remarked, his tone slightly chiding.

"That's not entirely accurate. I've merely been delaying the inevitable for a while."

"I do not understand your meaning."

"Don't be coy, Zevran, it doesn't suit you. The sun will set, the moon will rise, the tide will turn, and you and I will fuck." She met his gaze levelly, relieved to find the awkwardness engendered by the odd reluctance she'd been experiencing in abeyance. There now. It was out there.

"If it is so inevitable, then why have you been avoiding it?" he asked, drawing nearer with an almost feline, predatory grace.

"Because what I don't need right now are complications." Despite her words, she went willingly to his arms, letting the water support her as she wrapped her legs around his waist and slid her arms around his shoulders. His lips found her sweat-and-steam moistened neck with unerring expertise and Elissa writhed against him as he began to nibble the tendon between her neck and shoulder, wiping away the damp tendrils of hair that clung to her skin there.

"Then by all means, let us not complicate matters," he purred against her neck. With no foreplay to speak of, she was tight, sliding down onto him inch by slow, stretching inch.
It felt marvelous.

Only when he was deeply seated within her did Elissa seek his lips, her tongue gliding over his as he sucked gently upon it. It was almost a circle, she thought in delicious, drowsy languor, her tongue fucking his mouth while his cock fucked her. Lazily she wriggled her hips and he nudged in just a tiny bit deeper, drawing a pleased whimper from her.

She leaned back, laying on the surface of the water and letting it buoy her as Zevran held her waist in his hands, pulling her in to meet the surging of his hips while she floated almost horizontally, the waves they were generating splashing and rocking her, making her breasts bounce and slide on her chest.

"Ah, the sight you make," he sighed softly, watching her intently. "Surely no siren ever gliding along the waves looked so seductive."

Elissa's eyes closed, and she allowed herself to float, allowed Zevran to do all the work, supporting her and conducting their slow, leisurely fucking. Her first orgasm rolled over her gently, like the waves of the water itself. She rode it, not straining or rushing, not seeking more but simply letting it soothe her. Once it had passed, she opened her eyes and saw that Zevran had finally stopped looking at her. His head was tipped back so that his long platinum hair brushed the water, his eyes clenched shut, his jaw tense. Drawing it out, holding back.

She didn't want him controlled, didn't want him withholding. She simply wanted him to find release in her as freely and frankly as their fucking had begun. No pressure. No expectations. Just giving and receiving pleasure.

She grabbed his arms, pulled herself up, and moved off him, away from his body.

"Surely we're not done," he asked teasingly.

"Shh," she whispered, kissing him. She pushed him back until he sat with the high, steep stone wall at his back. Here the water was up to his shoulders, but he sank down willingly into it, his hands coming to rest on her hips as she turned her back to him and straddled his lap. She sank down once more, taking his cock in hand and guiding him into her. Using her knees, she began to ride his cock, pushing up and thrusting back down again. She leaned back against his chest and rolled her hips, moaning when his cock stroked that spot at the front of her sheath, and then she did it again when his hands came up and cupped her breasts where they floated on the surface of the water.

His lips found her shoulder, kissing and sucking his way up to the curve of her neck. She turned her head and her mouth sought his; not a neat, closed kiss, but open and sloppy from the awkward angle, tongues jabbing and thrusting and licking at the corners of their mouths. Elissa arched and mewled when his fingers lightly pinched her nipple and began to ride him harder, tearing her mouth from his to gain the leverage she needed to push herself up once again.

She felt and heard the approach of his climax; the low growl in his throat, the tightening of his hands upon her, one on her breast, the other on her hip, the swelling of his cock. Her hand slid down her belly, past the tiny bump Leliana had detected just above her curls, and her fingers moved in rapid circles over her slick clit. She arrived just a moment before he did, gasping and shuddering, her mouth open and her head thrown back in the heavy, steam-laden air. The release of his seed was just another wave of warmth, lost in the heat of the water.

"Ah, I thank you, my beautiful Warden," he sighed when she left his softening cock slip out of her to lean back against him. His arms encircled her waist and he pulled her back against his chest while they relaxed in the water. "I have not had a tension reliever like that in quite some time."
"Yes," she said, closing her eyes, feeling sleepy and replete. "Just this for now, nothing more," she had the presence of mind to add. "Pleasure with no complications. Or, stress relief, if you will?"

"You are much of my own mind on the subject, sweet Elissa."

She couldn't help it; she tensed. "Don't call me that," she said shortly, pulling away from him. For some reason it felt very wrong to allow him to call her by one of the endearments Cailan had used. Before her odd moment of tension could spoil the moment, she turned and gave him a sultry smile. "I prefer it when you call me Warden."

"Then it shall be as you wish, my ravishing Warden," he growled, lunging for her.

They finally left the pool when Elissa began to grow lightheaded from the heat of the water, and she dressed drowsily in the frosty air. The camp was quiet when they returned to the circle of tents, everyone asleep except for Sten, who gave a disgruntled snort when they emerged from the trees. Half-asleep already, Elissa stumbled to her tent, and was surprised when Zevran crawled in beside her.

"No complications," he murmured in her ear when she stiffened and would have protested. "I merely prefer sleeping beside another body in the cold of winter. Besides, it makes morning sex much easier."

She was asleep before she could find a flaw in his argument, though she rather regretted her complacency the next day when Alistair, looking stricken, once again refused to meet her eyes.

Perhaps it had been too optimistic to assume sex with Zevran would carry no complications.
"And what brings such a frown to your face, my sweet Warden?" Zevran asked, still lying on his back as he'd been since she had rolled off his body to lay beside him. He flung an arm across his bare, narrow, rippled belly, looking utterly casual about lying there nude, traces of seed drying upon his cock and groin. "Should I be insulted that you are looking so pensive mere moments after I've finished pleasing you?"

"No," Elissa sighed, curled beside the elf in the cramped confines of her tent. Her panting and sweating had subsided and now she was relaxed and drowsy. "Are you acquainted with the Fereldan adage, 'when all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail'?"

"And just what 'hammer' are you referring to?" he asked with a lascivious leer.

"Not yours, mine," she answered, smiling. Then she grew thoughtful again. "I'm rather dreading what new difficulties we may encounter when we're in Denerim. I don't flatter myself that I am a superlative fighter. I have one skill at which I excel. And I hadn't realized until recently just how tired I was getting of using that skill to achieve an end rather than simply enjoying sex for its own sake. I even hear myself saying it all the time. I don't 'have' sex, I 'use' sex. I use it to gain the advantage, to comfort myself when I'm troubled, to create miracles in hopelessly dire situations, to motivate others when their will is flagging..."

"Ahh, yes. Leliana has regaling me with tales of your antics before I joined the party," Zevran chuckled in her ear.

"My point," she continued, refusing to be daunted, "is that somewhere along the way, since my rather tumultuous initiation into sex, and with all that happened in the weeks that followed, I lost sight of the simple joy of being a woman and deriving pleasure from my body. Sex had ceased to be simply about pleasure, and instead had become about achieving a goal, fulfilling a purpose."

"But there are some purposes worth fulfilling," Zevran shrugged. "After all, there are few women, I think, who can claim the ability to bring men through battle merely with the promise of their luscious cunt."

His fingers slipped easily into her, sopping wet as she was with his seed, and Elissa gave a happy moan, feeling that delicious ache indicative of having been well and truly fucked.

"Not merely my cunt," she corrected, and Zevran chuckled.

His finger slid out of her and, slick with his own seed, nuded the entrance to her ass, slowly but deliberately pressing inside. "Yes, I'm certain the other many delights of your delectable body had something to do with it as well."

Torn between carrying her point and submitting to the pleasure of his prodding fingers, Elissa...
groaned softly and said wryly, "I was actually speaking of the martial prowess the rest of the party contributed. I rather think they may have had something to do with our victory; I merely got the adulation with my... unconventional means of motivating the militia."

"Hmm, are you sure?" he asked. "I think I should single-handedly defeat an army of darkspawn at gates of the Black City itself for the chance to bury myself inside this ass."

He pressed a second finger into her, spreading them wide, stretching her and Elissa bumped back toward him greedily, demanding more with pushes of her ass against his hand. She gave in and allowed herself to be distracted.

"You need hardly take such dramatic measures," she gasped when he began to fuck her ass with his fingers, gathering more seed from her cunt for lubrication. She could feel his cock against her leg, stirring to life and half-hard already.

Zevran withdrew his fingers and pushed her shoulder until she was on her back on the bedroll, shimmying down until his shoulders and head were between her thighs. Grabbing her legs, he pushed them up and back, her knees against her chest, spreading her to his mouth and gaze. He gave a low purr of pleasure as he nuzzled her cunt. Elissa shuddered, knowing it was his own seed he tasted on her folds.

"You know," he pondered, lapping at her cunt like a cat tasting cream, "if you don't wish to use sex to win your battles, you could simply kill your enemies. It's crude, but I've found it to be quite effective at times."

"But killing is so... sloppy," she mewed plaintively, as his tongue delved into her channel, wriggling and squirming with a life of its own until she panted and gasped, clenching her fists in his platinum hair. She thrust with her hips, humping against his face, smearing him with their combined fluids. She felt her body began to shiver as she trembled on the brink of another mind-blowing orgasm. "I might get blood everywhere."

"Ah, when you are right, you're right," he sighed, his voice muffled in her cunt even as his shoulders shook with humor. "Clearly sex is the tidier choice of the two."

His tongue slid once across her anus and then thrust hard inside that clenching ring of muscle he'd worked to loosen and moisten with his seed. He began tonguing her vigorously, alternating between fucking her ass with deep thrusts of his tongue and soothing her opening with long, firm strokes. Elissa was torn between laughter and pleasure, but it was the pressure of his thumb on her clit that decided the matter.

As she came, gnashing her teeth and growling, he rolled her up onto her side and slid up to lie behind her, pulling her upper leg back over his hip. Immediately, he thrust into her cunt, creating another wave of spasms just as the first had begun to abate. Before the second climax had passed, he was pushing his now-wet cock inside her ass, finding little need for caution. He was a master of his art, confident of the preparation he'd performed, and before her shuddering subsided, he was seated deeply within her and beginning to move, and she was flying apart yet again.

Sex with Zevran, Elissa decided much later, before she fell into an exhausted sleep, was therapeutic on any number of levels.
Zevran issues an intriguing challenge to Elissa. Alistair's encounter with his sister has incendiary results.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Zevran, Elissa/Alistair (UST)

"My dear Warden, I have a proposition for you."

"Oh, this should be interesting," Elissa grinned as Zevran fell into step beside her as they approached the gates of Denerim.

"I have been thinking about what you said last night, about your--hammer, I believe you called it? I have a game I should like to play with you."

The naughty twinkle in his eyes and the seductive lilt of his voice intrigued her far more than his innocuous words. "I'm listening."

"For the entirety of our visit to Denerim, turn yourself over to me. I shall control what you do with that delectable body of yours. The decisions of who you have sex with will be entirely up to me."

Suddenly Elissa found herself having to concentrate much more carefully on the process of putting one foot before the other, lest she stumble. Zevran, damn him, merely strolled casually along, looking jaunty and amused.

"To what purpose?" she managed to say, though her voice had grown husky.

"To make sure that whoever you fuck, it will be fun for you," his voice dropped, and his eyes spoke of wicked things as he gave her a long, slow perusal. "You are not to worry, I shall be exacting in my standards. I cannot necessarily promise pleasure for pleasure's sake alone, of course. There may be times when it is necessary to combine business with pleasure, but I will make certain there is indeed enough pleasure to make the business worthwhile. And even then, you will not be fucking because you have decided it is necessary. You will be fucking because I have commanded it of you. You will fuck who I tell you to fuck, when I tell you to fuck them."

Elissa had to close her eyes against a pang of arousal so intense it was nearly painful. It was nearly an orgasm in its own right, charging through her body without her having ever been touched. A shudder ran through her as she stood still, drawing several long, deep breaths before she could resume walking.

"Maker's balls, Zevran!" she hissed. "Must you spring this on me when we're out on the open road and I can't just throw you down and fuck you senseless?"

He gave her a complacent smile. "Anticipation is a delicious appetizer, is it not?"

"And what if I decide I don't like the game?"

"Then all you need do is declare the game to be over, and all shall be as it was."
Elissa drew another long breath. This was insane. There was no telling what sort of situations Zevran would get her into. She ought to refuse...

"Very well, I accept," she heard herself saying instead.

"Ah marvelous!" Zevran chuckled. "And I think I know just the place to begin."

"No," Elissa shook her head. "First things first. Alistair has requested that we stop in the Marketplace so that he can attend to some personal business. After that, however... I'm all yours."

"As you wish. While you attend to Alistair's personal business, I will begin making preparations."

It had taken many days after she first took Zevran into her tent, but slowly Alistair stopped avoiding her and staring at her with hurt eyes. Occasionally she'd overhear him asking Leliana or Wynne for advice, but for the most part he hadn't spoken to Elissa after that night at the hot springs until they were only a few days from Denerim.

She'd been thrilled when he'd told her he had a sister, and not just because it meant Duncan's death hadn't left him as utterly bereft of family as she had initially assumed, but because it meant he hadn't completely dismissed her.

She wondered how he would react to the knowledge that he was going to be an uncle and thought, for the first time, perhaps his reaction to learning that it was Cailan's baby she carried wouldn't be entirely angry. He so desperately seemed to long for somewhere to belong and someone to belong to, someone to claim as his own. Elissa had known that joy, once upon a time, in the open love of her--admittedly unconventional--family, and she missed it every day. To have never had it at all... her heart broke for Alistair.

He was nervous as he knocked upon the door to Goldanna's house, but Elissa was practically giddy with anticipation and vicarious joy on his behalf.

It didn't last long.

Mere minutes later they were back out in the street, and that hurt look was back in Alistair's eyes, and he was trying to make jokes.

"Alistair...." she fumbled for words, reaching out to lay her hand alongside his face, stroking his cheek. Half of her wanted to soothe and placate him, tell him how wrong Goldanna was, how he didn't need family like that when he had her. The other half wanted to do something, anything to make sure he never let himself be hurt this way again.

"Everyone is out for themselves, Alistair," she heard herself saying, vaguely appalled at her own callousness. "You need to learn that."

He hung his head for a moment, then looked back up at her.

"Do what I feel like doing and hang them all, huh?" he asked, something dangerous sparking in his eyes.

"Do what you need to do to take care of yourself and hang them all," Elissa corrected him.

"Is that why you have Zevran in your tent every night?"

Her chin lifted. "Yes." The word came out cold, oddly clipped. She supposed she could have
elaborated, told him why she needed Zevran, but that would come too close to defending herself. If he was ready to understand and accept her, he'd know why she was turning to Zevran. He wouldn't need an explanation.

She didn't realize Alistair had been advancing on her, or that she'd been backing slowly away, until she felt the rough, dirty wooden wall of Goldanna's house bump against her back.

Before she even had time to comprehend what was happening or how he had suddenly become the aggressor, his mouth was covering hers. No shyness or hesitation, no request for permission. He took the kiss from her, hungrily, unrelentingly, demanding her mouth open to the sweep of his tongue.

She wasn't sure she'd ever known a kiss could feel this way, that it could shake her to her very marrow. Desire that went far beyond sex flooded her body; the need to be closer to him, to be enveloped by him, to lose herself in him.

Her arms came around his neck, her hands stroking what little skin she could find exposed by his armor. It had nothing to do with the wish to advance toward sex and everything to do with the fact that she just needed to touch him, to feel him. She yearned closer to him, molding her body around his everywhere he pressed her against the wall of that shack, whimpering when his thigh pressed between hers.

Alistair wrenched his mouth away and rested his forehead on her shoulder, trembling, and she understood that he was shaken, too.

"I think about you every moment," he whispered, the words tumbling from his mouth in a breathless rush. "I hear you and Zevran and I touch myself, the way you told me to, trying to learn what will please you... Sometimes I think I'm going mad with wanting you."

His head came up and his eyes were hot and desperate. "Don't take Zevran into your tent," he pleaded, his voice low and growling. "Take me."

She wanted to. Maker how she wanted to! But she had to ask, had to be sure....

"Is this just because you want comfort?" Elissa whispered as she felt his lips against her neck. "Or do you really think you're ready to accept all that I am?"

He stilled immediately, another shudder running through him. Frozen with indecision he waited there, breathing by her ear. Slowly he pulled away.

"No," he said, not meeting her eyes. "You're right, I'm not."

Elissa practically moaned with despair. The warmth of his body retreated.

"I... I'm going to go now. I'll meet you outside the city later. It's probably better that I'm not near you at that moment."

He turned and walked away. He left her there, slumped and dazed against the wall, trembling and breathless and aching with need.

She didn't know whether she wanted to weep or scream with frustration.

She'd barely managed to compose herself when she rendezvoused with Zevran at the appointed time and place.

"Ah, my lovely Warden!" the Antivan exclaimed flamboyantly. "Are you ready to begin our game?"
Everything in her was a dangerous mass of longing, aching to be filled. She wanted to be fucked and fucked hard. Anything to make her forget the soul-shattering power of Alistair's kiss.

Suddenly nothing sounded like a better idea than Zevran's little game.

"More than ready," she snapped. "Let's go."
"So I take it our Alistair's personal business did not go as well as planned?" Zevran prompted as they crossed the wide Denerim marketplace. Elissa had been there many times; in the summer it would have been dusty and sweltering and would smell of sweaty bodies and rotting garbage. Now, in the early winter, it was full of mud. Few vendors withstood the cold and hawked their wares, and the only odors were those of roasting meat from the inns and taverns lining the square.

"Whatever would make you say that?" Elissa asked in a brittle tone. Ostensibly, she was supposed to be following Zevran as he guided her to their destination, but her long, rapid, irritated strides meant he had to work hard to stay ahead of her.

"Well, your foul mood might be a bit of a clue," he answered. "If you have no desire to do as we proposed to do, by all means let me know and we shall make other plans."

"Zevran," she rounded on him angrily, then all at once her rage fled and she sighed. "I swear by the Maker I have never spoken more truly than when I say I am desperate to undertake this challenge of yours."

"Excellent!" he rubbed his hands together in delight. "However, in light of our bad start, I think perhaps a change of plans are in order."

"Oh?"

"Leliana and Wynne have gone ahead to try to ascertain the location of Brother Genitivi, so that we might get that business out of the way first. We figured a devout Chantry sister such as herself should have little trouble wheeling out the information we need. We were supposed to meet them at an inn for dinner and to find out what she had learned but I think perhaps you should leave word with the innkeeper to have them wait for us while we attend to some other affairs."

"And what of Morrigan and Sten?"

"They will be working on re-provisioning us, depending on where our journey next takes us," he answered, giving her a sly wink. "It was decided that between two such intimidating souls, we can be sure of getting the best prices from the merchants, yes?"

"That's good. Funds are a bit scarce right now."

"Ah, which brings me to my purpose. I was on my way to make some inquiries as to where we might acquire some odd jobs to perform while we are here in Denerim when I bumped into an... old acquaintance. He was very interested to learn of the company I am keeping these days and requested to be introduced to you," Zevran looked troubled. "I had planned to refuse, but now I think it would be better to accept the invitation."
"Why had you planned to refuse?"

"The man in question... he can be a very advantageous friend, or an extremely lethal enemy. It would be much better not to know him at all than to know him and wind up on his bad side."

"Well, then, I guess I shall just have to be particularly charming, won't I?"

Zevran gave a particularly knowing laugh, and Elissa felt herself respond to it, her body still strung taut with arousal. "Ah, my dear Warden. You could charm the very birds from the trees. I have no doubt he shall be suitably impressed."

Elissa had not spent much time in the Gnawed Noble tavern during her upbringing, but she'd been there once or twice. Her first impression was that the quality of the clientele was going down, for the common room was full of common tars. Naval mercenaries, by the looks of them. It seemed that Howe or Loghain or both were gathering mercenary forces to fight the nobles who were resisting Loghain's usurpation of the regency. The realization incensed Elissa, that Loghain was so paranoid and short-sighted that he'd tear the land apart with a civil war while it was steadily consumed by the Blight.

Her anger had almost succeeded in destroying her mood to the point where she was ready to call off Zevran's game when one of the tars grabbed her, somehow mistaking her for a strumpet despite her leather armor. He identified himself as one of the Crimson Oars and began demanding her price. Zevran quickly stepped in and extricated her from the seaman's groping hands while managing not to give enough offense to trigger a confrontation, but those rough hands pushing up under the pleated kilt of her leather, bruising her thighs where they were bare between the tops of her boots and her armor, ignited something within Elissa, leaving her feeling just restless and hungry enough to consider humoring the mercenary.

When her eyes met Zevran's again, he gave a throaty chuckle. "Ah, so that's how it is," he murmured. "We shall have to see what we can find for you."

He led her to the quiet and elegantly appointed rooms at the back of the tavern and rapped on the door to one with the hilt of his dagger, in an odd, syncopated cadence. An accented voice called for them to enter, and Zevran opened the door, gesturing Elissa inside.

"My lovely Warden," Zevran said, giving the man inside a slight bow. "Allow me to introduce Master Ignacio. Master Ignacio, this is the Grey Warden I spoke of."

"Ah, yes, the one who bested you," came the reply in a soft, lilting accent slightly different from Zevran's own. The man himself was attractive in a very unassuming way, and yet there was something about the way he bore himself that said he was dangerous. "An unfortunate bit of business, that, Zevran, for it means you can never come back to us."

"Another Antivan Crow?" Elissa asked Zevran, feeling herself tense and casting a frantic gaze toward the door, which was on the other side of Zevran. Her breath quickened as she realized that if she had misjudged Zevran's sincerity, here is where she would pay for it with her life.

"Yes, but you have nothing to fear from him," Zevran said quickly. "He does not hold the contract on your life."

"And what about you?" she asked. "I thought you would be killed immediately if the Crows got hold of you."

"Not necessarily immediately. It's quite likely I would be tortured first." At her look, Zevran
explained, "Master Ignacio here is a unique person. He has acquired enough power within the Crows to be something of his own man. Therefore, if he decides to pretend that a certain erstwhile Antivan Crow in his presence is not, in fact, under an order of death, then very few would question him on the point. And fortunately for me, Master Ignacio has always had a bit of a soft spot where I am concerned."

Elissa's brow arched. "A former lover?"

"Occasionally," Zevran smiled. "The material point, however, is that if Master Ignacio also wished to insure that no other masters within the Crows accepted a contract on a certain person, he has that ability as well."

"I see," Elissa hummed appreciatively. "Now that would be a favor for which I would be extremely... grateful."

"Ah, and I would do much to secure the... gratitude... of a young lady as beautiful as yourself," Ignacio said in that delicious accent. "But a favor of this magnitude does not come free, nor merely at the cost of simple... gratitude."

"Then what would such a favor cost me?"

"Much less than you might think," he replied smoothly, walking toward her. Elissa felt her heartbeat trip and lurch as he approached, more certain than ever that despite his mild appearance, this was a deeply dangerous man. He was all propriety, and yet the presence with which he filled the room spoke of something else entirely. She could see it in Zevran's deference that the elf felt it as well. Ignacio used two fingers to lift her chin, turning her head from one side to the other and studying her features. "Exquisite. Ah, yes. I think I shall enjoy your gratitude quite a lot. But in the meantime, there are other favors I desire more. I understand you are short of coin. The arrangement may prove quite profitable for us both."

"What sort of favors?" Elissa murmured, feeling something in her softening, yielding to that presence.

"Ah, first things first. There is the matter of initiation." He released her chin and walked calmly away. If her nearness had affected him anywhere near as much as his had affected her, he did not show it.

"Initiation?" she asked, puzzled. "Zevran?"

"A Crow rite of passage, I am afraid," Zevran said with a troubled frown. "Before the Crows give up their secrets, they like to guarantee that the recipient is strong enough to be trusted with them. So the initiate undergoes a trial."

"What sort of trial?"

"To put it bluntly, torture. Fortunately, Master Ignacio keeps the tradition in his own unique way. I, myself, was stretched on the rack for several hours before Master Ignacio ordered me released, for he decided I looked much better with my limbs not all pulled from their sockets." At this, Zevran gave his characteristic good-natured leer. "I will not say I did not suffer in the hours I spent under his care, but I awoke the next morning considering it time well spent."

"As... intriguing as such a proposition sounds, you will forgive me for being cautious," Elissa said, forcing down the surge of desire the notion evoked. "Considering the contract out on me, it would be extremely foolhardy for me to place myself in such a vulnerable position with a member of the
Antivan Crows. Forgive me, Zevran, but not even one for whom you are vouching."

"Canny as well as beautiful," Ignacio said warmly. "Will you be worth the trouble? Yes, I think you might. Very well, I shall advance the first gesture of good faith. In this trunk beside me you will find some garments and a scroll. The garments are of no concern at the moment, but be assured you will wear them for me later, when you return. The scroll you will read now. You may learn about someone... interesting."

That was putting it mildly. Elissa perused the contents of the letter and her eyes widened in surprise, and then narrowed in anger. "Interesting, indeed," she gritted.

"If you find out something has happened to him, something... unfortunate... if we happen to talk again, I give you money for... letting me know. You don't like what's on the scroll, don't do anything. Maybe he has an accident and someone else tells me all about it." His eyes were challenging as they met hers, and Elissa smiled coldly.

"Oh no," she purred. "I'll be more than happy to see what... information I can acquire on this... interesting person. And in exchange, you will call off the contract on me and my fellow Grey Warden?"

"That I cannot do," Ignacio replied, frowning. "One master already has a contract on you. Even my considerable influence cannot undo that. But, if you help us out, maybe if that master asks for help, he'll just get silence, yes?"

"And what of this other matter? This... initiation?"

"When you return we shall discuss these matters further. Perhaps you will be more trusting then?"

"I look forward to it, Master Ignacio," Following Zevran's lead, she tipped her head in a deferential bow and wondered at herself for it. It was not usually her habit to bow to anyone, and yet....

...Everything about the Crow Master made her want to obey him, please him. That presence, that strange magnetism, called out to her, demanding she yield before him... and she wanted to.

Elissa was still trying to puzzle out what power it was Master Ignacio held when she and Zevran stepped out of the inn and into the marketplace. "Ah, you feel it, too, don't you, my sweet Warden?" Zevran asked with a sigh, shaking himself as though waking from a dream.

"What is it?" Elissa asked.

"I do not know. I can play at games of power and dominance, and play quite well, but Master Ignacio does not need to play."

"Is that the intent of your game, then? To let him dominate me in your stead?" she asked, strangely disappointed.

"Oh no," Zevran gave a wicked laugh. "If I have my way, submitting for Master Ignacio will be but one play in the game. I have many other treats in store for you."

"Such as?"

"There. That one. The city guard. Look at him, so harried and stern and gruff. Wouldn't it be delightfully naughty if you could bring a smile to his lips and get him to ignore his duty for a while?"

"Hmm, I suppose," she shrugged, still too preoccupied by her meeting with Ignacio to muster much...
interest.

Zevran drew her attention completely and abruptly back to himself by suddenly threading his fingers through her hair at the scalp and seizing her, pushing her against a nearby fence until she was pinned with his body against hers, his mouth just a breath away from her lips.

"There is no 'I suppose,' little Warden," he said in a low growl. "Do not mistake the fact that I do not have Master Ignacio's natural ability for a weakness of resolve. While we are here, your body belongs to me, that was our agreement, no? I am telling you, you will fuck that city guard, because I command it of you. No," he paused, his expression thoughtful. "On second thought, this complacency of yours must be punished, I think. You will use only your mouth on the guard, so that you will not find your release until I say it should be so."

Elissa gasped and shuddered, suddenly wetter than a lake of Andraste's tears. Zevran was right; he did play this game well. She nodded breathlessly and he released her hair, stepping back, once more mild of manner. Drawing a deep breath, Elissa straightened her shoulders, pushing her breasts up and out, and angled across the marketplace square toward the guard.
Denerim, Part 3: The Pirate

Chapter Summary

Elissa and Zevran undertake a few jobs in Denerim and encounter an old acquaintance of Zevran's.

Chapter Pairing: Elissa/Zevran, Elissa/Zevran/Isabela

Sergeant Kylon, Elissa discovered, was a very likable man.

His high opinion of the Grey Wardens, and low, scathing opinions about the job he'd been asked to do and the young noble bastards which whom he was supposed to do it, made her laugh. What it did not do, however, was give her an opening to proposition him. At least not yet.

Zevran was frowning when she strolled casually away from the sergeant, making sure to swing her hips for his benefit.

"What is this, Warden? Did I somehow miss you and the guard slipping away to someplace more secluded? His trousers are still fastened, and you do not lick your lips. Are you disobeying my commands already?"

"Not at all," she smiled cheekily. "The sergeant may prove more amenable to my charms once some of his concerns have been dealt with. He really is a desperately put-upon man. To that end, I managed to pick up another job, a paying job, one which takes us to the exact same location as the 'person of interest' I learned of from Master Ignacio's scroll. I suspect that when I return, he'll be much more willing to be led around the corner."

As she spoke, she led him along the street as it bent past the chantry, toward the bridge leading across the Drakon River. She was too intent on deciding whether or not they should take the time to gather Sten and Morrigan when Zevran's hand on her arm stopped her, pulling her off the street and around to the back of the chantry.

Once again, she found herself pressed against a wall.

"Maker's blood, Zevran!" she cursed, "what is it with you and Alistair pushing me against walls today?"

But Zevran stopped her words with a hand between her thighs, tugging at her smallclothes. He ripped them off and tossed them into the tall grasses lining the wall of the building.

"A donation to the chantry," he said dismissively. "I think, Warden, you need a little lesson on the rules of the game."

"What are you--?" he words trailed off when he began unlacing the trousers above his own long leather boots. His erection sprang free, and she reached for it eagerly, grateful for the chance to ease the frustrated buzz that had been plaguing her ever since Alistair had left. But Zevran caught her hands and pinned them beside her head.

"Here. Your hands do not move," he instructed. Grabbing one of her knees, he lifted it up around his hip, the stiff stitching of his leather armor rubbing roughly against her soft inner thigh. And then his cock was prodding at her entrance. With a smooth, effortless motion, Zevran grabbed her beneath
her ass and lifted her the few inches necessary. Her legs went instinctively around his waist and he guided himself into her cunt with a single hard thrust.

"Maker's breath!" she gasped, her eyes snapping shut as her head slammed back against the wall of the chantry. If one of the sisters or templars within heard the noise, they would be certain to come to investigate. In the distance, she would hear some chanter with an annoying voice making an utter muddle of the Chant of Light and then arguing the matter with another sister.

Zevran set a demanding pace, hammering into her, drawing urgent groans and cries from her lips despite her attempts to be quiet. He made no effort to kiss her or stroke her, and with her hands beside her head, her clit was achingly ignored.

"The rules are these: while we are here in this city, your body belongs to me. This means, for all intents and purposes, you are my whore."

His words made her cunt spasm, the tension within her belly painfully, unbearably tight.

"Zevran, please," Elissa moaned.

"Does the whore disobey her pimp? Does she use her own discretion when he tells her 'fuck this man' or 'that one there'? No!" He punctuated the last word with a particularly hard slam of his hips, and Elissa let out a keening cry when it jolted her clit, almost, but not enough to push her over the edge.

"No," he went on, his own voice growing harsh, his breathing ragged. "She uses her mouth, her ass, her sweet--" thrust "--little--" thrust "--cunt, at his command. She does not make judgment calls or await a better opportunity."

"Zevran, I'm...oh, Maker, Zevran, please, I'm going to come..."

"No, Warden," he said almost tenderly. "I am afraid you are not."

Zevran ripped himself away from her, taking his slick, shining cock in hand. With just a few strokes, he spent himself on the wall of the chantry at her feet before she could catch her breath or move. Elissa stared at him in disbelief as he opened his eyes.

"You Maker-forsaken son of a whore!" she breathed, feeling ridiculously near tears.

"This is true," he said mildly. "I am all that and more. And you, dear Warden, will not come until you learn to obey." He reached for her hand where it still rested beside her head as she slumped, aching with unfulfilled arousal, against the wall of the chantry. He brought her fingers to his face, breathing deeply. "And if I detect even the slightest whiff of quim on these lovely fingers, you shall suffer terribly indeed."

Casually he laced up his breeches again and turned, walking away from her, requiring Elissa to scramble to keep up. She was practically limping, her unsatisfied need an actual cramping pain that threatened to double her over for a moment. "What do you think, Warden?" he asked casually.

"Should we retrieve Morrigan and Sten from the marketplace before we continue on our way, or do you think we can handle this job on our own?"

It was on the tip of Elissa's tongue to call the game off, furious and frustrated as she was. She wanted to drag him to the nearest inn and fuck him until daybreak. But something in the challenge of Zevran's eyes halted her. She recalled his promise that it would be fun for her, and decided to wait him out.
"Get them," she answered, attempting to sound cool and unaffected. "For Master Ignacio's job, I don't want to take any chances. Speaking of allies, where did my mabari go?"

"Last I saw him, he was following Leliana. She had promised him food."

"It figures," she snorted. "Very well. Sten and Morrigan it is."

The Pearl was rather lavish, certainly not what Elissa was expecting from a brothel. The whores ranged from demure and tastefully dressed to scantily clad and bawdy, drinking and flirting enthusiastically with the patrons.

Remembering the mistake of the mercenary at the Gnawed Noble, remembering Zevran's own words just an hour earlier, Elissa mused softly, "I've always wondered what it would be like to be a whore."

"My dear Warden," he laughed, "we are all whores. Some of us are just more frank about the currency we accept, yes?"

"Yes, well that is precisely what makes me wonder... to be so open about bartering sex, no motivation or angle more complicated than the need for mere coin."

"And why would this, of all things, intrigue you?"

"It seems it might be liberating, in a way," she answered, frowning. "No need to maneuver or seduce or cajole. A simple transaction, pleasure is had, and it's over."

"Ah, my sweet Warden, you betray your youth with your idealism," he sighed. "For the whore, pleasure is far from guaranteed, especially when the option of refusing no longer exists. The liberty you assume is rarely present."

"True, she nodded. "It's an immaterial point, anyway. Unfortunately being a whore lacks the discretion I require. With enough effort, I can always salvage my reputation from an accusation of making an indiscreet mistake by bedding this person or that. Selling myself, however? Well, there's simply no recovering my reputation if word should get out. Come, let us see about this Paedan fellow before we deal with the mercenaries."

Gaining access to the chamber where Loghain's mercenaries were waiting to capture or kill any Grey Warden supporters proved ridiculously easy. It was a clumsily-laid trap, and Elissa's lips twisted in a sneer as she spoke the password and was bidden to enter.

The mercenaries--the human male described by Ignacio's scroll and an elven woman--were almost easy to dismiss when a third voice, a familiar voice, exclaimed, "Maker's blood, it's her. It's one of the Wardens!"

Her eyes settled upon another man, in the back of the room, his armor emblazoned with Loghain's device. His was a face she would never forget. Something within her went numb, an echo of pain and fear and dread. She shuddered as she remembered clawing, pinching, brutal hands slapping and hitting her, leaving her bleeding and aching and bruised. Her heart thundered furiously in her chest, and the taste of copper flooded her mouth.

The fear paralyzed her for a moment, and then it transformed to rage. She'd beaten him, beaten them all, left him wounded and the rest humiliated. They hadn't broken her, and now here he was for her to take the final measure of the justice she was due.

A cold smile crossed her lips. "Oh, look, it's Loghain's lickspittle lackey from Lothering. Apparently
you managed to deliver my message after all. Is this half-assed setup all for my benefit? I should have known; it reeks of your stupidity. Tell me--did you manage to find a healer, or did you have to endure stitches to repair that little scratch I put on your cock?"

"Slut!" he snarled. His face, which had paled at the first sight of her, now suffused with rage, growing red and mottled. "You'll be shitting blood for the rest of your short life when I'm done with you!"

"That didn't work out quite so well for you last time," she warned sweetly.

"You don't have me naked with my cock out this time, you bitch."

"And you don't have me outnumbered and at your mercy in the middle of a crowd of innocents," she sneered. "You might have to actually prove yourself a man this time around, rather than a sniveling coward who can't rise to the occasion unless he's slapping around an unarmed woman with his goons there to help him rape her."

He lunged at her, his sword in his hand, and the battle was joined. Somewhere on the edge of her consciousness she was aware of Morrigan and Sten and Zevran dispatching the other human and the elf, and then a thunderous crash as two qunari mercenaries burst into the room, but they were of little consequence. Her attention was on the soldier trying to hack her to bits with his sword. Deflecting his blows with her daggers was far from ideal, and there was no possible way to gain the distance to use her bow. She had an instant of fear, of knowing she could not win this fight on her own. Before, she'd managed to catch him at a disadvantage, naked and unarmed and not expecting an attack. She wasn't good enough with her daggers to fight him one-on-one.

Fortunately, she didn't need to. When his sword caught her on the forearm and carved a deep gash, almost immediately she felt the warm, tingling energy of the healing spell Morrigan had taken it upon herself to learn by observing Wynne, knitting the wound and soothing the pain. Zevran slit the throat of the elven woman in an swirling motion, all deadly grace and balance, using his momentum to carry him around in nearly a full spin as he struck the soldier directly on the back of the skull with the hilt of his dagger.

Loghain's man staggered, dazed, and Elissa dropped to one knee, bringing her dagger up underhand to shove it with all her strength into the gap between his long splintmail coat and the splinted leggings, severing the artery running through his groin. A hot spurt of blood arced over her in a fountain, splattering her face and armor, and she watched with hollow disinterest as he collapsed before her, howling as his life sprayed from him in rapid pumps.

His screams faded and she rose, staring at the still corpse. She was trembling, she realized as the surge of adrenaline began to abate. Tears stung her eyes as she felt something toxic within her begin to unfurl and disperse, something she'd never even suspected still lingered, like a cyst rupturing and the malignant fluid within draining away into nothingness.

"Are you all right?" Zevran asked, his tone and eyes grave and concerned. She looked over at her other companions; Sten was regarding her with something akin to approval, and even Morrigan wasn't quite managing her usual detached disinterest.

"Yes," Elissa said slowly, giving the body at her feet one last look. "I rather think I am. Come, let me wipe up some of this blood and then we'll deal with those mercenaries belowstairs."

It didn't take much effort to convince the White Falcons to take their revels someplace else; Elissa rather suspected the blood still staining her skin and armor might have something to do with the
As the troop left, her attention was drawn to a scuffle on the far side of the room, where a single woman was fighting several men. She'd always thought Zevran moved gracefully when he fought, but the sweeping fluidity with which this woman used her daggers was breathtaking. Always she managed not to be where her opponent attempted to strike. Her daggers moved almost too fast to see, a shining, glinting blur of silverite.

"Ah!" Zevran hooted when he saw her watching the woman. "This is a most fortunate coincidence! I must introduce you."

"You know this woman?"

"We have met in the past; I seduced her and then killed her husband to fulfill a contract."

Elissa gaped at him. "And...you think she's going to want to see you again?"

"Indeed. I showed her a very good time, and she benefited greatly from the death of her husband," he shrugged. "I would almost think she took the contract out on him, if not for the fact that her indignation was genuine, if short-lived. What a perfect opportunity. Come. Dismiss Morrigan and Sten, we will not need them for this."

By the time Morrigan and Sten had left, the opponents the woman had been fighting had been scattered and she was enjoying a goblet of wine at a corner table. She looked up at Zevran's approach and smiled slyly. "Ah, and look who we have here. Come to apologize for leaving me bereft of my lord husband and then vanishing without a trace?"

"You know it was just business, Isabela. Business that turned out well for you, I see--you inherited the ship, I take it?"

"Hmph. I suppose I never did like the greasy bastard. And the Siren treats me far better than she ever did him," her eyes flicked to Elissa and widened with interest. "But you're forgetting your manners. Who is this sweet little thing you have with you, Zevran?"

"Ah, allow me to make the introductions," Zevran said, practically bouncing on his heels and looking incredibly pleased with himself. "Warden, this is Isabela, queen of the eastern seas and the sharpest blade in Llomerryn. And Isabela, my dear, you will no doubt be amused to discover that I am traveling with a Grey Warden."

"It's a pleasure," Elissa said demurely, wondering at Zevran's excitement. "Zevran, how is it that for someone who never before set foot in Ferelden, you have so very many acquaintances here?"

Isabela laughed, a throaty sound that reminded Elissa of the unfulfilled state of arousal she'd been in before the came to the Pearl. The woman was definitely regarding her with interest, but Zevran's next words drove lustful thoughts right out of her mind.

"Isabela, the Warden here is very proficient with her bow, but somewhat lacking in skills necessary for close-quarters combat. It nearly cost her her life just moments ago. I thought perhaps you might be willing to impart some of your skills to her."

"I beg your pardon?" Elissa drew up, embarrassed and affronted. "You introduced me for weapons training?"

"You have stated many times that you know your martial skills are not equal to those of your companions," Zevran pointed out. "It becomes a liability for the rest of us, not to mention the babe in your belly. And now here we have quite possibly the best fighter in all of Thedas. It would be a shame to waste such a chance."
"Then you saw that little demonstration," Isabela noted.

"Indeed," Elissa replied. "I was very impressed with your skill."

"I fight with quickness and wit, rather than with brute force and strength. I call myself a duelist because I honed my skills in duels with warriors I encountered over the years. It's possible I could teach you, but I prefer to know my student better."

"I'd be grateful," Elissa said, warming to the idea. "Forgive my earlier rudeness, I just wasn't aware that training was on the agenda for today." She gave Zevran a narrow look. "When I agreed to your bargain, this wasn't what I thought you'd have in mind."

"You'd be surprised," he answered, something full of promise making his voice low and rough.

"Oh, now this piques my interest," Isabela said with an arch of her brow. "Just what bargain have you made here, Zevran?"

"Ah, that is perhaps something better discussed aboard your ship. I think once you get to know our sweet Warden, you will find she is a very apt pupil."

It wasn't until they were aboard Isabela's ship in her lavishly appointed cabin that Elissa realized just how filthy her hasty efforts to wipe the blood from her body and armor had left her. Everything in Zevran's manner said sex was certainly on the agenda, but the idea of crawling onto that satin-covered bed, the first she'd had the opportunity to lay upon for weeks, left her feeling absolutely disgusting.

"I think I should like to bathe before we get around to...training," she said, and Isabela nodded and called for her cabin boy, sending to the galley for hot water. The captain herself pulled down the large copper tub from where it hung on hooks on the wall and while they waited for the cabin boy to haul in bucket after bucket of hot water, she began teaching Elissa some of the most basic principles of her fighting style, using Zevran as an opponent.

She taught Elissa to look for the cues in posture and movement that indicated certain attacks would be forthcoming, and where they would be aimed, and how to avoid them. Elissa quickly realized where Zevran had learned the fluid, circular movements she'd seen him use earlier, and together they began to teach her how to let momentum carry her through one motion to the next without stopping, always staying ahead of her opponent's blade, anticipating the next strike before it could land.

"You are a quick learner, little one," Isabela praised when Elissa was panting and covered in sweat from repeating the same parry over and over. "Now, the tub is full. Be a good girl and wash yourself, then we shall get to know each other better."

Gratefully she stripped off her armor and sank into the tub while Isabela summoned her cabin boy again and sent Elissa's armor off to be cleaned and aired. The hot water felt lovely, the first she'd felt since that night in the hot springs. Thoughts of that particular night brought her eyes back to Zevran, who was smiling at Isabela with lurid intent as the captain began removing her own armor. Nude, she swayed toward the chair Zevran slumped in and straddled his lap, draping herself over him.

Elissa watched unabashed as Zevran's hands cupped the older woman's full backside, squeezing and kneading while she began to unfasten the buckles of his cuirass. She leaned over Zevran, kissing him deeply, and then as one their heads turned toward Elissa as she stared.

"Would you like some help washing, sweet thing?" Isabela offered, scooting off Zevran's lap to kneel beside the tub. Zevran rose and worked on removing the rest of his armor while Isabela took
up a soft sponge and began stroking Elissa's back with it. Elissa sighed and let herself relax into the woman's touch, only opening her eyes when one of Isabela's hands came around her ribs, her slim fingers finding Elissa's nipple with unerring accuracy and manipulating it to a hard peak.

"Hmm, you are a delicious little thing, aren't you?" the captain hummed, licking Elissa's neck where her head tipped to the side. Elissa made a pleased whimper and allowed herself to enjoy being seduced for once, exerting no effort to reciprocate. When Isabela's fingers began to slide down Elissa's stomach, Zevran made a warning sound.

"Careful, Isabela. The Warden is not allowed to have her pleasure until I allow it," he instructed.

"Zevran! That's just cruel!" Isabela scolded. "If that's the game you were playing, you should not have brought her to me."

"Yes, but what can I do?" he shrugged. "She will not obey as she should, and so she leaves me little choice."

Elissa frowned, the pleasant tension of arousal building in her belly, hovering on the brink of becoming something more urgent and needful. "Zevran, the game is ceasing to be fun," she warned flatly.

"Is it?" he challenged, dropping the final legging he'd been removing to the floor. "You have your pleasure every morning and night, often several times. It's simple for you, finding someone to seduce, or inviting me into your tent, where I do so enjoy to be. Pleasure comes easily and readily to you. Obedience, however? No, that is not nearly so simple. Can you honestly say you don't enjoy the challenge, the mystery, the constant state of yearning with no idea when it will be fulfilled? Tell me you do not anticipate finding out how much more powerful your release will be when it finally comes?"

Elissa closed her eyes, struggling with that demanding need within her that wanted release and wanted it right now. But he was right, she realized. She wanted to know where he would lead her.

"It's all right," she murmured to Isabela, turning in the woman's arms. "I'll see his game through."

Isabela kissed her, then, and as ever Elissa thrilled at how soft and gentle another woman's lips could be, so different from a man's. Isabela was skilled, nearly as skilled as Zevran himself, and soon Elissa's wet body was pressing closer to hers, demanding more. Isabela's fingertips drew lines down Elissa's wet spine, stroking delicately over her buttocks.

"Come," Isabela smiled, pulling back. "Let's get you dried off. If I can't give you pleasure, I at least want the chance to explore you fully."

And she did. Zevran watched, casually draped over a chair stroking his cock, while Isabela spread Elissa over the bed, learning every part of her with lips and tongue and stroking, probing fingers. The other woman seemed to take nearly as much pleasure in looking as she did in touching, leaving Elissa feeling oddly exposed and examined. And yet there was something thrilling about being on display, spread open wide before not only Isabela's eyes but Zevran's as well, as he stared intently.

Elissa wondered at her strange passivity, how willing she was to let the captain have her way, for inaction was not usually like her. And yet, it felt good to be pampered, even at the cost of never-ending arousal without relief. The sensation of Isabela's soft, full mouth on her nipple, sucking and pulling, first hard then softly, had Elissa grasping Isabela's head, arching her back and thrusting her breast into the captain's face while mewling for more. The delicate scrape of feminine fingernails down her inner thigh sent shivers across Elissa's skin, as though more than just her leg had been
As Isabela warmed to the game Zevran was playing, she began skirting closer to the edge, her fingers dancing along Elissa's cleft, dipping into her cunt, slowly, gently, not using nearly the speed nor force to push Elissa over the brink. Her tongue laved Elissa's folds, dipped into her channel, but carefully darted around her clit, bringing Elissa to the brink of fulfillment before backing her away until Elissa was almost sobbing with frustration.

Finally unable to bear the torment, Elissa rose, pushing the older woman down upon the bed, and took charge, seeking to allay her need with action. Her tongue ravished Isabela's mouth, thrusting insistently, demanding a response, while her fingers expertly found their way into Isabela's hot, wet cunt with a hard, swift stroke. Elissa's mouth moved down to Isabela's nipple, sucking hard while the sea captain writhed and moaned, and when Elissa's thumb pressed against her clit and began to rub, Isabela shuddered and cried out, seizing around Elissa's fingers.

The mattress sank beside her, and Elissa felt Zevran's warm body sliding up behind hers, felt the brush of his cock as he encircled her with his arms and urged her head around to kiss her. He pulled her fingers from Isabela's cunt and drew them into his mouth, tasting Isabela on her skin before sharing the taste with Elissa in another deep kiss. "Mmm, Zevran," Isabela purred, "what a delightful little companion you've found. I think I should keep her."

Zevran laughed. "Ah, no," he said, "I'm afraid that won't be possible. She has a great deal of work ahead of her, and we have places to be this evening."

"Oh, well, it was a thought," Isabela replied with a pout. "Now come. We've been neglecting you."

Once again she started to suspect the game to not be worth the reward, and she took advantage of Zevran's distraction to let her hand sneak down toward the junction of her thighs. She had almost reached her goal when Isabela leaned over and grasped Elissa's wrist in a surprisingly strong grip.

"Naughty girl," she tsked, and pulled Elissa's hand toward her own clitoris instead. Sighing in resignation, Elissa dedicated herself to her appointed task, soon replacing her hand with her mouth. Isabela's hands clenched in Elissa's hair as Elissa devoured her clit; licking, sucking, hard and sift strokes of her tongue. She moved lower and used her mouth on Zevran's balls, drawing them in gently, stroking them with her tongue, evoking pleased groans from him as her nose nuzzled Isabela's cunt. She tasted Isabela on his shaft when it was exposed briefly before Isabela plunged back down again.

Elissa began to forget about her own frustration and enjoy her task, letting their moans and sounds fill her ears, their combined scent flooding her senses. They tasted musky and spicy and indescribably good, and the knowledge that she was heightening their pleasure was powerful in its own right. Zevran's hands came to rest on Isabela's hips, helping her lift herself up and lending force to her downward plunge, slamming her down onto his cock until Isabela was keening with pleasure, her body starting to tense as she built toward her climax. Elissa applied her tongue vigorously, stroking firmly on Isabela's clit with the next thrust of Zevran's hips and then the captain was flailing and crying out her pleasure.
A few ragged thrusts and Zevran stilled and shuddered. Panting wearily, Isabela dismounted, leaving Zevran's softening cock, shining with his seed, draped before Elissa's face where she rested her head on his thigh. Zevran made a pained sound as Elissa lifted her head and gently began to stroke him with her tongue, gradually taking all his soft length into her mouth to suck the salty fluid from it. The taste only whet her appetite, and before she knew it she was once again between Isabela's thighs, greedily lapping Zevran's seed from the captain's cunt and bringing her to another shivering climax.

They all rested silently for some moments, the gentle lassitude of shared pleasure settling over them. Elissa was keenly aware of her own lack of fulfillment, and yet strangely at peace with it as well, content in the knowledge that she had brought them pleasure and that sooner or later, her time would come. Perhaps not every sex act, she mused, need end in orgasm to be pleasant. Nonetheless, her need began to plague her once more as she realized Isabela was arguing with Zevran on her behalf.

"Oh, come, Zevran, surely the little dear has earned it by now," Isabela chided.

"Oh, indeed, and yet I must stand by my word," Zevran said regretfully. "She has been given a job, and she will not have release until she completes it."

"I think you're a wretched beast for making the poor thing wait."

"The 'poor thing' has ears, and a voice as well," Elissa said, lifting her head. "Zevran and I made a deal and I'll see it through. I do appreciate your concern, though," she added, crawling up the bed to kiss Isabela deeply.

"Well, if you're not going to let me pleasure this darling girl," Isabela said when Elissa pulled away once more, pouting. "Then let us get dressed, and we can continue your lesson. And Zevran, do try to make it a point of bringing her back to me sometime when she's not under such a cruel restriction."

It was some time later when they left Isabela's ship, Elissa's head full of feints and tricks even as her body still hummed with unsatisfied arousal. She considered the diversion to be time well spent. Nonetheless, she was desperately looking forward to her next encounter with Sergeant Kylon.
Denerim, Part 4: The Sergeant

Chapter Summary

Elissa fulfills her task *vis a vis* Sergeant Kylon, and she and Zevran leave for their appointment with Master Ignacio.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Sergeant Kylon, Elissa/Zevran

The day had already passed well into the afternoon as Zevran and Elissa made their way through the winding roads and alleyways of Denerim back toward the marketplace square. It was there they encountered Sergeant Kylon again, prompting Zevran to whisper to her, "Ah, and here's your mark, Warden."

"I was hoping I'd find you," the sergeant hailed them as they approached. He was flanked by a cadre of his incompetent guardsmen. "I heard about The Pearl. I don't know how, but you got them to leave with no fuss at all. The Pearl's 'workers' will--"

"Nobody gives orders to my men but me!" A coarse voice interrupted. "A little lesson in respect is in order!"

"*Nobody gives orders to my men but me!*" A coarse voice interrupted. "A little lesson in respect is in order!"

Elissa sighed to see the leader of the White Falcon mercenaries she had dispersed approaching. Kylon looked them over then met her eyes again. "I see. Don't bother sparing these louts. Things are about to get messy."

Immediately they were charged by the mercenaries. Two of them, including the leader, headed straight for Elissa, giving her no time to grab her bow and gain some distance. She unsheathed her daggers instead and set herself in the light-footed, balanced stance Isabela had shown her, watching the oncoming stampede. She was painfully aware of the fact that, except for Kylon and his men, she and Zevran had no support in this fight, and cursed herself for braving Denerim's alleys without her other companions.

The fight was brief but intense. Trying to keep in mind Isabela's lessons, she watched the bodies of the mercenaries, trying to anticipate their next move, to be someplace else than where they were striking. She felt, rather than saw, the clean stroke of her dagger across the next of one mercenary as she whirled, moving immediately into a side-step that avoided the two-handed blow of another's sword. That one she dispatched on the back-swing as he lumbered past, driving her dagger beneath his helmet into the base of his skull.

One of Kylon's men cried out as an arrow embedded itself in his shoulder, and realizing there were archers, Elissa charged them without stopping to think. If she was vulnerable in close-quarters combat, so too might they be, unable to defend themselves as effectively against a melee attack. One of the archers never managed to release his bow before he went down with Elissa's dagger sliding out of his belly, the other managed to get his sword clear of its sheath, but was slow and clumsy with it. Elissa realized then just how right Zevran had been about her being a liability to her companions. The sword fell from the mercenary's hand when the stroke of Elissa's dagger across the back of his hand nearly severed his fingers. Her next strike slipped neatly between his ribs and he sank to the ground, gurgling blood.
Panting, she whirled to discover the rest of the mercenaries were either lying on the ground or wounded and fleeing. Her eyes immediately sought out Zevran and she was relieved to find him unharmed. Sergeant Kylon was also still on his feet, apparently unwounded, though several of his men were clutching injuries and wailing as though they were halfway to the Fade already. Rolling her eyes, Elissa sheathed her bloody daggers and ran across the alley, back to the sergeant and Zevran.

"Are you all right, Warden?" Zevran asked anxiously. Flushed with pride at her unexpected success and feeling madly, gloriously alive as the hot blood of battle coarsed through her veins, Elissa nodded, grinning.

Sergeant Kylon surveyed the carnage and whistled admiringly. "And people voluntarily attack you?" he asked incredulously. "Are they just stupid?"

The man could not have chosen better words to endear Elissa to him at that moment, so thrilled was she to have performed so well in the fight.

"Zevran," she said, meeting his gaze with eyes that blazed with triumph and arousal, "why don't you see to the sergeant's wounded men? I need to speak with him privately."

Zevran's low, knowing voice sizzled along her already stimulated nerves.

"Take all the time you need, Warden," he said with a grin.

Trying to project an air of dignity and gravity, Elissa led the sergeant down the empty alley and around the corner of an abandoned building.

"About the matter of payment--" the sergeant began, but Elissa cut him off, sealing her mouth over his. The sergeant stiffened in shock, his hands on her shoulders poised to push her away, and then his mouth opened and his tongue met hers. He, too, still felt the heat of battle lust. His kiss wasn't gentle for long; soon he was possessing her mouth, pulling hard at her lips, thrusting insistently with his tongue. It was a long moment before Elissa drew away, licking her lips slowly, feeling how sensitive and swollen they were from the sergeant sucking on them.

"Warden, I-I don't know what to say--" he stammered.

"It's a thankless job you do, sergeant," she murmured, pitching her voice low, letting it growl in her throat. "I think some demonstration of appreciation is in order."

Before the sergeant could ask her intent, she sank to her knees before him, her hands pulling at the laces which attached the leather codpiece protecting his groin where it was exposed by his chainmail leggings, then opening the laces of the chauses he wore beneath.

His cock was hard and throbbing by the time she released it from its bindings, heated with blood in contrast to the cool air. Elissa stroked him with not just her mouth, but her face, using her skin and eyelashes and even her hair to caress him as she held his hard, pulsing length in her hand.

"Oh, Maker," Kylon sighed, his eyes closing and his head falling back. He braced his hands on the wall behind him, making no effort to grab her or pull her closer, leaving Elissa free to pleasure him with all her skill and enthusiasm.

Elissa used her fist wrapped around him to slide back the sheath of skin around his cock, parting the cowl to expose the flaring head. She loved this, the slow reveal as the hood pulled back, the smooth glide of that amazingly soft skin. A cock was a sensory treat, full of soft textures and heady aroma and flavor. A pump of her fist teased a droplet of fluid to the tip and Elissa's tongue darted out
daintily to catch it, savoring it.

It would have been easy for her to be perfunctory about the matter, bringing the sergeant to completion with little effort or artistry. To do so was made even more tempting by the promise of the reward awaiting her. But she liked the sergeant, and moreover she enjoyed this particular endeavor, and so she took her time, exploring him with delicate fingertips and playful flicks of her tongue, breathing in his scent. Despite his passivity, he was unconsciously pushing with his hips long before she opened her mouth and took him inside.

The sergeant gave a strangled groan, his hands balling into fists as her warm, wet mouth closed over him. Elissa let her tongue cradle the underside of his cock as her lips pushed on the gliding skin, then pulled it smoothly forward, and then pushed back again, letting its loose slide aid the motion of her mouth as she took him in deeper with no friction whatsoever.

The unfortunate side-effect of her pregnancy which heightened her gag reflex made it difficult to take him as deep as she wished to, but his willingness to allow her to control the matter encouraged her, and so she pressed forward, taking him deep. Inevitably her throat spasmed and she withdrew, drawing a deep calming breath and hoping that she would not disgrace herself by vomiting on his boots. Suddenly, she realized how diabolical Zevran was to set her this particular task, for he was well aware of her difficulties in this regard. To mask her discomposure she stroked him with her hand, using her saliva to aid the motion, which she dipped her head low and began to caress his sac with her tongue.

Kylon grunted loudly, issuing another invocation to the Maker as he thrust with his hips, opening his thighs to give her better access. Here, too, she drew out her ministrations, laving his balls with long, slow, firm strokes of her tongue, drawing them gently into her mouth, sucking carefully. With the fingers of her free hand she teased the ridge of skin behind his sack, all the way back to the knotted ring of his anus. He bucked when her finger first brushed gently over it, and she withdrew, wary of alarming him.

When she was confident her throat was not going to rebel, Elissa took him into her mouth once more, using her hand to apply pressure far down toward the base where her lips could not reasonably go. Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked hard on the head of his cock, pumping rapidly up and down with her mouth as far and deep as she dared. She felt his fingers in her hair, trembling, but still he made no effort to guide or force her. It was a rare gift, she thought, to have a man so utterly willing to let her pleasure him without making any attempt to exert his will upon her.

And still she did not rush. When she felt him beginning to get overwhelmed, she backed off, licking long, slow lines along his cock from his balls to the tip, using her teeth with delicate care. Her finger teased his rear again and when he did not react with shock or alarm, she grew bolder, pushing gently and feeling the ring begin to loosen for her. The persistant tremble in his body let her know he was reaching the limit of his endurance and she took him into her mouth again, pumping and sucking eagerly and greedily, with no further effort at teasing or delaying.

Her finger slid into his backside and his cock began to swell and grow harder, less yielding. He groaned again, loudly, desperately, and his entire body quaked as he hovered on the brink. A gentle wiggle of her fingertip and a long, pulling suck and suddenly the rich flavor of his seed was flooding her mouth, salty and thick and creamy. Elissa let herself savor it, rather than swallowing right away. She let it linger on her tongue, fill her cheeks, before letting it slide slowly down her throat, sipping rather than gulping.

"Maker's breath," the sergeant breathed, unable or unwilling to stir himself from where he slumped against the wall. Sighing with satisfaction, Elissa tucked him back into his chauses and laced them,
"Don't thank me," Elissa said softly, meeting his eyes with a smile. "Understand that some of us know just how impossible your task is with Arl Howe's swine overrunning the city. I will do what I can to help while I am here."

"Well, then, let me say that what you have done--all that you have done--is deeply appreciated," his tone and expression were solemn. "I don't know why you did it, but I'm grateful. I promise I will do what I can to try to set aright some of the terrible things being said about the Grey Wardens. I should be getting back to my men and get them safely back to the marketplace where they can't get themselves killed. Come see me, perhaps tomorrow. I may have more work for you. I mean... actual work, not...."

"I know what you meant, Sergeant. I will see you tomorrow if my business permits me to linger in the city that long," Elissa acknowledged, and turned from him, leading him back into the alley where Zevran and Kylon's wounded men awaited.

When the sergeant and his men were gone, Zevran grinned and gestured her closer. "You and the sergeant were gone some time. Have you completed your task then?"

Elissa looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Did you have any doubt?"

He grabbed her arm, pulling her closer. "I would test this for myself," he announced, and kissed her, his tongue probing her mouth deeply. He made a low, pleased sound, and the kiss became a longer affair than any mere desire to test could account for.

When Zevran finally pulled away, he sighed contentedly. "Ah, my sweet Warden, perhaps the only thing more agreeable than your mouth with the taste of a man still lingering on your tongue is your mouth with the taste of a woman on your tongue instead," he praised, and Elissa felt that heavy, flooding pressure deep within, pulsing urgently. "And lucky man that I am, I have experienced both in the same day."

"Maker, Zevran! If you don't fuck me soon--I mean really fuck me, complete with release--I'm going to go screaming mad," she groaned in frustration.

He laughed at that. "All in good time, dear Warden. For now, I'm sure our companions are quite concerned for us, yes?"

"Andraste's tits," Elissa cursed, arousal fading as the spell of Zevran's skillful, prolonged seduction was broken. "They're probably frantic by now. We were supposed to meet them hours ago. It's practically evening already and we still don't know what Leliana has found out about Brother Genitivi."

Elissa set off at a brisk pace toward the market district where their companions were awaiting them at the appointed tavern. It turned out she need not have worried quite so much. Alistair was with them as well, for while they had been waiting Leliana and Wynne had taken it upon themselves to do some odd jobs posted on the Chantry board to bolster the party's dwindling funds and had recruited Alistair to aid them.

She felt Alistair's eyes on her throughout the meal they ate at the tavern. She looked away, trying to dismiss the memory of their moment against the side of Goldanna's house and how badly she wanted him. Even now, even knowing she'd almost certainly be fucking Zevran tonight. Still, she wanted him, wanted him to somehow magically arrive at a place of acceptance so that she could have him. And still he stared, his eyes hungry and uncertain, distracting her as she tried to attend to Leliana's
report of the troubling news from Brother Genitivi's house.

"His assistant, Weylon, there was something not right about him," Leliana said, frowning as Wynne nodded. "He was very nervous, and at least some of what he told me was clearly a lie. And there was this smell in the house. I think something had died there."

"Were you able to get anything useful from him?" Elissa asked.

"He said Brother Genitivi was last at Lake Calenhad, but I'm not sure that is the entire story. With just Wynne and myself, I didn't dare confront him with his lies."

"We shall all go tomorrow, then, and find out what he's trying to hide," Elissa decided. "With the extra coin you and Wynne and Alistair made for us today, we may as well stay an extra day and get more provisions, especially if it turns out we're going to have to drag ourselves all the back back across Ferelden to Lake Calenhad or Maker knows where else. We need more winter gear, the full cold is nearly upon us. Morrigan and Sten can see to that, and we'll attend to this Weylon fellow while they do. Since we're staying another day, I may as well pay another visit to Sergeant Kylon, as he indicated he may have more work for us as well."

When the tavernkeep asked if their party would like rooms for the night, Elissa regretfully started to decline, for their finances would barely allow for it. Then she paused. She felt guilty thinking of the warm bath she'd had aboard Isabela's ship, for none of her other companions had enjoyed such a luxury in weeks. It would strain their resources to the very limit, but Maker only knew when they would next have the opportunity.

"Yes," she said finally, and her heart lightened to see the delight illuminate their faces. Even Morrigan and Sten looked somewhat less surly than usual. "Rooms with hot baths for all of us. If anyone doesn't mind sharing a room, however, it will save us some money."

"Leliana and I can share, if she has no objection," Wynne said, smiling kindly at Elissa. The maternal approval warmed her, made her feel certain she'd made the wiser choice in her extravagance. "After so many years in the Tower, it would feel odd to have a whole room to myself."

"We will not need a room," Zevran murmured to Elissa, too low for the others to hear. "We still must keep our appointment with Master Ignacio. If it doesn't take all night--which I'm quite certain it will--Master Ignacio will see to our lodgings."

Elissa stared at him in dismay. "But--I thought we would--"

"I'm sorry, my dear Warden," he shrugged, looking somewhat put out himself. "But Master Ignacio is not a man it is wise to keep waiting, yes?"

Slowly, Elissa swallowed her frustration, only to find it replaced with dread over whatever trial Master Ignacio had in store for her. Resigning herself to at least another few hours before Zevran's game came to an end, she nodded.
Denerim, Part 5: The Trial

Chapter Summary

Elissa undergoes a specialized trial for the Antivan Crow, Master Ignacio.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Master Ignacio, Elissa/Zevran

Content Warnings: BDSM

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Gnawed Noble had, if anything, gotten rowdier as the day progressed toward evening, with the Crimson Oar mercenaries shouting and swilling ale without restraint. The few noble patrons who bothered to remain watched them in disgust and annoyance, but as they didn't seem to be breaking anything and weren't harassing any of the patrons, there was little to be done about it.

Zevran led Elissa back to Master Ignacio's private room, keeping her close this time lest any of the mercenaries again mistake her for a strumpet. Not that she thought she would particularly mind, as desperate as she was, but it wouldn't do to put on such a display for the nobles in the tavern. Not that it seemed likely she'd particularly need any sort of credibility with them again, but as she'd told Zevran earlier in the day, it was best to be discreet.

Zevran once again rapped on Master Ignacio's door with that strange cadence, but this time instead of Master Ignacio bidding them enter, the door was opened by a bearded man she'd seen earlier in the marketplace.

"Ah, good to see you again, Cesar," Zevran greeted, and the man nodded formally, closing the door behind them. "Warden, this is Master Ignacio's close associate and right-hand man, Cesar."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Warden," the Antivan acknowledged, bowing and holding out a bundle. "These are for you, a gift from the master. He requests that you wear them now."

Elissa took from his hands the folded garments she had glimpsed earlier in Master Ignacio's chest, shaking them out to examine them. Most of the bundle was a long, full gown of neither the Ferelden nor Orlesian modes with which she was most familiar. It reminded her much of the gowns her late sister-in-law had brought with her out of Antiva, but had quickly abandoned when she realized they were not fashionable in her new country. The skirt was fuller than present Ferelden fashion, and the cut much, much lower. The colors were also more vibrant, primarily a rich sapphire blue, but the flared skirt split, revealing cascading ruffles of amethyst, emerald, topaz and ruby. Wrapped within the gown was a set of satin-encased stays in the same rich ruby shade that accented the trim of the gown.

Cesar made no attempt to leave the room nor afford her any privacy, and so Elissa shrugged and began to strip out of her armor before him. His reason for remaining quickly became apparent as she fumbled with the unfamiliar laces of the stays, which cross-crossed up the back rather than the front as the Ferelden corsets she'd worn back in Highever had done. He stepped behind her and expertly untangled and hauled on the satiny cords. At a word of warning about the babe, he made certain not
to cinch the waist down too far, but even so, the corset straightened her spine and forced her breasts up, and up, cantilevering them out from her body. The shallow cups at the top of the stays offered nothing by way of modesty, serving more as a shelf than a covering, leaving her breasts bare above the nipples. Her breasts may as well have been offered up on a platter.

Zevran made an appreciative sound, and Elissa actually found herself blushing, a light rose hue creeping up along the creamy skin so blatantly visible. It seemed ridiculous, considering how frequently she flouted modesty before him, but never before had she been so boldly displayed. The corset seemed somehow more indecent than total nudity would have been.

The gown itself did little to alleviate the problem, for it barely covered more than the stays. Her nipples were concealed, but the slightest stretch or reach would bring them up out of the bodice. The loose, ruffled sleeves only came down to her elbow, unlike the long sleeves presently in vogue in Ferelden. The skirt was long and full, but also split down the front in such a way that, while the opening was invisible when she stood still, her legs were exposed each time she walked. Delicate black stockings and satin slippers were rolled up with the stays, but nothing else by way of smallclothes, and since Zevran had torn hers off and discarded them that morning, she feared any close observer might get more than an eyeful each time the skirt parted.

All told, it was a gorgeously decadent display, but after so many months in armor and simple woolen clothes, she felt awkward and clumsy in it.

"I thought you assured me Master Ignacio did not keep with the Crow tradition of initiation by torture," she murmured to Zevran once she was garbed.

"And so he does not."

"Really?" she gave him a skeptical look. "I'm quite certain these stays could be construed as just that. I hadn't thought to spend the evening wearing my breasts as ear-baubles."

"Ah, now this," came that beautifully accented voice from the doorway to the sleeping chamber, "this brings back beautiful memories of Antiva, does it not, Zevran?"

"Master Ignacio," Elissa found herself dropping into a curtsy without even thinking about it, responding once again to that indescribable presence that seemed to accompany the Crow master wherever he went. The Ferelden-style gesture was somewhat ungainly in the unfamiliar gown, and the motion momentarily bared her nipples to his gaze.

"It does bring to mind the dark-haired beauties of home," Zevran agreed, his words strangely cautious as he bowed. A slightly troubled frown crossed his face, as though Ignacio's words carried more meaning than they appeared to, but the expression was quickly erased, replaced by Zevran's more typically lecherous smile.

"It is true," Ignacio acknowledged, looking pleased with himself. "Warden, I hear our friend met with a terrible accident."

"Truly, I'm devastated," Elissa replied flatly. Actually, she'd been so caught up in the fight and killing the captain of the soldiers who'd raped her that she had forgotten the trap that had been laid for the Grey Wardens and their supporters, but she couldn't help but feel satisfied that the matter had been dealt with. No doubt Loghain would be furious, which only sweetened the victory.

"I'm sure. Perhaps the contents of the chest will alleviate your grief when next you check it, yes? Until then, I assume I have established my honest intentions where you are concerned?"
"Or you've chosen a particularly effective way of lulling me into complacency," she replied.

Ignacio laughed. "Ever suspicious. Ah well, the time has come for you to decide whether you will take the chance and trust me," he declared. "Since you are here and have complied with my requests thus far, I assume you intend to do so. Cesar, the potion."

A goblet was pressed into her hand, and Elissa sniffed it cautiously, finding the aroma beneath the rich red wine unfamiliar. "And I'm to drink a potion from the hand of an assassin?" she asked with a disbelieving smile. "Master Ignacio, you do strain the bonds of trust on very short acquaintance. Zevran?"

"It will be safe, Warden, for you at least," he said seriously, his eyes intent upon her. The unspoken message was clear; he did not know what it might do to her babe. Recalling his earlier words about the dangers of making an enemy of Master Ignacio, Elissa drew a deep breath and took a long draught from the goblet. A tingling on her tongue and in her throat began as she swallowed, and though it lessened, it did not entirely abate.

"What is the purpose of the potion?" she asked, setting the goblet cautiously aside.

"It's a very expensive brew, sold only in the finest brothels in Antiva," Ignacio replied with a satisfied smile. "Illegal, naturally, because it's enchanted and contains the slightest touch of lyrium. With the amount of coin a single vial costs, a large village could eat like noblemen for a year. When imbibed, it heightens emotion and lowers inhibition, assuring that responses and reactions are honest and unrestrained rather than scripted. This may assure the well-paying patron that the whore he has contracted is being sincere in her passion rather than playing a role. It also makes an effective interrogation tool when wielded by the right person. And when applied to the skin and flesh, it increases sensation. Pain is amplified, as is pleasure, so much so that pleasure can become its own form of suffering. You see, Warden, I need not cause you injury to inflict very great distress."

As he spoke, Elissa became aware of the stays of the corset pressing against her ribs, constricting her breathing. Suddenly it felt as though she could not get enough air, no matter that she inhaled as deeply as the corset would allow. She felt panicky and trapped, her eyes darting around the room in alarm.

"Ah, now, you see? You are afraid, Warden, despite all your bravery and seductive smiles," Ignacio looked thoughtful as he studied her response. "You fear a trap, even with Zevran's reassurances, yes? You fuck him, but it's still in the back of your mind that he may betray you."

"No," Elissa shook her head in denial, but even as she did so, she knew Ignacio was right. Only the very smallest, most paranoid part of her feared betrayal by Zevran, but it was there nonetheless. Perhaps not so much actual concern as a practical acknowledgment of the possibility. Having it pointed out in front of Zevran, with his carefully neutral expression, however, made her feel deeply, unaccountably ashamed, and tears came readily to her eyes, spilling down her cheeks, and she was utterly unable to restrain herself from shedding them.

"You are grieved that Zevran has discovered you believe him capable of betraying you," Ignacio observed. "Zevran, what have you to say to that?"

"The Warden would be a fool if she did not allow for the chance that I might betray her, and she is no fool," Zevran said coldly, looking displeased with Ignacio's game. "But I gave my oath, and I mean to keep it. She need not fear."

"And there we have it," Ignacio sighed, his tone pleased. "Now that these unworthy thoughts of mistrust and betrayal have been dealt with, we may turn our attention to other matters, yes? Please sit,
Warden, there on that chair."

She obeyed instinctively, unthinkingly. The personal magnetism that had made treating Ignacio with deference seem so natural was, under the effects of the potion, utterly irresistible. She could summon no will to project an air of dignity or independence when every instinct within her demanded she capitulate. Now she understood what Ignacio meant when he said "the right person" when he spoke of interrogation. It felt dangerously like she had no will of her own. "Zevran?" she asked uncertainly, feeling that panicked sense of being trapped again.

She was reassured to notice that for all his deference toward the Crow master, Zevran did not look to Ignacio for approval before crossing to her. He knelt before her and took her hand. "It's all right, my sweet Warden. I promise that you will not come to any harm. It is my desire that you submit to Ignacio's trial. You will obey him."

"This is curious," Ignacio said, frowning, "Zevran, the Warden defeated you and took you as her prisoner, yes?"

"Yes, Master Ignacio."

"And yet the entire time you have been here, she has deferred to you. Warden, I would very much like to know why."

Embarrassment, profound and unrelenting, flooded through her, heightened by the potion. Unable to withstand the implicit command, her face turned crimson as Elissa explained, "I ceded control of myself to Zevran for the duration of our time here in Denerim."

"And he has given you to me," Ignacio nodded. "I wonder that you did not offer to conduct the trial yourself, Zevran. You seem most protective of the Warden."

"I do not have the gift with torment that you have, Master Ignacio," Zevran said, with a bow of his head. "But I shall very much enjoy watching."

Fear again, like a cold wave of air passing over her. Though she knew from Zevran's reassurances she was safe, she was helpless to suppress the tremble that shook her at the mention of the word "torment." But also, there was arousal, for surely Zevran would not sound so pleased at the prospect of watching unless there was sex involved. An entire day's worth of aching, unfulfilled longing, amplified beyond measure, surged through her, and Elissa whimpered loudly.

But Zevran was not done. "I do, however, have one request...I know well how your potion works, Master Ignacio, and the methods you employ. After the pain shall come the pleasure, equally unendurable in its own way. But when the Warden has her first orgasm, I must be the one to bring her. It is a matter of a long-standing debt between the Warden and I, yes?"

Again, heat bloomed across Elissa's face, with humiliation both at being discussed so frankly, as though she wasn't even present, and also that Ignacio would grasp from Zevran's words just how desperate her state of arousal was to begin with.

"I think that can be arranged," Ignacio agreed with a nod. "But first she must be prepared."

"As you say," Zevran conceded with a calm nod. "I shall leave the matter to you."

Again, she felt as though the stays were a crushing force, constricting her ribs. Zevran's removal of himself from any involvement in what was to come left her hesitant and uncertain, for she detected in Ignacio no warmth or good nature that would make a light-hearted game of whatever torment he had devised.
"You may wonder why I have dressed you so," Ignacio remarked. "Within the Antivan Crows, an assassin must take on whichever disguise may get her closest to her mark. She must be able to blend in with nobility and common whores alike. And tonight, Warden, you shall appear to be a little of both. Cesar, her breasts." Ignacio sat, taking up a goblet of wine, as Cesar stepped before Elissa's chair.

In Cesar's calmly efficient service she found even less reassurance, for clearly he would carry out his master's commands without pause. Ignacio's "associate" came to stand before her and Elissa noted that he'd placed a leather glove on one of his hands. Without any respect for her person or privacy, he pushed the bodice of the gown down so that it caught beneath the stiff cups of the corset, leaving her nipples and upper breasts bare once more. Taking up a vial, Cesar uncorked it and poured some of the potion on his gloved hand. He began to massage it onto her nipples with cool, impersonal strokes as they tightened and peaked.

"It is more of the same potion you drank," Ignacio informed her. "As I mentioned, it heightens sensation. You shall begin to feel the effects very soon. Her mouth too, Cesar."

The leather-encased fingers dabbed more of the potion from the vial and smeared it across her lips, then brusquely thrust into her mouth when she gasped at the immediate tingling. He wiped the remaining potion along her palate and tongue. Almost immediately, Elissa became aware of intense flavors, the dusty, oily taste of the leather gloves, the hints of the wine she'd drunk earlier, the herbs and a hint of cinnamon within the potion itself. Each flavor sizzled along her tongue like the effervescent bubbles in a glass of fine Orlesian champagne.

Cesar stepped away, and Elissa was left sitting there with her breasts exposed, a riot of flavor dancing inside her mouth. The air of the room, warmed by a fire in the generous fireplace, felt unaccountably cold as it slid across her damp nipples, making them shrink to painfully hard nubs.

Ignacio sat calmly across the sitting room from her, sipping his wine. His eyes roamed her breasts appreciatively, and he commented to Zevran, "I thought you were foolish to accept a contract on a Grey Warden, but perhaps you were not so foolish after all. Here you are, somewhat protected from our brothers within the Crows who would seek to punish your failure, and the rewards, well...." the Crow master gave an elegant shrug. "Is she skilled?" he asked idly.

"Oh, indeed," Zevran said warmly, looking at Elissa with a smirk. He was well aware of her keen humiliation at being discussed in such a manner, and he was relishing it. "Even so young, she could give lessons in pleasure to the courtesans that service the noble houses of Antiva. Ah! It's hard to say which orifice is the most gifted, for she has mastered them all."

"Hmm. Perhaps we should see this wonder for ourselves. Warden, you will put your legs up, over the sides of the chair," Ignacio instructed, turning his attention back to Elissa. "Yes, just like so. You will spread yourself wide and let us all see the delights Zevran has been sampling."

Only her promise to obey Zevran kept her in that chair. She should not have felt as mortified to obey as she did, Elissa thought, closing her eyes to block out the sight of them watching her so casually. She, who had shamelessly fucked the militia before the entire village of Redcliffe! Surely this was far less cause for self-consciousness. But her lack of shame was a matter of willpower, of repeating to herself the lessons her mother had taught her about the beauty and wonder of her body and sex, and with Ignacio's potion coursing through her veins she was incapable of summoning that discipline that allowed her to shrug off self-consciousness. Instead, she felt exposed and vulnerable and degraded to be displayed as though she were no more than a painting or a statue.

When Cesar stepped forward without being instructed and spread the split in her skirt wide, draping it over the arms of the chair so that it framed her legs as she splayed them, she moaned in an agony of
embarrassment, desperately, cringingly aware of the wanton display of her cunt. The coolness of the air on her folds attested to her arousal, and Maker! surely they could smell her even across the room.

"As exquisite as the rest of her," Ignacio remarked, staring intently at her cleft.

Without realizing what she was doing, Elissa lifted her hands and began to try to soothe the aching tightness of her nipples. Such a flagrant gesture, so at odds with her embarrassment, and yet Ignacio had said the potion she had imbibed would lower her inhibitions. Rather the soothing, the rubbing was its own torment, grating on her overstimulated senses. Her nipples were ice and fire in turns, pebble-hard and throbbing.

"Is she aroused, Cesar?"

The fingers of Cesar's bare hand swept up the moist furrow of her cunt, and came away slick and shining with copious moisture. He crossed the room and offered the hand to Master Ignacio as a servant might present the lord of the manor the cork from a bottle of wine, so that he might sample the bouquet and approve or disapprove of the vintage.

Ignacio breathed deeply and nodded. "Very fine, indeed. Zevran, come and assist me. It will be a long night, and I find I am in need of release now."

As Elissa watched, Zevran sank to his knees before Ignacio and freed the Crow master's cock from his breeches. She stared, transfixed, as Zevran took Ignacio into his mouth and began to suck. Each bob of Zevran's head, each hollowing of his cheeks, sent a new wave of longing through her cunt, for it was gorgeous to see how beautiful Zevran was, relishing his endeavor, his grace and skill as he plied Ignacio's cock with tongue and lips. When Ignacio clenched a fist in Zevran's hair and thrust his cock deep into Zevran's throat, her own throat spasmed in response. She wanted it to be her mouth on that cock, or she wanted that mouth on her cunt, she couldn't decide which. She wanted it all, and more, anything, anything to relieve the ache of unsatisfied longing that had been building within her all day and now, under the influence of Ignacio's potion, had become a crisis all its own.

Ignacio's orgasm was almost eerily quiet, or perhaps she missed his sounds amidst her whimpers and whines, which she was powerless to suppress. She hadn't realized she'd moved, putting her feet down and beginning to rise, until Cesar grabbed her and wrestled her back into her splayed position on the chair. She watched for the telltale bobbing of Zevran's throat but did not catch it and moaned again in frustration, wanting to see evidence of him taking Ignacio's seed. Instead, Ignacio stroked Zevran's face and said softly, "Be generous, now, and share with the Warden."

Zevran rose to his feet in a single fluid motion and crossed to Elissa, bending to kiss her. The pressure of his lips upon hers was amplified, making her feel as though this relatively gentle kiss was ravishing her mouth. Her lips parted and immediately a salty stream flooded her mouth from Zevran's. She moaned, yearning toward him, drinking it down despite the intensity of the normally mild flavor. It was like the difference between tasting smoked meat and being inside the smokehouse itself. And underneath the taste of the strange seed there was the familiar essence of Zevran. Elissa whimpered and thrust her tongue into his mouth, seeking more.

"The secrets of the Crows are kept very close," Ignacio said as Zevran withdrew, leaving her lips and tongue blazing with the feel and taste of his kiss. "The purpose of the Trial is to insure that they remain so. Initiates undergo torture, during which they are asked the name of their master, the location of their cell, the person who contracted them, or who they are meant to kill. The torture ends when they die, or break, or when their master is content that they will not give up their secrets. But I find the methods of my brothers to be barbaric and inefficient. An assassin who has been badly scarred or injured so severely that the lingering pain will hamper their agility for the rest of their days is less effective. A dead assassin fulfills no contracts, and so all the years and expense of housing and
training the apprentice are wasted. Thus, I have refined the Trial, yes? You will break, or you will prevail, without ever being injured. Rise."

Wary and confused, Elissa brought her feet down and stood. She noted Ignacio said nothing of whether she might die, and wondered at the cost of failure if she should break. Her heart pounded against her ribs like the wings of a caged bird buffeting the bars of it prison, desperately injuring itself in an effort to win its freedom. Fear and alarm rushed through her body and weakened her knees, for suddenly she saw in Ignacio's eyes something cold and pitiless. She no longer felt certain that his "soft spot" for Zevran afforded quite the measure of safety Zevran assumed it would. Strangely, she was reminded of Duncan and the grim determination with which he had killed Ser Jory rather than allow the knight to back out of the Joining and spread the secrets of the Grey Wardens. Only she suspected Ignacio would feel much less remorse should she, or Zevran, or both die here tonight. Her eyes sought Zevran's, but he was staring at Ignacio warily, his fingers twitching but not yet moving toward the hilts of his daggers. She knew that if he drew, Cesar and Ignacio would be upon him in an instant and he would be dead.

But to what purpose? Was Ignacio under contract with Loghain after all? If so, why lead her to Loghain's men and warn her of their trap?

Stupid. Stupid! she cursed herself, feeling the teeth of the trap biting deep. They assumed because her party had defeated Zevran and his hired thugs that she was the more dangerous of the two, and so Ignacio had lured her into laying aside her weapons and armor and encumbering herself with the corset and gown, neutralizing the threat she posed. If this scene turned violent, she would be useless, and she suspected that she would have no opportunity to take Ignacio or Cesar by surprise as she had the soldiers in Lothering.

She wondered how much of her paranoia was due to the potion in her blood and how much of it was a realistic assessment of the threat they found themselves faced with, but she could not discern the difference. All she knew was that this was no game; no password or phrase would end what was to come.

"Now," Ignacio commanded, his tone still mild and harmless, "turn, and kneel before the chair with your back to us. Cesar."

When she had complied, Cesar came forward with a pair of leather cuffs. He buckled them around her wrists snugly, and then withdrew from his pocket a pair of small, golden clamps, each dangling its own short chain. She immediately discerned their purpose.

Elissa was no stranger to the implements of erotic pain: she had tried many of them under her mother's supervision, and had acquired a taste for the bite of clamps upon her nipples. Her cunt warmed and flooded at the sight of them, but she did not account for the potion Cesar as massaged into her nipples. The fine, blunted teeth of the clamps felt as brutal and fierce as a claw trap, overwhelming her with both pleasure and pain in an instant.

She wailed as one was applied with detached efficiency by the silent Cesar, and then the other. She writhed and arched and reached up to release the clamps, but Cesar caught her hands. To the short chain dangling from her left nipple, he attached the cuff on her right wrist, and repeated the process, securing her left wrist to her right nipple so that her arms were pulled close to her chest, crossed before her.

Now she could not writhe or struggle, for each motion of her arms pulled on the clamps and renewed her agony. Normally the true torture of nipple clamps was not in wearing them--for eventually the pain of the clamps became a dull ache--but in the moment of their removal, when the blood rushed into the nipples and brought back with it sensation. In this configuration, however, the pain never
dulled, and each motion that caused any tension in the chain refreshed the agony.

"You will notice your hands are not bound together," Ignacio's voice floated over her pain. "You cannot reach the clamps with your fingers to release them, but if you are strong-willed enough, if you are willing to endure the necessary pain, you may pull them off and gain your freedom."

"Nooo," Elissa moaned, her body shaking with the effort not to move. "Please...."

"You wish them off?"

"Yes, please!" she gasped, sensing an offer of mercy in his words. "It's too much! It hurts! Maker, please, it hurts!"

"I shall happily remove them, but first you need answer a question," Ignacio trawled the bait before her, and she felt once again the teeth of the trap he had laid. "Has Zevran revealed the secrets of the Crows to you?"

Elissa sobbed in pain and despair as she finally understood the intent of his inquisition. This was about Zevran's trustworthiness rather than her own. Ignacio was trying to ascertain whether he should honor Crow tradition and kill Zevran, or if he should let the elf go. Zevran's life depended on her ability to refuse him the answer he sought.

She saw the shifting of shadows on the wall before her as Zevran surged to his feet. "Enough, Ignacio! If I am your target, you need not subject her to this. Kill me, if you will. Do not make the Warden the instrument of my punishment for failing the Crows."

"You will sit and be silent, or you will die here," Ignacio said coldly. "You are not foolish enough, Zevran, to believe I have only Cesar here to aid me should I decide to kill you both. You will not leave this room alive unless I say it is so."

"No!" she screamed, denying both Ignacio's threat and his query, feeling an agonizing tug at her nipples with each heaving breath she took.

"Ah, then you choose to endure the clamps, yes?" Ignacio replied. "Very well. Continue, Cesar."

Ruthlessly, Ignacio's man pushed Elissa down until her chest was pressed on the seat of the chair, and the pressure of the brocade-covered seat was its own form of torture as her bound hands were crushed against her breasts, pulling once more on the chains. Her skirt was lifted and air brushed her bare backside as it was gathered up and draped across her back, leaving her ass thrusting out and her dripping cunt exposed. She moaned in humiliation, and then Cesar's cold, gloved hand was there, spreading the potion over the skin of her buttocks and thighs, massaging it in. It took a moment longer than it had on her nipples and mouth, but soon her skin felt more alive, felt every waft of air like a gale, every light touch like a hard jab, every soft squeeze as though it were a brutal pinch.

Cesar's gloved hand disappeared, and she was left like that. She didn't know how long; time had long since ceased to be counted by any measure other than the horrible throbbing pain of her nipples. She heard, rather than saw, the approach of the belt as it whistled through the air, and then she was shrieking.

It wasn't a particularly hard blow; she'd endured worse from Nan when she'd misbehaved as a small girl. And yet, it felt as though the molten rock that she'd been told ran through the caverns of Orzammar had been undammed to flow across her skin. She reared up in response, and screamed again when the motion caused her nipples to nearly tear free of the fine teeth of the clamps.

"Andraste have mercy!" she sobbed, mewling and thrashing her bare ass back and forth in an effort
to escape the pain, trying desperately not to pull at the clamps on her nipples. Tears flowed unchecked down her face, tasting like the bitterest brine as her tongue flicked the scalding stream from her sensitized lips.

"I have no wish to hurt you, Warden," Ignacio said. "Only answer my question, and we shall spend the rest of the night in far more pleasurable pursuits, yes?"

Maker help her, her cunt pulsed in response, responding eagerly to the offer of pleasure. Pleasure, yes, she was desperate for it, had been waiting all day for it. All she had to do was answer his question.

His question? What was his question? There was a trap here, she knew it, but rational thought was quickly being lost in the haze of suffering. What was she supposed to say?

Zevran. Zevran had told her things, many things, about the Crows. From the very moment she'd shaken him awake on that dusty road....

I wasn't paid for my silence. Not that I offered it for sale, precisely...

He'd told her about Loghain hiring him, told her about his training with the Crows, had even begun to teach her some of his skills as an assassin.

Zevran would die if she answered honestly, and so she screamed, "Please! Zevran never told me anything! Please stop!"

"Ah, you prolong your own suffering with lies, little Warden," Ignacio said, sounding regretful, and the belt whistled again. And again. And again.

She lost count at a dozen lashes, but still it went on and on. No inch of skin, from the base of her spine to the tops of the black stockings just above her knees, went untouched by the belt. No matter how desperately her rational brain told her that her flesh was not actually being flogged from her bones, her nerve endings were sending her another message entirely. She felt certain huge, open, bloody weals were being raised across the backs of her thighs and buttocks. She shrieked and flailed helplessly, then shrieked again when her movements caused another ripple of torment to her nipples.

Suddenly the lash was gone, and all that remained was the scouring pressure of the soft air currents across her skin. Elissa collapsed against the seat of the chair, insensible to the aching of her knees and nearly unaware of the pull of the chains on her nipples, so great was her relief.

The sound of a cork being pulled from a vial reached her ears, and then Cesar's hand was before her face, wafting something that smelled strongly of mint under her nose.

"Tell me what I want to know, and Cesar shall save his mint oil to perform a cool, refreshing massage to your shoulders and back later. If he pours it on your sweet ass right now, it will burn like acid. The choice is yours, Warden," Ignacio taunted.

Weeping, trembling violently, Elissa held her silence. At least until the oil touched her skin.

Her sensitive throat burned from screaming. The very flames that had incinerated Andraste could not have been hotter than the touch of that oil upon her skin. She felt as though her flesh was being seared and charred by a torch held against her thighs and ass.

How long it went on, she could not say, for she began to feel as though she were floating, not truly within her body. She had wept so hard and so long she now had no tears left to shed and her eyes swollen and burning. She'd given up struggling and simply lay against the seat of the chair, quaking
and shuddering helplessly, and yet strangely at peace. The pain had ceased to be something to resist, and had instead become something to ride, like a small boat bobbing on the waves of the Waking Sea.

The rough scouring of a towel across her blazing skin brought her back into her body, and she wailed in pain, only to realize it did not feel nearly as intense as it should have. Cesar pulled her up and abruptly released the clamps from her nipples. She hadn't realized that the pain had receded to a dull roar there until it came screaming back. Despite the agony, the experience made her aware of the fact that the heightened sense of taste was gone from her mouth; her lips no longer felt swollen and sensitive.

Ignacio's potion had worn off.

How long? she wondered, her mind working frantically during the reprieve. How long had it been until the effects had faded? An hour? Two, at most? Surely she could endure whatever he would do to her if she knew that it would eventually wear away.

"You have done well so far, Warden," Ignacio praised her, and he heard his footsteps as he came close. For the first time, he touched her, his hands trailing across her sensitive buttocks and thighs. Even without the potion, her skin was still inflamed from the lashing she had received and she felt even the softest touch of his fingers keenly. "You are exquisite in your suffering. But pain is not the only way to prise information from unwilling lips. Pleasure can be equally effective. Secrets spill during pillow talk as the sweat of passion cools, yes? And what one may not yield to end the pain of torture they may scream from the rooftops to be free of the frustration of unfulfilled desire."

On the seat of the chair, Cesar deposited two carved and polished wooden phalli. She was quite familiar with objets d'amour and understood the contoured shape and flared base of the second one indicated it was to go into her ass. Neither one was particularly large nor intimidating, and yet she felt the cold fist of alarm constrict her heart.

"I will fuck you with these," Ignacio said coldly. "But first I will coat them with the potion. The pleasure will be so intense, it will be agony, unless you tell me what I want to know."

"No," she whispered, though whether in horror or denial, she could not say.

The goblet reappeared before her, held in Cesar's hands. "By now you must have noticed your head is clearer, your emotions less intense, and realized the potion, while potent, is short-lived. But I can renew it any time I desire. Drink."

"No," she answered again, her voice stronger, though hoarse with screaming as she tried to push herself to her feet only to find her limbs would not support her. It took several tries, and she was amazed Cesar did not force her down again, but she rose on wobbling legs and turned to face Ignacio as he watched her calmly.

"You will drink, or I will assume Zevran has given you the secrets of the Crows and he will die."

"I dare not," she said again. "I know little about lyrium, except that it is addictive. I know even less what effects it might have on a babe in the womb. Though it pains me, if I must choose between the babe I carry and Zevran, I will choose my child. But I think it need not come to that. I would negotiate with you."

"The initiate does not negotiate the Trial with the master," Ignacio refused.

"But this is no actual Trial," she answered, feeling her resolve return with each passing moment. "I
am no Antivan Crow nor will I ever be, whatever work I may accept from you. No, this is about Zevran and whether you need feel bound to execute him on behalf of the Crows. But you already have your answer to that. You had it when you left him alive to bring me to you. Speaking hypothetically, even if Zevran had revealed to me the secrets of the Antivan Crows, it can be no threat to you or your organization. Zevran is now under my protection, and if I am strong enough to defeat him, skilled though he undoubtedly is, and get him to yield to me the secrets of the Crows, who then can possibly pry those secrets from my lips? Not even you with your skillful torments have yet succeeded. So what have you to fear, even if he reveals every last detail to me?"

"It is a matter of principle, of loyalty," Ignacio replied. "Of tradition."

She rolled her eyes at that. "Oh, please," she scoffed. "The tradition you have already flouted by implementing your own unique method of trying initiates? The tradition you have seen fit to forsake in suffering Zevran to live beyond the moment you became aware of his presence here in Denerim? You are hardly a traditionalist, Master Ignacio. It's a convenient excuse, but not a very compelling one. The fact is, you want Zevran to live. You find him beautiful and desirable. Beyond that, there is the fact that I find him to be an invaluable asset in my endeavor, and it is not in the interest of the Antivan Crows that the archdemon wins, for as you so aptly pointed out earlier, dead assassins fulfill no contracts, and dead patrons offer no coin. No, you don't do this out of obligation. You do it for pleasure. And that is something I know a great deal about."

"What, then, is your proposal?"

"You said before you would do a great deal to win my gratitude. And so you have. You have won it by helping me thwart the trap laid for the Grey Wardens and their supporters. You have won it by seeing to it that no further contracts on me will be accepted by the Antivan Crows. And you have won it by allowing Zevran to live. Therefore, let there be no more pretenses to coerce my acquiescence to your games," she lifted her head proudly, elegantly, as though unaware of the fact that her breasts were still wantonly displayed by the corset, and her hair wild and mussed from her struggles before. "You have my gratitude. Now claim it. Play your games of erotic torment with me. Use your toys, your potion. I will accept it all, and you will taste the skills upon which Zevran bestowed such fulsome praise. I have three conditions. One: I will not imbibe the potion again. If you have any doubts my passion is genuine, that fault lies in your own skill, rather than my response. Two: you will use your considerable influence among the Antivan Crows to suggest that Zevran's assistance to me is actually in the Crows' interest and that he need not die for failing to kill me. And three: Zevran first settles the debt between us, as you promised him he could."

Ignacio stared at her as the silence stretched on interminably, but she returned the look evenly, as though her ordeal had not left her shaken and in utter dread of a renewal of that agony. Finally, the Crow master nodded. "Very well. I accept your offer of gratitude."

Elissa sat then, her limbs weak with relief. But she could not allow any weakness or trepidation to show. So instead, she resumed the position Ignacio had first demanded of her. She spread her skirt wide, draping it over the arms of the chair, and then opened her legs and hooked her knees over the arms of the chair as well. And as she did so, she met Ignacio's eyes squarely and gave him a slow, seductive smile. She trailed a single finger up her shining, wet cleft, and brought it to her mouth, sucking on it slowly, and all the while, she held his eyes.

"Come, Zevran," she gestured with her hand without breaking her eye contact with Ignacio. Zevran rose and crossed to her, his displeasure betrayed only by the tension about his mouth in the middle of that cautiously neutral face. Only once he was before her did Elissa allow herself to look at him. "I gave my word, and thus I am still yours to command, Zevran," she said softly. "You need only speak your wish and I will rescind my bargain with Master Ignacio, whatever the consequences may be for
both of us."

"I would not have you do that, my dear Warden," he answered softly.

"Then what is your will?"

Zevran dropped to his knees before her, and his hands slid up her splayed thighs to her knees, pushing them, if possible, even farther, more obscenely apart. "Only that I taste the first release from this sweet cunny before Master Ignacio learns that the most deadly weapon the Grey Warden possesses is not her dagger, but her sheath."

He bent his head then, and his tongue drew a long, slow line up her slick cleft and Elissa met Ignacio's eyes again, let him see the passion that darkened her eyes, her response as Zevran's tongue probed deep within her cunt, rubbing his face in her nectar until his skin shone with it. Still staring at Ignacio, she lifted her hands and cupped her breasts, gently fingering her nipples, and then her eyes did flutter shut, a moan escaping her lips. Maker, her nipples were tender; even the lightest touch was nearly too intense to bear after the ordeal of the clamps. And still she toyed with them, letting herself relish the intensity of the sensation, but more importantly, letting Ignacio watch her.

She bucked when Zevran's unerring tongue found her clitoris, sliding firmly over it. When he began to trace circles around it with the tip of his tongue, her head fell back and a sigh trickled from her lips. "Yes, Zevran, oh....Maker, yes..."

Zevran understood perhaps better than she that they were putting on a show, and so he took his time when it would actually have required very little effort to bring her to completion. Instead, he made her whimper and writhe and beg for it shamelessly, until her fingers left her nipples and instead clenched in his hair, pulling him in closer, thrusting against his face. When she came, she came wailing his name, humping his face as wantonly as the most common whore displayed in borrowed finery.

She stroked Zevran's face with one limp hand before he moved away, but he did not return to sit beside Master Ignacio, instead taking up position across the room near Cesar. It was, she realized, the position of a bodyguard. That was Cesar's function, whatever his secondary role as surrogate tormentor might be, and Zevran had done away with deference and instead chosen to declare his willingness to act as Elissa's defender should the need arise.

While Zevran had pleasured her, Ignacio had not been idle. He reclined on the settee, his breeches unlaced and open, and upon his erect shaft he wore a tight leather sheath, much like Cesar's glove. Though his size had been average or only slightly better when Zevran had serviced him, with the sheath he was somewhat thicker. That would not have been disturbing in itself, except that before her alarmed gaze, he drizzled a scant amount of the potion over the leather, coating it.

"You wished to play my game with no pretense, Warden. Come, then, and ride."

Swallowing her trepidation, Elissa rose and approached him, sweeping her skirts apart and straddling his lap. Ignacio's hands settled on her hips, and once again she met his eyes unflinchingly. She would let him see her struggle, her torment, whatever lay in store if that would serve his pleasure. He pushed on her hips, and slowly she slid down onto his encased cock.

"Oh, Maker!" she moaned as he filled her. No sooner had the waves of her orgasm subsided then she began to feel the potion's effects. His shaft suddenly felt huge within her, the minor stretching of her muscles to accommodate it felt as though she was straining to take it all in, filled beyond endurance. The fine stitching on the leather sheath made it feel ribbed, rubbing against the inside of her cunt.
When his thumb, still bearing a minute drop of the potion, found her clitoris and began to rub, Elissa screamed, thrashing wildly in another orgasm. A push of his hips, driving him deeper into her, and she was coming again.

"The sheath," Ignacio grunted as he thrust up into her again, "will mute anything I feel. I will not come again until I take it off, which I will not do until the potion fades. If I wished, I could fuck you all night this way."

Her back arched as another orgasm crashed through her, sending her practically toppling from his lap. He caught her, pulling her close, and his lips found the upper swells of her breasts, kissing and biting the soft white skin. When his lips closed over her nipple, everything within her clenched, sensation rippling through her body as his hands began to guide her up and down along his cock. One orgasm blended into another, and another, and still she was coming, feeling unbearably full, every thrust, every roll of his hips, every bump against the gate of her womb magnified until the pleasure did, indeed, become a torment all its own.

Soon she was sweating, her hair clinging wetly to her face as she tossed her head with each spasm of agonizingly intense pleasure. Ignacio pulled her close against him once more, holding her quaking form immobile. He pulled her skirts up and aside, baring her backside once more, and when she felt the slim, carved wooden phallus gliding into her ass, slick with potion, she screamed and began to beg and plead to no avail. Though slender, the toy made her feel unendurably full, the muscles of her ass clenching and seizing around it.

There was no end to the pleasure, so painfully, blindingly intense she could not bear it, begged for it to end, pleaded that it was too much. And then that sublime, floating feeling came upon her, taking her away from her overwhelmed senses, and when it did, she began to ride him, becoming an accomplice in her own ordeal as she flexed and surged up and down.

It almost felt like losing consciousness, except she was aware of herself, aware of the pleasure, the overwhelming sensation flooding her body. But she no longer resisted; rather, she strove for it, rode it like his cock, rose and fell with it.

Time ceased to have any meaning, until she became aware of Ignacio, panting and sweating with exertion, pushing her off his lap. He spilled her onto her back on the settee and peeled the leather sheath from his furiously engorged cock. Without ceremony, he crawled over her and slammed into her, and even though the effects of the potion had faded, she was unbearably over-sensitized. She came again, moaning, and once more she was floating, aware of Ignacio fucking and straining above her, aware of her own bucking hips, her legs gripping him, pulling him in deeper as she thrust up to meet him, but no longer overwhelmed by it.

Then Ignacio was withdrawing from her, his seed a cool trickle from her swollen cunt. Zevran came immediately to her side, gently withdrawing the phallus from her ass and helping her to sit up. With tender, solicitous hands he straightened her clothing, for she could not do it herself. She ached and throbbed and she was weary, weary and replete.

"I trust you are satisfied, Ignacio?" she heard Zevran say.

"I am," Ignacio said, his voice still somewhat breathless. "Truly, Zevran, she is a marvelous creature. Certainly worth embracing the wrath of the Crows for."

"Thank you," Elissa said, finding her voice, as ever taking umbrage at being discussed in the third person. "And thank you also, Master Ignacio, for such an enlightening experience. The ways of pleasure are my particular field of interest. That potion of yours may be more diabolical than the archdemon itself, but I'm quite certain I shall never know its like again."
To her amazement, Ignacio rose, giving a courtly bow and kissing her hand. "You are most welcome, Warden. I beg you, keep the gown. There is also another scroll in the chest for you, should you decide to learn of anyone else...interesting. I will always have work for one so skilled."

She managed to nod, and Ignacio preceded Cesar from the room. The door closed behind them and she was alone with Zevran once more.

She was swaying on her feet, half-asleep as he unlaced her from the gown and the corset beneath, stripping off the dainty embroidered slippers and rolling down the fine black stockings. With tender solicitude he guided her to the bed and she sank wearily upon it. She was asleep before he had finished stripping and curled himself around her.

Chapter End Notes

The sketch is a rough draft sketch done by minoukatze at LJ. I think she abandoned the project before the finished version was done, as I never heard from her again. I never shared it before because I was awaiting the final version.
When Elissa awoke the next morning, Zevran was already out of bed and dressed, looking out the window of the room at the empty pre-dawn Denerim marketplace square.

She stretched, feeling much less ache than she might have anticipated, given her ordeal the night before. But then, whatever it may have felt like, what she had endured had actually not been all that physically taxing. No welt nor bruise remained after the mild whipping she'd received, and if her nipples were tender, that was certainly nothing new with her pregnancy. If there was one thing that hurt, it was her throat, from all the screaming she'd done.

"Ah, you are awake," Zevran said briskly when he turned at her movement. "Good. It would not do to keep our companions waiting for us to join them, yes?"

"You're dressed already?" she asked plaintively. "Surely you're not going to waste the opportunity of the only bed we're likely to see for weeks."

Zevran did not smile. Even more distressing, he remained dressed.

"My dear Warden," he said, coming to perch beside her on the edge of the bed. "I owe you a very great apology."

"Whatever for?" she asked, perplexed.

"A great many transgressions, I fear," he said with a troubled frown. "First and foremost, I should never have introduced you to Master Ignacio. Though I understood he was dangerous, I let the preferential treatment he'd once bestowed upon me, and the memory of the pleasure I'd had with him color my judgment. I underestimated his intentions. What you suffered last night was entirely my fault. I did not foresee that he would attempt to use you to punish me. I thought he had a sexy game in mind, or perhaps he genuinely wished to conduct a Trial for you. I was mistaken."

"Oh, come now, Zevran, it's not as bad as all that," Elissa scoffed, uncomfortable with his uncharacteristically somber mood. "I'm no stranger to erotic pain; I've been testing nipple clamps on myself ever since my newly-developed breasts finally stopped aching. No real harm was actually done, and in the end, matters turned out pleasantly enough."

"And that is yet another reason I must apologize," he sighed. "When we came to Denerim, I promised you that you would not need to 'use sex,' as you so aptly put it, unless it was also fun for you. Instead, you wound up using it to get us both out of a very dangerous situation, and even more, to attempt to get me out from under the sentence of death imposed upon me by the Crows."
Elissa huffed impatiently. "Zevran, do not credit me with altruistic motives I haven't earned," she said. "You are of benefit to me, and I can use every skilled ally I can get. Moreover, right now you're helping keep me sane. If I saved your life, it was because I need you."

"Still, you should not have needed to do that. I failed in my promise to you."

"Then I suppose you shall simply have to make it up to me," she said lightly, rising to her knees and sliding her silken arms around his neck, feeling the chill of the metal studs on his armor against her sleep-warmed skin. "We have an entire day left here in Denerim. Plenty of time for you to find someone to command me to fuck for fun, rather than out of necessity."

She drew his head down, pushing up to meet his mouth with parted lips. Lightly she flicked her tongue against his, drinking in his sigh, followed by a low moan of approval. His hand rose and cupped her breast, so much fuller and heavier as her pregnancy advanced, and as he did so she felt the leather of his bracer rub against her ribs.

"Ah, my sweet Warden," he murmured, lifting her breast and bending his head low to lightly flick his tongue across her nipple, rolling his eyes up to meet hers. "Never have I seen a sight such as you last night, glorious in your passion. Someday I wish to watch you fuck another man under less dire circumstances."

Liquid heat pooled in her center at the very thought, and she began pulling impatiently at the buckles of his armor, then suddenly she withdrew, feeling queasy and voraciously hungry at the same time.

"Oh, Maker. Blast it!" She became aware of another throbbing need, one which had nothing to do with sex, pulsing between her legs. She cast an anxious glance at the chamber stool and realized that what the inn room might offer in amenities and comfort, it sorely lacked in privacy for matters that were usually attended to by discreetly slipping away behind a bush.

"I need food," she muttered, irritated. "Can you see if you can get me some bread and perhaps some cheese while I dress?"

Zevran had undoubtedly caught her look toward the chamber stood but thankfully opted not to tease her about it. It was not the first time their morning passion had been interrupted by such urgent matters, and he knew well how it embarrassed her. "It shall be as you wish," he said, rising from the bed and giving her a flamboyant bow.

He returned bearing more than just a tray of bread and cheese. "I encountered Cesar in the hallway," Zevran announced. "It seems you left quite an impression upon Master Ignacio, for he has sent another gift for you, to go with the gown. Setting the tray aside, he offered her the long cloak he'd draped over his arm. It was finely made but sturdy, beautiful and yet practical enough for extended wear while traveling in the winter cold. Elissa stroked an admiring hand down the heavy black-dyed wool, smiling. "And here I was afraid we would not be able to afford suitable winter gear," she murmured approvingly. "This should save us a copper or two."

"At the very least," Zevran agreed. "Between this and the fee Master Ignacio paid for our service to him yesterday, our financial situation may not be quite as desperate as you fear."

"Well," Elissa muttered, looking at the half-decomposed corpse in the back room of Brother Genitivi's humble house, "this is inconvenient."

"There's no sign of Weylon, the man we spoke to yesterday," Leliana reported after checking the
other rooms.

"I think *this* is Weylon," Elissa coughed, gagging. Thankfully it was winter, and the bedroom cold. Though a few days old, the corpse had decomposed very little. She imagined in summer it would have been quite unbearable. She held a hand to her nose in an effort to block the odor, but was quickly forced to flee the room and the house before her sensitivity to strong smells had her retching in the gutter. The others joined her some moments later.

"We found some of Brother Genitivi's notes," Alistair announced. "Whoever Leliana and Wynne spoke to yesterday, apparently he didn't take them all with him. Brother Genitivi did mention heading toward Lake Calenhad, but from there he indicates he'll be heading up into the southern Frostback Mountains toward some village called Haven."

Elissa stared at him in disbelief. "Tell me you're joking."

"Um...no?"

"Maker's balls!" she cursed. "Bad enough when we thought we would have to go all the way to Lake Calenhad, but now we have to go up into the mountains in the middle of winter? Oh, Andraste's ass!"

"At least you have a suitable cloak for it now," Zevran pointed out mildly, earning himself a glower for his troubles.

Elissa sighed and pulled out her map, resting it atop a nearby barrel to study it. "All right then. We'll stop by Lake Calenhad on our way west and see if we can track down any more information about Brother Genitivi, anything that may spare us the necessity of trekking up into the mountains. The lake will be partially frozen and dangerous with ice floes, so we won't be able to get across by boat again. Instead we'll skirt around the south and stop in at Redcliffe, where we can check on the Arl's state and resupply for the journey up the mountain.

"Leliana," she continued, "I need you to go to the marketplace and locate Morrigan and Sten. Make sure they're aware we need gear suitable for mountain weather. I suspect at least a few of us are going to need new boots and we'll all need more sleeping furs and more heavy woolen socks. Damn, maybe even new tents, something made of heavier canvas in case we get caught in a blizzard. I'll go see Sergeant Kylon; our bonus from Master Ignacio isn't going to go far at this rate. Alistair and Wynne, go back to the Chantry board and see what else you can find. If you find an odd job someone is willing to pay you for, take it. I'll also see if I can track down the Blackstone Irregulars and find out if they have any other work for us. We'll meet at the inn where you stayed last night and have supper there, but I'm afraid unless we have a windfall, we'll need to make camp outside town this evening."

Her mood was terse as she left with Zevran and her mabari to seek out Sergeant Kylon. The gruff sergeant smiled to see her and gave her a polite bow. She delivered news of the body in Brother Genitivi's home and he dispatched several of his men to retrieve it and deliver it to the Chantry.

"I was hoping you hadn't left Denerim yet," he said. "I think I have just the perfect job for you...."

Contrary to her expectations, Kylon's offer of employment did not brighten her mood. After accepting the job, she stalked away from him, more furious than ever.

"Sport?!" she spat. "Bloody bored nobles, sitting on their arses all winter with nothing better to do than hope for some amusing bloodshed! Well, I'll be damned if I give it to them!" she vowed.
"Might I point out that these mercenaries are likely in Loghain's employ?" Zevran offered cautiously, and she rounded on him with a snarl.

"I don't fucking care. I'll not risk injury to myself or one of my companions--to make no mention of my babe--for the entertainment of those useless layabouts. Actually, I have a better idea," she paused, thoughtfully. "If I handle this properly, perhaps I can win some goodwill from the mercenaries. Maybe even enough to make them break with Loghain and come in on my side."

Zevran gave her a curious look. "How do you propose to do that?"

"I don't know," she muttered, groaning in frustration. "I can't offer them sex, not in a tavern full of noblemen before whom I must preserve my reputation. Flattery, perhaps? Maybe I can charm them into leaving."

An odd look crossed Zevran's face, and he stared at her for a long moment before he asked cautiously, "Warden, just how badly do you wish to make money and win allies?"

"Badly enough I'm willing to accept this asinine excuse for employment," she muttered. At his look, she answered more calmly, "Loghain's mercenaries concern me greatly. We don't have the forces to combat them, and every resisting soldier Loghain's hired thugs kill reduces our available force when it comes time to fight the archdemon. As for money, well, many of our company are geared in substandard armor with weak weapons. If we wish to be effective, we need better armor and runes so that Sandal can enchant our weapons. Right now, we don't have that; we're barely clothed adequately for the cold, and if our winter gear costs too much we won't have enough left to feed ourselves. At this point, I'll do just about anything."

Zevran nodded once. "Very well, then. Come along."

He stopped by the stall of an Orlesian merchant and bought some incense, then led Elissa back toward Brother Genitivi's house. Weylon's body had been removed, and with it much of the stench had abated. Zevran opened the windows, then built a fire in the stove to combat the cold. He threw incense on the fire and soon the aroma of sandalwood and jasmine began to pervade the small house.

"Dress yourself in the gown and stockings Ignacio gave you," he commanded her. "Wear your cloak over it."

Watching him warily, Elissa obeyed, once again astonished at how immodest the gown was. As she dressed, Zevran rearranged some of the furnishings, hauling books and papers out of the study area into the small bedroom where they'd found the body, and moving the straw-filled tick from the bed into the study, laying it on the floor. Beside it, he sat a stack of towels and a pitcher of water from the well outside. Then he shut off the bedroom. Once he was done, what little odor that had lingered in those outer rooms was no longer discernible.

Zevran carefully studied Elissa's appearance and then pulled the hood of the cloak over her head. He opened the door for her, asking her to request that her mabari stay and guard the house until they returned. When she would have stepped through the portal, his hand on her arm stopped her. He pressed close to her, his fingers snaking under her hood and through her hair, pulling her head back as he had done just the previous day when asserting his dominance over her. His lips brushed hers as he spoke softly. "By your own promise, you belong to me today, yes? No matter what I demand of you?"

"That was our agreement, yes."

"You are my whore until you end our game," he emphasized, his eyes dark and intent upon hers.
"And unless you end it now, you will be a whore in actual fact when we next return to this house."

Elissa's eyes widened and her heart hammered as she began to understand his intention. Her mouth opened, and a refusal was on her lips when suddenly she stopped, remembering the words she'd spoken to him just the day before, the curiosity she'd expressed. He was offering her wish, offering her the chance to know, and it was not likely she'd ever get the chance again.

Breathlessly, she nodded instead, but it was not enough for Zevran. "I would hear it from your lips."

"Yes," she whispered, leaning against him when her limbs weakened with desire. "Yes. I am your whore."

Zevran nodded and led her back to the Gnawed Noble tavern. There he purchased a bottle of Antivan brandy from the barkeep and with a few discreet inquiries, quickly determined who was the leader of the mercenary crew carousing within, a tall, red-haired man. Making sure her face was hidden to all save by direct scrutiny, he approached the sailor.

"My friend, might I beg a moment of your time?"

"What would an elf be wantin' with the Crimson Oars?" the man demanded.

"I thought you should be aware that the city guard will be here shortly intent on driving you from this tavern," Zevran said calmly. "You see, there have been complaints...."

"Complaints?" the sailor repeated, outraged. "We have good coin, and we're breakin' none of your laws. I spit on your complaints."

"I agree, it is an injustice." Zevran's voice was heavy with sympathy. "But you may wish to reconsider annoying the nobility of the city, lest you find the source of your good coin dries up, yes? Instead, consider that your time and coin might be better spent in other pursuits."

"Eh?" the mercenary asked, and Zevran took Elissa's arm and pulled her closer. Positioning himself so that none but the leader and a few of the mercenaries closest to him could see, Zevran pulled open the front of her cloak, affording them a long look at the scandalous display of her breasts, barely concealed by the gown.

With his fingers beneath her chin, he lifted her head so that they could see her face beneath the deep hood.

"A rare piece here, yes?" Zevran said softly. "No common whore, this. Trained to please a man by the finest courtesan in all of Antiva, but alas, ill luck intervened and now she is left to make her way as best she can. Her price is no small coin; she is fit to service royalty and she will cost you accordingly. But you will not likely ever see another so beautiful or so skilled, at least not one that a common mercenary such as you could ever buy for any amount of coin. All you need do is bring your men to the small house across the way. Thus, the noble patrons of the tavern are kept content, and you and your men will experience a treat none of these fine nobles will ever touch. That way everyone is happy, yes?"

The leader of the mercenary crew looked at her for a long moment, and Elissa held his eyes, letting her own apprehension show, and a blush color her cheeks. He reached out, as though he would touch her, push her hood back, but Zevran's dagger blocked his way. "When your coin is in my hand, only then may you touch."

Casually, Zevran flipped Elissa's cloak back into place, covering her gown once more, and led her from the Gnawed Noble. Before the doors closed behind them, they heard the Crimson Oars' leader calling his men to gather around and get ready to leave.
Once inside Brother Genitivi's humble dwelling again, Zevran silently took Elissa's cloak. A strange silence had settled over her; she found herself unwilling to speak, lost deep in her thoughts.

_A whore in truth you will be..._

This was going to happen, she thought, surprisingly unafraid. Within moments, those rough mercenaries would barge through the door. They would hand Zevran their money, and he would send her off to fuck them. Already she could feel herself getting wet, a tight, coiling warmth knotting within her belly.

A whore. She was truly a whore. All that remained was the exchange of coin.

She swayed on her feet with a sudden surge of fear and desire.

Zevran, too, had gotten quiet. He watched her cautiously, perhaps concerned that she was going to change her mind and he would be left to explain to a rowdy, half-drunken crew of mercenary sailors why the whore they were promised would not be servicing them after all. They both were wound tight, and they flinched when a loud rap practically splintered the flimsy door.

His dagger drawn, Zevran opened the door and the entire crew of sailors--Maker, there were over a dozen of them!-- barged into the house. Smoothing her hands down her skirt, Elissa turned and faced them fully, drawing a deep breath that pushed her breasts up even higher. She lifted her chin and managed at once to look elegant and afraid.

"You wanted our coin, elf," the leader said, dropping a heavy purse into Zevran's hand. "That's over half the commission the regent paid us to bring our ship to this reeking city."

Elissa had to duck her head and bite her lip to keep from laughing at that. If only Loghain knew the purpose to which his money was being put....

Zevran opened the purse and quickly counted the sovereigns within. "You may have her until sundown on this, no longer," he said firmly, drawing the string on the purse with an attitude of finality.

Nodding, the leader of the mercenaries strode purposefully toward Elissa, but Zevran blocked his way once more. "One last word of caution, my friends," he said. "You could sail every port in Thedas and never see the like of this one again. Such quality does not stand up well to ill use, and a broken or maimed whore is useless to me, yes? The hound and I will be keeping careful watch. If you or your men damage her, you will pay with your blood."

"'Ow do we know she's worth it?" one of the mercenaries demanded. "I want to see more'n a pretty face afore I give up my share o' the fee."

"You wish a demonstration?" Zevran asked. "Very well. Show them, my whore, just what their money has bought."

With her eyes meekly downcast, Elissa approached the one who had spoken, and once she was before him, she sank to her knees, her skirts pooling around her on the floor, parting to reveal the black stockings and the bare expanse of thigh where they ended. Slowly, she reached out, stroking her hand firmly over the bulge beneath his voluminous breeches, and licked her lips. The half-hard cock beneath the rough fabric quickly grew firmly, and Elissa unlaced his breeches to release it.

She gave a long sigh and took his cock in hand, inhaling slowly as she stroked him with firm pulls. She prayed briefly that her throat would not betray her and, remembering her mother's lessons, took a deep breath, calming herself, relaxing her muscles, releasing all her tension. Then she opened her lips
and took him into her mouth, and in, and in, until the ridge around the head of his cock passed into her throat with a slight popping sensation and her nose was pressed firmly against the hair covering his groin.

"Maker's blood!" one of the mercenaries cursed softly--it may even have been the one whose cock was in her mouth. Her throat threatened to rebel, and she knew she'd have to withdraw soon or risk humiliating herself, but for the briefest moment, she let the convulsions of her gagging stimulate the head of his cock. When she pulled back, his cock was shiny with her saliva all the way to the base, and she licked her lips again, drawing another deep, calming breath until her urge to continue gagging subsided. Then she opened her mouth once more and took him within.

She made no effort to hide the tears that sprang reflexively to her eyes each time he thrust against the back of her throat and made her gag. She was playing a dangerous game with her volatile gag reflex, and yet it was necessary to impress these men with her skills. She thought with amusement that her mother had perhaps never anticipated that her tutelage would be put to use on such common men, but it stood her in good stead.

As Elissa worked, she became aware of Zevran talking to the leader of the mercenaries.

"Ah, hers is a tragic story, yes?" he said theatrically. "Betrothed as a mere child to a great nobleman, she was. Only, her intended wanted a wife who was skilled and enthusiastic in the arts of the bedchamber, and so he paid for one of the finest courtesans who ever lived to travel all the way from Antiva to teach his young bride. I came with her, for it would be my job to protect the girl and preserve her chastity until she wed. No sooner was the wedding complete and the bride bedded, however, then civil war broke out when the regent usurped the throne. The lady's husband was killed, and his titles and lands forfeited. She was left with nothing but the skills he'd insisted she be taught."

On Zevran babbled, spinning a tale of half-truths about his pet whore's desire to see Loghain overthrown, and how she was hoping to raise enough money to support a growing resistance movement being marshaled by a number of noble houses, as well as the mysterious Grey Warden who had survived the slaughter as Ostagar.

When the leader of the Crimson Oars protested that their loyalty had been bought and paid for by Loghain's coin, she nearly pulled away from the cock in her mouth to render a scathing reply, and was saved from giving the game away by the hands on the sailor she was pleasuring pulling her insistently closer as he thrust into her mouth. Salt washed over her tongue and slid down her throat.

"Whore, her mind whispered, and she felt a thrill of satisfaction at the thought.

While the mercenary held her head close, shuddering and softening in her mouth, she listened to Zevran's reply.

"Have a bit of brandy, my friend," Zevran said, pulling out the bottle he had purchased. "It is admirable that you stand by the bargain you made. But I would beg you consider also the number of nobles who oppose Loghain. Perhaps their chances of prevailing are not great with mighty warriors such as yourselves at Loghain's beck and call, but what if they should somehow prove victorious? It may be in your interest to have their gratitude. It is possible that you may not wish to serve Loghain as enthusiastically as you might otherwise have done, when he calls upon you to fight, yes? Or perhaps the coin he pays you may be diverted to some cause more worthy, with Loghain none the wiser."

Whatever the leader may have replied, Elissa missed it, for hands were upon her, pulling her up off her knees and into the crushing embrace of another mercenary, who plundered her mouth in a rough
kiss. She allowed herself to smile and laugh, as though charmed by his good-natured enthusiasm, and took his hand, leading him back into the transformed study and the mattress that awaited there.

The sailor began to strip, and as he did so, she noticed that behind him, Zevran had taken up position in the doorway, her mabari seated beside him, where they could keep a protective eye upon her and make sure none of the mercenaries got too rough. Though he spoke to the mercenaries in the other room, he watched her closely, and she felt another tight pang of arousal as she remembered his words about wanting to watch her fuck another man. Perhaps this was not merely about fulfilling her desire to know what being a whore was like.

Elissa unlaced her gown and let it drop to her feet, leaving her in her stockings and corset. Shouting with glee at the sight, the gregarious mercenary was swinging her up and carrying her to the rough straw tick. No sooner did he have her on her back then he was kneeling between her legs and thrusting hard into her tight, wet sheath. Elissa cried out in pleasure, and the mercenaries in the other room shouted bawdy cheers.

The mercenary required little effort to please, and took little trouble to pleasure her. Instead, he fucked her, hard and fast, grunting and sweating above her as her stocking-clad legs embraced his plunging hips. Despite the lack of artistry, it felt good, marvelous just to be fucked without the need to perform or exert herself. It was enough to be filled, over and over, hard and deep, and her moans and cries with each deep thrust were quite genuine. Through it all, the voice in her mind taunted her, told her how far she had fallen to be servicing rough mercenaries for the sake of mere coin.

Nothing but a common whore.

Her hand slid between her body and that of the mercenary, finding her clit, and then she was soaring, shuddering and crying out as he slammed into her, his hips slapping against her. He came with a triumphant yell that nearly shook the rafters, giving her another enthusiastic open-mouthed kiss. As she used a towel to clean herself up and expelled as much of his seed from her body as she could, he dressed. But before he left, he deposited a gold coin on the table near the doorway where Zevran stood guard.

She was a whore.

Another came to her then, one with considerably more endurance than the first. He pushed her to her hands and knees and fucked her from behind. And then he wanted her atop him, riding, and beneath him, her legs over his shoulders. The other sailors were starting to shout out cheerful curses and admonishments about him taking all day when he finally came. Again, she cleaned herself up, and again, he deposited a coin on the table before he departed.

Another came, wanting her mouth this time, and another. Then it was a pair, sandy-haired, freckled twins no less, and Elissa came screaming with them both in her cunt at once, rubbing their cocks against each other as they embraced her from both sides. Then another, dark-haired and rough, pushing her to her knees and using his saliva as lubrication before he thrust into her ass.

Then there was another. And another after that. Nameless, faceless, anonymous. They weren't men, but rather cocks lined up to fuck her. This one slender, that one stout, that one long and thick. Elissa lost count, lost track of how many times she'd been fucked on her back, on her knees, the number of cocks that discharged in her mouth.

All the while, Zevran chatted jovially, charming the men, regaling them with tales of her tragedy or with rumors of the heroics acts of the Grey Warden seeking to thwart Loghain and restore the throne to either the sitting Queen or another heir. He impressed upon them the lack of wisdom in dividing a land with civil war while a Blight spreads, and how whore and mercenary alike would be out of a
job if the Blight continued unchecked.

The stack of gold coins on the table mounted.

She was weary and getting sore by the time the leader of the mercenaries came to her, his shocking red hair soft beneath her fingers. Here, she exerted herself, encouraged him to lay down and let her give him a massage, using more than her hands. She rubbed her breasts against his back, tickled him with her hair, licked and kissed and nibbled her way down his spine. Her tongue slid between his twitching buttocks and caressed the knotted bud of his ass, drawing a shout from him.

When he tossed her onto her back and pushed into her, she embraced his hips with her knees and met his thrust enthusiastically, letting loose with all her energy and passion. She used every muscle in her cunt to clench down on him, making her sheath so tight it wrenched a groan from his lips. Her fingers found his hard nipples, pinching lightly as she nibbled at his chin and neck. He surprised her when his hand wedged between their bodies and located her clitoris, and she screamed in pleasure, quaking and spasming around his cock with just a few expert caresses. He spent himself inside her, and when he did, Elissa kissed him deeply, and thanked him.

She lay there wearily as he dressed, but when he passed Zevran, she heard him say, "If you can get word to this Grey Warden, tell her the Crimson Oars will come to her call."

Soon the small house was quiet, and through the dirty window she could see the sky outside was nearly dark. Zevran came to her, then, with another pitcher of water and her clothes and armor. Stretching her aching muscles, Elissa rose and counted the coins on the table. There were over twenty sovereigns there, and that didn't include what had been in the purse Zevran had been paid when the mercenary crew had arrived, nor the fee she would be paid when she reported back to Sergeant Kylon that the mercenaries had been cleared out of the Gnawed Noble. She stared at Zevran in amazement and he gave her a sly smile.

Laughing, she kissed him and began to wash and dress.

"How in Andraste's name did you make that much money?" Alistair asked, aghast, when Elissa told the party over supper that they could once again afford to stay at the inn, and would be remaining one more day in Denerim to acquire some much-needed armor upgrades at Wade's Emporium.

"We found some unexpected allies and financial support in the form of a mercenary crew whom, it turns out, doesn't care for Loghain's politics," she said evasively. Luckily, Alistair was too thrilled to inquire further. Still, it didn't sit well with her to be dishonest, and she wondered why she had bothered to lie to him, now, after all he already knew about her. If she wanted him to accept her for all that she was, surely he ought to know precisely how debauched she could be.

"Whore."

The word echoed tauntingly through her mind, only now there was no delicious thrill of the forbidden to go with it.

When supper was over and the others had sought their rented rooms, she pulled him aside. "I lied to you earlier," she said, clenching her jaw against the urge to sound penitent or guilty. "I was hired by Sergeant Kylon to clear the Gnawed Noble of a crew of rowdy mercenaries. They weren't causing any harm, but the highbrow clientele of the tavern didn't find their presence suitably aristocratic, you see. The proprietor expected me to kill them for the amusement of her patrons, but I found the idea repugnant. So instead, I lured them out by pretending to be a harlot. I took them to an empty house and I serviced them all, and they paid me extremely well. In so doing, I also won more allies to our cause. Loghain is going to be in for an unpleasant surprise if he expects the Crimson Oars to take up arms against us after today."
"Maker's breath!" Alistair groaned. "Why? Why did you do it? And why tell me about it?"

"I could tell you the practical reasons. We are desperate, Alistair," she said softly. "We can't survive on the scant coin we've been making doing odd jobs and selling what weapons and armor we can carry from our fallen foes. We need better equipment, or we're going to die. It's as simple as that. More than that, I told you once what I would do to stop Loghain and Howe. This gave me the chance to turn some of Loghain's hired thugs against him. It brought us that much closer to finding justice for Duncan and Ca--all the other Grey Wardens.

"But that's not the real reason I did it, merely a happy benefit. I did it because it was an adventure. Because I wanted to know what it would be like to sell myself." She sighed, slumping wearily against the wall outside his room. "As to why I told you...I don't want to lie to you. I don't want to hide. If I ever have any hope of you coming to terms with me, you need to know, even if you don't particularly want to."

"Why should it matter to you?" he asked bitterly. "You seem to be doing just fine without my acceptance."

Because I'm falling in love with you. The words were there, perched on the edge of her tongue, but she found she could not speak them.

"That I won't tell you," she said softly, blinking rapidly. "If I tell you now, the day is going to come when you'll doubt my sincerity, or wonder at my motivations, and I won't have that. Suffice it to say, your acceptance matters a great deal to me."

She left him then, dashing away tears that refused to be denied, and made her way to the room she was sharing with Zevran. She undressed and bathed again, feeling filthy despite having washed after her time with the mercenaries, and climbed shivering into bed where Zevran awaited her.

"I was beginning to think you would not come," he purred, nuzzling her ear as his hand slipped up her ribs to her breast. He withdrew when a sob escaped her, however.

"Ah, you are regretting our game, yes?" he said, his tone grave. "I feared this might happen."

"No," she answered, meeting his eyes. "I don't regret it. It was fun. I enjoyed myself, and we accomplished some very important things in the process."

"Then what is it, my sweet Warden?" he asked tenderly. "Perhaps something our chaste templar has said?"

Elissa's wet eyes widened at that. "How--"

"I am no fool," he chided softly. "Why are you here, and not with him?"

"Because he can't accept what I am, Zevran. Perhaps he never will. And you do. You don't ask me to change."

"No. But then, I am not the one who has your heart," he observed. "Perhaps if I did, it would be different."

"Perhaps," she sighed, rolling to face away from him as tears continued to trickle down her cheeks. His arms closed around her, but he made no effort to touch her otherwise. Slowly, her tears dried, and still he held her silently. She might have thought he was asleep but for the slight tension in his body.
Drawing a deep breath, she turned to face him once more. "I won't change," she stated firmly, seeking his lips.

She wondered if she was saying it for his benefit, or her own.
Zevran and Elissa issue challenges to one another.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Zevran, Elissa/Alistair (UST)

Elissa had expected Alistair to retreat after all that had passed between them in Denerim, after the searing kiss that had left her so shaken, the solemn confession that had confused and upset her. She thought all of it would make him run from her, hide in confusion—or possibly just disgust—and that she'd be able to try to gain some distance and perspective on her feelings for him.

Instead, he gave her a rose.

"I was just thinking...here I've been doing all this complaining, and you haven't been having a good time of it yourself," he said softly. "You've had none of the good experience of being a Grey Warden since your Joining. Not a word of thanks or congratulations. It's all been death and fighting and tragedy."

"No, Alistair," Elissa shook her head in denial. "Don't...don't try to make what I do some noble sacrifice on my part that gives me no pleasure...."

"Is it really that far from the truth?" he asked seriously. "Not that I don't think you don't...enjoy yourself most of the time, but I saw you in the Circle Tower. That wasn't about pleasure. But you did it anyway, because whatever your methods, you want to stop this Blight as badly as I do. Duncan once said to me that the Grey Wardens do what they must. I wasn't really paying attention at the time, but now I'm starting to see...you're doing just that."

She had no answer for that, and taking her silence for encouragement, Alistair continued, "I'm not saying I always approve. I'm not saying it doesn't trouble me sometimes, or that I don't think there might not be another way. But...you've gotten us this far, and it hasn't always been easy or pleasant for you, and I appreciate that. I never even thanked you for saving Connor and Isolde. So I thought maybe I could say something. Tell you what a rare and wonderful thing you are to find amidst all this...darkness."

It had brought tears to her eyes as she gave him a sappy smile, and to mask his own confusion and uncertainty, he forgot himself and turned to flirting, the way he had so often done before Redcliffe.

"Now, if we could right on past this awkward, embarrassing stage and get right to the steamy bits, I'd appreciate it."

Even knowing he was just flirting, she couldn't suppress the surge of excitement his words awoke within her. "You don't really mean that," she said with a shake of her head.

He drew closer, almost touching her, but not quite. "Maybe not yet," he said, his voice a low, sexy rumble that tightened everything within her from the waist down. "But maybe soon."

She hated how easily she could be swayed by him, how deeply he fascinated her. His purity, his innocence were alluring. His self-restraint was exotic, for men had always come easily to her. Even
that accursed self-righteous streak of his that told him concepts of right and wrong were cast in iron, intrigued her. As a virgin, she'd never had that. She had always been sexually aware, just as she had always been conscious of a certain degree of fluidity in her ethics.

She tried to tell herself her infatuation was simply due to the challenge his reticence posed, that it was a perverse desire to make a conquest of the one man who continued to deny her, that she would quickly become bored if she ever did bed him, and yet....

...She knew she lied. If she merely wanted a conquest, his approval wouldn't be so damned important to her. She didn't want him to fuck her. She wanted him to love her.

She was mad. That was the only answer for it.

She didn't understand it. She was certain after she confessed to him that she had whored herself out in Denerim that would be the end of it, that he would want nothing more to do with her. Sometimes she thought that was why she had told him; perhaps her honesty with him wasn't so much a desire not to hide as it was an effort to drive him away before her feelings got any more intense.

Instead, it had the opposite effect.

As their party set off west across the Bannorn once more, it became apparent that Alistair was done with hiding. He no longer fled when she was with Zevran, but stood his ground. He did not try to force himself between them, and yet every look, every twitch told her he was waiting for her to come the rest of the way to him. And she wanted to, but she didn't dare. Until she could be certain he wouldn't recoil in horror the next time she decided sex was the most expedient way to meet her ends, she couldn't close that distance.

In many ways, it was more maddening than his wariness had been. Now she knew she could have him, if she only were brave enough to take the risk.

Zevran noticed it as well. "I have no objections to prolonged foreplay," he said wryly one evening, following Elissa into her tent when she retired early to remove herself from Alistair's temptingly close presence, "but this dance you and Alistair are doing is beginning to get tedious."

"Shut up," she growled, pushing him down upon the bedroll and straddling him. "It's not foreplay."

"No?" Zevran gave a throaty chuckle as she pulled furiously at his laces and buckles. "Are you telling me that if you could choose to be in any tent in the entire camp at this very moment, you would choose to be here?"

"Of course not," she answered, deflecting the point he was trying to make with a mischievous smile. "I'd be in Sten's tent."

"Ah, I see. I have misread you all along, thinking it was the templar you wanted. Instead, you harbor a secret passion for the Qunari," Zevran nodded, affecting a thoughtful frown. "Well, I cannot say I blame you. He is quite large. I could be tempted myself."

"You have no idea," she hummed, giving a small laugh of success when one of the buckles on his armor yielded to her efforts.

"Now this I must hear," Zevran said eagerly, gently pushing her off him to sit up. "If I promise to
remove my armor more efficiently that you're managing to do it, will you tell me what you know?"

As he stripped, Elissa related to him the details of the time she'd spent in the Fade with Sten, dwelling with great relish on both the Qunari's size and the quantity of seed with which he'd deluged her. By the time she was finished, Zevran's eyes were glowing with intrigue and arousal.

"How big did you say he was?"

Elissa picked up his hand, examining it and pressed his fingers until they folded into a fist. Studying it for a moment, she finally shook her head. "No. Larger."

"Ah!" Zevran closed his eyes in rapture. "Next time I enter the Fade to dream, I want such an experience," he effused, sitting beside her fully nude, his erect cock standing testament to the truth of his words.

"But I'm not sure what was real," she said with a discontented pout as Zevran began to loosen her own armor. "It was a dream, after all, his dream, and males of just about any race are prone to...exaggeration."

"I see," Zevran hummed, managing to unbuckle and remove her cuirass much more effectively than she had his own in her frustration. "And the uncertainty haunts you."

"That and the challenge," she shrugged. "In the dream, taking him within me was a rather extreme effort. I'm not sure I dare, in reality. I suspect he can be gentler than he claims to be, but it would be negligent to take the risk with my babe."

"Then we shall simply have to be sure to prepare you well," Zevran purred, sliding a hand between her legs to finger her wet cleft.

Elissa laughed, spreading her legs for him. "As intriguing as that may sound, I sincerely doubt I'll ever have the opportunity."

"You must make the opportunity," Zevran said firmly. "If I were to make the offer, no doubt Sten would pummel me. No, if he likes anyone beside the mabari, he likes you. It must be you. You must take him all inside you, and return to me filled with and covered in his seed so that I may see and taste for myself the truth of your report."

"And just how am I supposed to manage that?" she asked as Zevran pushed her down upon her back. He lay between her legs and peeled away her smallclothes, his breath warm against her wet folds.

"You will find a way. I shall make a dare of it. I dare you to seduce the Qunari, if you can." He punctuated his declaration with a long, firm sweep of his tongue up her cleft.

"That hardly seems fair," she protested, clutching her fingers in his hair. "And just what is your forfeit if I meet this dare? Or do I get to present a challenge to you as well?"

"And what would you challenge me to do?" Zevran asked calmly.

"I don't know. Just who in camp have you been harboring a secret passion for? Besides Sten, of course. And don't even think of proposing it be Alistair. Leliana? Morrigan?" Zevran gave a derisive snort and dipped his head low again. His tongue was snaking its way into her cunt when she asked lightly, "Wynne?"

His eyes rose to hers, so hot with desire that she gasped. "Really?" she asked slowly, her eyebrows
He gave a wistful sigh. "It truly is a magical bosom," he murmured longingly.

"Then that shall be your challenge," she said. "I'll attempt to seduce Sten if you attempt to seduce Wynne. Though it still seems rather unfair. Your challenge doesn't have the physical impediments posed by seducing Sten."

"I have said we will prepare you, yes?" he asked, his voice muffled against her cunt as his tongue delved deep. His thumb found her clitoris and she jerked at that first electric jolt of sensation, and Zevran gave a wicked laugh. He pulled back and slid two fingers inside her, fast and deep, and his lips sealed over her clit, pulling and sucking as his fingers fucked her. Her first orgasm came quickly and easily, her muscles clenching and rippling around his fingers as she cried out softly. It only encouraged him to pick up the pace, adding a third finger to fuck her vigorously while she shuddered and moaned. The repeated curl of his fingers against that intensely sensitive point at the front of her sheath, coupled with hard strokes of his tongue against her nub, soon sent her tumbling over the brink once again.

Zevran placed gentle kisses to the insides of her thighs as she recovered, dazed for a moment, feeling as though her entire body had turned to liquid. He withdrew from her slowly. "Stay here," he ordered, and turned away to dig through their packs.

He retrieve the familiar vial of oil and smiling, Elissa began to pull her knees to her chest, exposing her ass, only to have him push them back down. "No," Zevran said with a shake of his head. "Not this time. Spread them wide for me."

Watching him curiously, she did as he bade, letting her knees fall out to the sides, splaying herself wantonly before him. Zevran uncorked the vial and drizzled oil down his fingers, coating his hand before he set the vial aside. Settling himself between her legs, he pushed three fingers deep inside her cunt. Elissa moaned softly, flexing around him, lifting her hips to invite him deeper, but again he pushed her back down. "Stay still," he instructed. "Relax."

As ever, passivity was difficult for her, but her curiosity overrode her inclination to be active, and she settled, willing herself to be pliant. Slowly, Zevran fucked her with his fingers, twisting and pumping until he felt the last tension leave her thighs and hips, and then he withdrew his oiled hand. When it returned, he had folded in his small fourth finger, pressing it in with the others.

"Ohhh...." Elissa sighed, feeling herself stretch almost to the point of pain. He withdrew his fingers, turned his hand, pushed them in again, and they slid in deeper, and deeper still on the next stroke. She let herself drift on the sensation of being so deliciously filled, of stretching and yielding. He was in no rush, slowly and deliberately fucking her with four fingers. Deeper, he pressed, ever deeper. She felt his knuckles against her pubic bone, and she was certain if he pushed in any deeper it would hurt, and yet she craved it, craved the fullness of his fingers inside her. What had felt like too much when he'd added the fourth finger now seemed not to be enough.

"Maker, yesss...." she hissed when he twisted his hand and pushed in again, even deeper than before. It was beginning to burn, and she embraced it, yearned for it, wanted his hand buried deep inside her even if it meant pain. Again, he pushed, and again, and each time the burning sensation dissipated, his fingers slid in deeper and it awakened all over again.

"Zevran, please," she begged, biting her lip as she once again felt his knuckles, seeming impossibly wide and hard, butt up against the bones of her pelvis.

"Tell me what you want," he coaxed in a low, sexy whisper, pulling back, twisting his bunched
fingers this way and that inside her cunt.

"All of it," she whimpered, shifting her hips restlessly, willing him to fill her with his fingers again.

"All of what, my greedy Warden?" he asked, teasing her with a brush of his thumb against her clit.

"Your hand," Elissa moaned. "Fuck me with your hand."

She mewed with dismay when he pulled his hand out of her entirely, but he merely added a generous quantity of oil to that already shining sleekly on his skin and then his fingers were once more pushing inside her, prying her open, twisting and plumbing. Again, his knuckles came up against her bone, and though he pushed, it seemed certain they could not pass through. He pulled back, folded his fingers more tightly together, rotated his hand slightly, changed his angle and slid then in again. When she once again felt the pressure against her pubic bone, he pushed against it, and pushed, and just when it seemed he must stop or break her, she felt the hard ridge of his knuckles slide slowly inside her.

"Oh, Maker!" she cried. She felt full, gloriously full, fuller than she could remember being except in unreality of Sten's dream.

"Look, sweet Warden," Zevran's accented voice curled around her like a warm flow of dark Antivan chocolate. "Sit up and look at my hand filling your beautiful cunt."

With effort, she pushed herself up on her elbows and peered down between her knees. As she did so, she felt every muscle tighten around his hand and groaned softly as it increased the sensation of fullness. Only his thumb remained outside, curving around her mound, resting beside her clitoris. She wanted it to move, wanted him to bring her to climax with his hand filling her.

"Make me come," she whispered, staring in awe.

"No, not yet," he answered. "Not until you have taken it all."

With his words, he slowly withdrew his hand, shining with oil and her own fluids, and when next he began to push his fingers inside her, his thumb was tucked into his palm.

Elissa's head fell back and she keened softly as the stinging, pulling feel of stretching resumed. He repeated the entire process, pushing slowly, steadily, withdrawing to add more oil and then sliding all five fingers back inside her cunt.

Again, she felt the press of his knuckles against her pubic bone, unbearably hard and unyielding, wider than ever before. It nudged and withdrew. His hand twisted and angled, and again it nudged and withdrew. Again, and again, and then suddenly that hard ridge of bones was passing inside her body, sliding through her stretched and loosened flesh. She cried out in triumph, her body shuddering and her skin dappled with the sweat of exertion, of endurance. She panted as though she'd run a great distance rather than lying there on her back. Impossibly, she felt her flesh closing around Zevran's hand, pulling him even deeper inside, and his fingers began to curl into a fist within her.

Her body quaked, hovering on the edge of orgasm, and she knew the smallest movement of his hand within her, the most minute pressure on her clitoris would send her screaming over the brink, but instead he simply sat there, waiting. When Elissa opened her eyes and dared to look at him, he was staring down between her legs. Moving carefully, she lifted her head again and looked down. Nothing but his wrist was visible outside her body. Impossible as it seemed, his whole hand was buried inside her.
Zevran's eyes met and held hers as he slowly, deliberately brought his mouth to her stretched cunt and swept his tongue along her throbbing clit.

The world exploded around her and she screamed, feeling her muscles pulse around Zevran's fisted hand. The spasms had not yet abated when he uncurled his fingers and began to withdraw, past that widest point, and then they returned, sliding inside her again, and another cascade of pleasure rocked her. Her head thrashed wildly, her hair clinging to her sweat-dampened skin.

"Do you like that, Warden?" his voice caressed her as his free hand found her nipple and tweaked it. "Do you like having my fist deep inside your sweet, quivering cunt?"

"Yes, oh, Maker yes!" she panted, another wave of shudders wracking her body. His arm began to move, slowly and carefully, as he pushed his fist in as far as he dared, then withdrew until the ridge of his knuckles was almost completely out. In a moment of coherent thought between waves of insensible pleasure, she understood he was exercising great caution because of her pregnancy. She wanted to beg him to let go and fuck her with his fist, but she refrained, knowing—if only just by the barest edge of awareness—that she was too caught up in pleasure to exercise any sort of judgment about what was safe and what was not.

With each cautious plunge of his hand, another orgasm washed over her. Each time she looked and saw his wrist there outside her body, another spasm shook her. She was trembling and exhausted by the time he finally slowly pulled his hand out. He rose up to his knees and sat on his heels, the tip of his cock mere inches from her cunt.

Taking up the oil, he spread a few drops on his cock and began to stroke.

"Watch," he growled, the tempo of his fist pumping and sliding along his shaft increasing as his hips began to plunge, driving his cock into the tight hole in the center of his fist. With his free hand, he reached down and spread open the slick, oiled lips of her gaping cunt. He aimed his cock and seconds later, thick waves of seed erupted from the tip. She felt it the first stream shoot inside her, and another spurt landed on her clit and began to trickle down along her cleft. Grunting, he plunged his cock into her loosened and relaxed sheath and spent the last spurts inside her, using his thumb on her nub to coax her to one last soft, shuddering climax.

Wearily, she let herself fall back, feeling the gentle burning and aching that told her she'd been well-fucked. Zevran sank down beside her, reaching down with one hand to toy lazily with the creamy seed coating her cunt, inside and out.

"Ah," he sighed. "There, you see? Now you have no excuses for not meeting the challenge I have set for you."

"I suppose not," she answered with a smile. "Perhaps your time might be better spent plotting how you're going to meet your own challenge. Wynne may turn out to be a hard woman to woo."

"True," he acknowledged, rising. As winter settled in, it was now too cold to go long without clothing once the sweat of passion cooled, and reluctantly she rose as well and they began to dress.

As they lay back down together, drawing their cloaks and furs around them, Zevran mused, "I think I shall miss this, Warden, once you and Alistair bring an end to your foreplay."

"I think I will, too," she said softly, unable to bring herself to say more. It was the first time they'd acknowledged that despite their vow of no complications, ending their dalliance would not be without an element of regret.
Despite Zevran's warmth at her back, sleep was a long time coming.
(Interlude B) One Night In Redcliffe

Chapter Summary

Zevran sets out to fulfill his dare.

Chapter Pairings: Zevran/Wynne, Elissa/Teagan (implied)

The moment they walked through the massive doors to Redcliffe Castle, Zevran knew he would be passing the night without the Warden's company. Even if she hadn't warned him on the approach to the castle that she'd likely be sleeping with Bann Teagan that night, the heated expression in the bann's eyes when he saw her spoke volumes. The bann practically devoured her with his gaze, and Zevran smirked at proof of yet another of the Warden's conquests. He wondered how many that made, but he'd long since lost count.

"Have you found the Urn?" Teagan asked anxiously.

"No," Elissa replied. "Brother Genitivi was not in Denerim, and his assistant had been murdered. We found some notes that said he was heading into the southern Frostback Mountains, to a small village called Haven. We'll be departing tomorrow to go into the mountains ourselves in search of him. We're merely stopping here in Redcliffe to resupply and beg for baths and a night's rest in a proper bed before we continue on."

"Redcliffe Castle is at your disposal, whatever you need," Teagan vowed fervently and summoned a servant.

For such a grand castle, supper was a simple affair. Managing things in the arl's stead, Teagan explained, he had decided to conserve what resources he could. There would be no more lavish suppers until the Blight was stopped, he'd decreed. Instead, as much food as possible was being preserved and laid away in storage to feed the army they would gather to fight the darkspawn horde. Elissa nodded in approval, listening closely to the bann's plans and the measures he was putting in place, asking questions, making suggestions. They discussed training regimens for the knights and Redcliffe militia, the numbers of their forces, which other banns and arls had sided with Teagan in opposition of Loghain and how the civil war progressed.

As she and Teagan talked, Zevran's attention turned to Alistair, who was watching Elissa in fascination. He wondered if the other Grey Warden had ever realized before that, whatever her sexual skills might be, Elissa Cousland had been born and bred to be a ruler of men and a master of affairs of state. She understood the intricacies of estate management, and the bann's conversation made sense to her in a way that it did not to the rest of them. He thought upon the things Elissa had told him, about the plans she and her parents had made before they had died, and realized that had she succeeded she would have made a frightfully good queen.

Zevran wondered if the bastard prince was aware of that, as well.

When supper was concluded, Bann Teagan rose and invited Elissa to join him in the arl's study to continue their discussion of the state of Redcliffe's readiness. Knowing he'd not likely see her until morning, he decided to turn his attention to other matters. Namely, a certain challenge that had been laid before him.
Like an assassination, a well-conducted seduction relied largely on becoming familiar with the mark. Learning her routine, her preferences, where she would be and what she would be doing, then waiting for the perfect moment to catch her alone. Thus it was that he made his way to the library of Redcliff Castle, pausing briefly and silently outside the arl's study to listen as the Warden explained to a perplexed Bann Teagan that it was not his child she carried. He did not linger, but made his way on, finding himself in a large but strangely crowded room lined with tall bookcases and littered with comfortable chairs and chaises. He perused the spines of dusty tomes that held little interest for him. The library seemed particularly sparse on racy material, and moldy histories were not to his taste. Nonetheless, he finally chose a volume at random and settled in one of the chairs to await his mark.

Presently, she arrived, bundled up so very properly in her concealing robes. She had laid aside her staff and instead bore a bottle of wine and a silver goblet no doubt borrowed from the Redcliffe cupboard. She paused as she entered, spying him.

"Zevran!" she exclaimed, startled. She looked flustered for a moment, but quickly regained her equilibrium. "I...hope I'm not intruding."

"Not at all," he said, leaning back casually in his chair. "There are plenty of books to go around, yes?"

"I must say I'm rather surprised to see you here," Wynne said, choosing a chaise far from him and setting her wine bottle upon the small table beside it. "I had assumed you would be with the Warden."

"Ah, no, I am afraid she will be warming Bann Teagan's bed tonight, not my own," he sighed. Her eyebrows arched at that.

"And...you're not upset?"

"Why should I be?" he shrugged. "I have no claim on the Warden, nor she on me. We pass our time together on the road because it is more pleasant than sleeping alone in the cold, nothing more."

"I see." she frowned a bit, as though displeased by his answer. "I had assumed the two of you had...feelings for one another."

"And so we do," he said with a smile. "We enjoy each other's company greatly. I have tremendous respect and affection for the Warden and I believe she is fond of me as well. But there is no quaint cottage in the country in our future."

"And is the Warden aware of these facts?" she asked sharply.

"Insistent upon them might be a better description," he answered frankly. "Which is why she is with Bann Teagan tonight, and why when the day comes that I again sleep alone on the road, it will be because our beautiful Warden will be in Alistair's tent, rather than my own."

"I see," Wynne said again. She sat very erect on the chaise as she uncorked her bottle of wine and filled her goblet. "At least Alistair will be pleased. In a way I'm happy to hear you say that," she told Zevran, sampling the rich red wine, unaware of the way his eyes darkened when she licked a droplet off her lips. "It certainly makes matters less complicated."

Zevran gave her a sly smile, "You need have no fear that she'll be jealous of my passion for you, my darling Wynne."

She gave him a repressive look, then shook her head in resignation and took another drink of her wine. With a sigh, she mused, "That still leaves me wondering why you're here in the library. I
hadn't taken you for much of a reader."

"It's true, I am not," Zevran said, sitting up and tossing his book aside. "Perhaps I merely came for the company."

Wynne paused, then, and Zevran could see her working out the various ways she could respond; whether to pretend she hadn't noticed the attempt at flirtation, or to discourage it, or even to respond to it.

"But you were alone when I got here," she said at last, cautiously.

"This is also very true," Zevran acknowledged, rising and crossing the room slowly, advancing toward her. "However, I happen to be aware of the fact that Sten carries an extra pack when we travel, because it is too heavy for its owner to manage--as books and bottles of wine so often tend to be. If I wished to find the owner of that pack while we are here in the castle, where might I first consider looking?"

"And why on earth would you wish to find me?"

Zevran bent low over the table upon which her goblet rested and lifted it. "Perhaps I simply wanted to sample your vintage," he said with a smile, taking a sip of the wine.

Wynne stared at him for a long moment, aghast. And then she began to laugh, clutching her sides with tears streaming down her cheeks. When she finally subsided to breathless giggles, Zevran was still watching her with a calm smile curving his full lips.

"Maker's breath!" she gasped, wiping her eyes. "That may be the very worst line I've ever heard, and I've heard a great many in my day."

"Ah!" he answered brightly, pleased with himself. "But I finally succeeded in making you laugh, yes?"

Without invitation, he perched on the foot of her chaise, forcing her to choose between moving her legs aside or bearing contact with him. After a long moment, she moved, curling her legs up beneath the skirt of her robe.

"Yes," she said with a smile, taking back her goblet. "Yes, you did at that. Now honestly, Zevran, what's all this about?"

"You don't believe I wish to be with you."

"I believe very little you say, and with good reason."

"I have been a very accomplished liar in my past, it is true," he conceded. "But if the Warden trusts me, then why should you not?"

"The Warden is young and rather wild. Her preference for your company has, I suspect, very little to do with your honesty or lack thereof," Wynne answered, frowning again.

Zevran took the goblet from her hand. "And that is where you are wrong. This is good," he announced, taking another sip before offering it back to her. "The Warden's preference for my company has everything to do with my honesty. She knows that when I say I will not complicate her life with unreasonable demands, and that I will step aside when she finds her affections engaged elsewhere, I am sincere. Now, thus having proved my honest intentions, I shall tell you quite frankly that I very much desire your company tonight, Wynne."
"Zevran, I have a son older than you are."

He gave her a wolfish smile. "All that means to me, my dear mage, is that you have lived long enough to understand how and when to find pleasure."

"You're not serious!" she said incredulously, finishing the wine in a single gulp. She gave him a narrow look. "Why?"

"Can it not be because I find you desirable?"

"No, I don't think it can. If you merely wanted a pretty bedmate in the Warden's absence, you could try to exercise your wiles on Leliana or Morrigan."

"Truthfully, I have always had a bit of a weakness for mature women," he said at last. "There is an honesty and openness to their desires that is very refreshing. No little girl games. Then there is also the fact that I find myself quite distraught by your situation."

"My...situation?"

"Yes," he nodded gravely. "Since you made it known that you did, in fact, die in your fight with the demons at the Circle Tower, and that you are being kept alive by a Fade spirit and have no idea how long you have remaining, I cannot stop thinking what a tragedy it would be if you were to pass from this life without having known at least one last night of glorious passion."

"I don't want sympathy, Zevran," Wynne said stiffly.

"Not sympathy," he grinned, "self-pity. The tragedy would not be yours, but my own."

She laughed again at that, shaking her head in disbelief. "I can't decide which of us is madder, you for proposing this or me for considering it."

He moved closer to her then, scooting up the chaise. His hand fell upon her ankle and very deliberately began sliding up under the hem of her robe. "I wish to give you pleasure, Wynne," he murmured, his voice low and husky with passion. "I wish to bury my face against those magnificent breasts while you let your hair down to cascade over us in all its silver glory. I wish to sip the nectar from between the soft, pale thighs you hide so well beneath these robes as you thrash and moan above me."

Wynne's eyes drifted shut, and sensing his advantage, Zevran pressed further, leaning over her as his hand moved past her knee, past the top of her practical woolen stocking to the silky flesh of her thigh. "Tell me you do not want it as well, sweet Wynne. Tell me you do not want to taste passion again, to feel lips pulling on your nipple, or the thrust of a man between your thighs once more."

When she opened her eyes again, Zevran was a mere breath above her. He could have claimed her lips but instead he hovered there, awaiting her move. She stared at him, her pale blue eyes wide and solemn for a long moment, and then she turned, uncurling her legs to give him better access, and pushed herself up to meet his lips.

She tasted of wine and cinnamon, at once spicy and earthy. Her lips were soft and full and talented as they slid across his. With a sigh, the mage lifted her arms, let them twine around his neck and Zevran gave a small, satisfied moan into her mouth. The skirt of her robe began to bunch before the progress of his hand as he pushed further, moving up between her thighs, and his finger lightly stroked the wet crotch of her smallclothes.

The effect was immediate. Her thighs fell open and her hips lifted, her back arching, seeking more
pressure. Instead, he teased her with another light stroke, and then another, until she gave a frustrated growl and grabbed his wrist, pulling his hand up as she ground against it firmly.

"Do you not wish to go to your room, or mine?" he asked with a small laugh at her eagerness.

"No," she answered firmly, pushing him away. "If we stopped long enough to do that, I might have time to rethink this entire foolish notion."

"Ah, but what should happen if someone comes running because I have made you scream?"

Her eyebrows arched at that. "Considering how many nights you and the Warden have kept the entire camp awake, I suppose that is a very valid consideration. However," the air pressure in the room suddenly increased and he heard a low hum. When her hand reached out to touch the skin of his face, he could feel the cool vibrations of her power, "how do you know it won't be the other way around?"

Zevran gave an eager chuckle. "Oh, I can only hope it will be!"

She rose, looking flustered, but then she set her jaw in determination and met his eyes squarely. "Come along, then."

She did not acknowledge him as he followed her to her room. The door to the arl's study stood open as they passed, revealing the room was dark and empty. A soft cry from behind the door to the bann's bedchamber when they later passed that as well told the rest of that particular tale.

She closed the door of her chamber behind him after he entered, and when he turned, she reached up and released the modest bun pinned at the back of her head. Her hair was exactly as he'd imagined it, a soft, flowing fall of silver than spilled down over her shoulders and tumbled past her bosom. He sighed happily when he saw it, stepping close to her, lifting a lock to let the soft strands trickle through his fingers. He leaned in to smell it and realized she must have bathed once she'd been shown to her chamber, for it was still slightly cool and damp in places and smelled strongly of the lavender soap he'd found in his own chamber. He buried his face in the softness and breathed deeply, and then turned his head to place a soft kiss on her neck, just below her ear.

Wynne tipped her head to the side, giving him better access, and Zevran took that as his cue to continue trailing kisses down her neck until he came to the damnably high collar of her robe. He lifted one hand to the tie there, but paused, lifting his head and searching her eyes for permission.

She pushed him away and kept pushing, steering him toward the edge of the bed. It bumped the back of his knees and when she continued to push, he let himself fall upon it, let her tower over him. Not content to allow herself to be passively seduced, was Wynne, he thought with a smile, settling back and giving over his role as aggressor. She opened the front of her robes and spread them wide; beneath, her dark nipples strained against the thin white shift she wore. Her eyes intent upon his, Wynne lifted her chin proudly, as though daring him to find fault.

Finding fault was the last thing on Zevran's mind, so close to the paradise he'd dreamed of. "May I touch you, sweet Wynne?" he asked softly, and she sat beside him, perched on the edge of the bed and turned to face him. Zevran rolled up on his side to face her more fully, still compliantly below her leave, and his hand came up. His palm cupped her full, pliable flesh. His thumb brushed over the nub of her nipple and felt it rise and grow hard. He closed his eyes, learning her softness by feel, gauging her reactions by the intensity of her sighs. Beside him, he felt her shift restlessly when he gently tweaked her nipple, not quite pinching, but pulling firmly with his fingertips. When he looked at her again, her eyes were closed, her head back, and she moved, rising and falling, arching into his hands in slow, wavelike movements with each deep breath.
"Ahh, beautiful," he murmured as he beheld the crests of her nipples firm against her shift, as though seeking to burst through. "These breasts have haunted my dreams," he confessed. "They should be immortalized on statues, not buried beneath dowdy robes."

"If you keep that up," she answered tartly, a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes, "I'll start to doubt your sincerity again."

"You may check for yourself to see just how sincere I am," he answered, nudging her with his hips. Almost of their own volition, her eyes flicked toward the kilt of his leather armor, which unfortunately was too concealing to allow for a proper demonstration of his...sincerity. He was debating whether or not to take a more active approach when her hand pushed its way up under the leather pleats and found his cock straining for freedom within the protective pouch that contained it. She found the tie at his hip by feel and then her hand stroked him with firm pulls.

Zevran let himself be passive, let himself be pleasured, lying back with no more effort to control her actions than the occasional gentle push of his hips to meet a particularly pleasurable caress.

Her hand abandoned his cock, extracting from him a low moan of disappointment, but Wynne pushed herself to her feet. She untied the sash that kept her robe wrapped at her waist. The long garment fell open and she shrugged it off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor in heavy folds. Then quickly, as though afraid she might change her mind, she set her jaw stubbornly and lifted the hem of her shift, tugging it up and over her head.

She was not young, and though she was fit and trim, she had not the uplifted firmness of a young woman. Hers was a body that had been comfortably lived-in for decades, no hard edges or ridges. No, she was all soft, pliant curves and exquisitely silken, fragile white skin. It was a body he could sink his fingers into, could mold with his hands, one which could cushion his weight or settle softly above him.

Her jaw was still defensively rigid when he pushed himself up off the bed, sliding to the floor and sinking reverently to his knees before her. His hands stroked up her soft white thighs above the practical black woolen stockings. He placed a kiss on the very slight, gentle ripple of loose skin at the bottom of her belly as he rolled her stockings down her legs. Then he peeled away her damp smallclothes and the aroma of her struck him, earthy and rich and nearly overwhelming with his face so close to her steel-colored curls. When she stepped out of her smallclothes, his hands came to rest on her hips, his fingers kneading a backside that sagged surprisingly little. Her hands cupped his head and drew him in, and he breathed deeply of her scent as his lips brushed her damp curls.

His tongue began questing, seeking, and he knew he found his goal when she bucked her hips in a sharp spasm and gripped his head more tightly. She tasted as divine as she smelled, like the air off the Rialto Bay in Antiva City at high tide, salty and fresh and alive. His fingers squeezed and pulled softly at the malleable flesh of her backside as his tongue delved, sliding between her slick folds as her knees inched farther apart, granting him greater access. He closed his eyes and gave himself over to his endeavor, sweeping over her sensitive nub with the flat of his tongue before tracing slow, firm circles around it with the tip. Her hips began to move more urgently, soft sighs trickling from her lips, and he felt her skin begin to grow warm and damp beneath his fingers. The rhythm of her hips increased, growing more irregular, and then she gave a quiet gasp. Her body shuddered and the hands holding his head were suddenly bracing more of her weight, aiding his hands on her hips in keeping her upright.

When she could support herself again, Zevran pulled back, licking her nectar from his lips. For a long moment she simply stood there, her head thrown back, breathing deeply. A flush had spread across her shoulders and chest, giving her pale skin a rosy glow. He stared up at her, waiting for her...
to open her eyes and make her desires known to him. He almost thought perhaps she was reluctant to
look down and see him there; perhaps she was imagining or remembering someone else, another
lover from another time. Or perhaps she simply did not want to recall that it was an unrepentant
murderer of whom she thoroughly disapproved who had just given her pleasure.

"Thank you, dear mage," Zevran purred. "I have dreamed of doing that since I first saw you."

"If that is what you dream of in the Warden's tent, then you are a very great fool," she said, looking
down at him at last. Her words lacked some of the chiding bite she might normally have given them,
however.

"Perhaps," he acknowledged with an expansive shrug. His hands slid from her hips up her torso to
cup those gently swaying breasts that had been fascinating him for so long. "I am your humble
servant, sweet Wynne. I will worship you, just tell me what you would have of me."

She paused, as though weighing a great decision. Would she thank him for the service and ask him
to leave, or see it through? Then a hard, imperious look came over her face and she ordered, "Take
off your armor."

She stood still before him while he undressed, her hands folded before her in a manner that might
have been called prim, had she not been so utterly and gloriously nude. He stripped without
ceremony, without showmanship, unwilling to drive her away a display of with gratuitous
flamboyance. When he was as bare as she was, she let her eyes sweep over him, thoughtfully, as
though judging his worth.

"Lie down," she said slowly, and he crawled onto the bed, and lay in the center of his, his cock
standing up in bold testament of his desire. And still she studied him, finally placing one knee upon
the mattress and crawling up to loom over him.

"What was it that fascinated you so?" she asked softly. "My bosom, wasn't it? I believe you
mentioned something about wishing to bury your face in it?"

"Yesss," he hissed, his gaze riveted to those full, heavy, swaying breasts so temptingly near. He
attempted to lift his hand, wishing to touch her, and suddenly found he could not move.

"No hands," she said with a very small, satisfied smile. So intent on her breasts had he been that he
hadn't noticed the creep of her power over him until he was paralyzed by her spell. He could feel
every brush of her body as she crawled over him, bringing her breasts to his face, and he discovered
he still had the use of his mouth as she lifted her own breast and brought the nipple to his lips and
pressed down onto his face.

"You may have your wish," she said, amusement coloring her tone.

Thrilled with her game, Zevran eagerly opened his mouth and took her dark nipple inside, greeting it
with his tongue. He heard her sigh and set to work within the stricture of her spell, drawing on her
nipple with hard, firm sucks, releasing it to stroke it firmly with his tongue. He rolled her nipples to
taut peaks between his tongue and palate, used his teeth, gently scraping. She shifted and brought her
other breast to his face, and he gleefully lavished the same attention upon her other breast, listening to
her soft moans, feeling them vibrate in her chest. Unbound, her breasts were every bit as magnificent
as he'd known they would be, and as he'd promised, he worshiped them as she arched her back and
pressed closer, burying his face in her soft flesh.

He was thoroughly enraptured with the work of his mouth at her breasts, but then her weight shifted,
so that she lay propped on one arm beside him, rather than kneeling and hovering above. Freed from
the need to support her weight, her hand slid down her body and Zevran felt the shift of her hips as her thighs parted, felt the motion of her fingers against his side as she stroked herself, heard her moans get louder and more urgent. He redoubled his efforts at her breasts, sucking and biting and licking with every ounce of his considerable skill to please her, and he felt the shudder of her climax ripple through her body. He felt some small regret that he had not been able to watch her face as she brought herself to completion, and hoped before all was done that he'd have the opportunity again.

As her trembling subsided, so did his efforts at her breasts. He focused less on giving her pleasure and more on reveling in being so close to her bosom. He nuzzled her soft skin, rubbed his face like a cat against the pliant mounds, placed gentle kisses along the slopes and curves.

His ignored cock was twitching and throbbing with need when her fingers, still slick with her own moisture, found it, curled around it, stroked down its length. He would have pushed up into her hand but he was still held immobile, forced to lay there at her mercy as she teased and caressed him. She moved away from him, down his body, watching not his face but his cock as she pumped her hand up and down, her breasts swinging with the motion of her body. The sight nearly drove him wild and soon he was begging her for more.

She looked up and a playful gleam lit her eyes as she studied him. His skin began to prickle a split second before he heard the soft sizzle of electricity. She removed her hand from his cock and dragged it up his body. Her fingers traced along his arm, raising the hairs there and Zevran moaned softly as she found his nipples. Small, tingling arcs of power passed between her fingertips and his chest, causing him to gasp and twitch.

"Ah, I knew you were a wicked woman," he said in satisfaction. "You've decided to torture me for your pleasure, yes?"

"I think 'torture' is overstating it," she answered dryly, her crackling fingers moving down his belly.

"Not even if I beg prettily?"

Raising a challenging eyebrow, her hand closed around his cock again and he went rigid as the power she channeled made him feel each one of a thousand tiny sparks dancing along his member. Her paralysis spell released him and his entire body arched and tensed as he groaned. When the sensation finally passed, he collapsed back onto the bed.

"Is that what you had in mind?" she asked with a sweet smile that did nothing to disguise the twinkle in her eye.

"You must do that again," he said, panting heavily. To his delight, she did. The hot current ran up and down his cock with each stroke of her fist, and he couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything at all except lie in a rigid arc and experience that her power.

"Again! Please!" he gasped when the power subsided. And then the next time, "More!"

"Zevran, I don't want to hurt you," she said, frowning slightly.

"Please do," he begged, and again electricity crackled along his cock, fierce as hundreds of small knives plunging into his engorged member all at once. When her other hand cupped his balls, he howled, his entire body seizing beneath her. It was like an endless orgasm, minus the sense of release, and ten times more powerful. On it went, and on, until she finally let go of him and waved her fingertips as though shaking away the residual charge.

"You are a goddess," he panted, his body shivering and covered in sweat. Whatever misgivings she
might have had with using that much power on him faded and she smiled in satisfaction, pleased
with his praise.

He was still recovering when she leaned down, letting her breasts surround his cock, and Zevran
groaned helplessly, pushing eagerly up into channel created by that softness. "Ah ah!" she chided, as
though he were nothing more than a misbehaving child, and immediately he felt her power locking
him down again, pinning him to the mattress. He struggled and strained, yearning to thrust his cock
up between her breasts again, but he was held immobile.

It was Wynne who pressed her breasts down onto him, pushed them together with her hands until his
cock was engulfed by her soft flesh. Wynne who watched his face as she moved, sliding up and
down above him as Zevran moaned and begged and praised her and her marvelous bosom, painting
with lurid words a portrait of how beautiful he found her and how badly he wanted her. Just when he
thought surely he could not resist coming all over her chest, a heavy weight locked around the base
of his cock and squeezed tightly.

Wynne pulled away, but the pressure surrounding his cock did not. He went from being on the brink
of orgasm to being unable to come even if his wanted to. He'd experienced devices that would
accomplish much the same feat, even used the ring of his own fingers to stave off an impending
orgasm, but never magic.

"What have you done?" he asked, his voice strangled. The tightness that clamped around the base of
his cock surged, and Wynne looked mischievously smug.

"A very small touch of the Crushing Prison spell," she answered almost academically. His cock
twitched, dark red and aching with the need for release. Without her spell he would surely have
come just at the suggestion of having something so powerful it could crush the life from a hurlock
wrapped around his cock. He knew without being told that she could injure him very badly indeed
unless she was careful, and the thought only aroused him further, the danger thrilling him.

"Please," he begged shamelessly, his cock throbbing agonizingly. "I must come."

"Must you?" she taunted. "I could keep you all night here if I wished."

"Then do what you wish with me," he pleaded. "I will pleasure you all night, obey your every
command, only let me find release inside you."

Suddenly he was able to move again, though the stricture on his cock remained in place, making
each motion its own torture. Wynne crawled to the head of the bed and reclined there, opening her
thighs. "Then pleasure me," she said, and Zevran eagerly set to the task.

His hand slide between her thighs, seeking her moist depths. She gave a gasp when his finger slid
within her, and he realized she was exquisitely tight. Even one finger within her felt snug, and he
wondered how long it had been for her. He ignored the frustrating friction of the bedclothes against
his cock as he slowly worked his finger in and out, his hand growing wet as his palm rubbed against
her mound. She hissed between her teeth when he added a second finger, and he paused, letting her
adjust, creeping up to lavish attention upon her breasts as his fingers simply rested, buried deep
within her.

The shifting of her hips and the easing of the tension in her thighs told him when she wanted more,
and his fingers began to thrust gently, his palm rubbing against her nub with each deep stroke. As
he'd promised himself he would, he laid his head against her breasts and looked down, watched his
fingers working between her thighs, disappearing into her body. A brush of his thumb across her
clitoris caused her body to tighten, clenching around his fingers, and he waited for her to relax again,
opening to him, loosening around him.

Soon her hips were rocking to meet his hand; somewhere in the process her arm came around him, holding him close to her body, his head pillowed on her breasts. "Harder," he heard her murmur, and he obeyed, increasing the tempo. His fingers plunged into her slick channel, his hand bumping her mound with a wet, clapping sound. Wynne began to moan low in her throat, lifting her hips to meet his plunging fingers, encouraging him with throaty, growled commands.

Faster.

Harder.

More.

His thumb on her clit brought her bucking and writhing to climax, clutching at him as she thrashed and trembled. Afterward he sat with his fingers still within her, listening to the hammering of her heart between her breasts as she caught her breath.

His cock throbbed and ached, begging for relief, trapped within her dangerous spell, but again, he waited. No sooner had her shudders subsided then he found himself once more lying on his back as she pushed him down and rose above him, straddling his thighs.

She stared down at him for a long, inscrutable moment, then she shifted above him, positioning his imprisoned cock between their bodies, and slid slowly down upon him. So sensitized was he from the power she'd channeled through his cock that each inch of her sheath engulfing him was a delightful torment all its own. Her eyes fluttered closed as she rippled and twitched around him, adjusting to the feel of him inside her. Once she was fully settled upon him, she gave an experimental roll of her hips, and they moaned in unison.

She began to flex her thighs, to move, to ride him, slowly at first, taking her time, and then with more urgency. Her hands came down behind her, bracing on his thighs, arching her back and thrusting her swinging breasts forward as she sought a more pleasurable angle. Her glorious bosom swayed and moved as Zevran thrust up into her with each roll of her hips. Her fingernails dug painfully into his thighs, scored his flesh, and he growled in approval, relishing the pain. The need to come was agony, but still he could not find release. Gritting his teeth, he thrust harder, listening to her moans, seeking to bring her more pleasure.

Her power flared to life again, hot and cold all at once, causing shivers to chase across his skin. Her hand glowed with golden light as she brought it forward and reached down, stroking herself urgently. Zevran gripped her hips hard and slammed up, panting and sweating with effort, faster, harder, pulling her down into his thrusts as she flexed and clenched. Wynne began to moan, loudly, desperately, the frantic caressing of her fingers upon her clit increasing until finally she stiffened above him with a strangled cry. He watched her as she rode the waves of her climax, fearless and unrestrained, her silver-white hair whipping around her as her head tossed from side to side. She was every bit as magnificent as he'd ever imagined she would be.

Then suddenly the stricture of her spell was gone from his cock and he lost himself, thrusting up wildly as the last of her spasms milked him, exploding within her with a force that practically left him unconscious.

She did not collapse against him into his arms, though a part of him wished she would. Instead, she sat very still above him as he shrank and softened inside her, her head bowed almost solemnly as her trembling subsided.
"Thank you, Zevran," she said at last, softly. It took a long moment, but finally she raised her head to meet his eyes. "I'm not entirely certain why you chose to pursue that, but I appreciate it. I think I needed that more than I believed I did."

For a very short moment, he had considered being cruel, considered revealing to her that he'd been dared to seduce her. Something about her honesty and goodness left him feeling vulnerable and uneasy, not sure how to respond to her with his masks of sarcasm and mockery disposed of. But she did not deserve his cruelty or cynicism. He would not spoil the moment, no matter how confused it left him.

"It was my very great pleasure," he said at last, foregoing his characteristic banter in his confusion.

After a moment, lifted herself off him, settling on the bed beside him, and he hesitated, unsure whether to stay or go. We was not certain he would be welcomed to stay, but he found he did not want to be alone. Perhaps so many nights in the Warden's company had spoiled him.

Finally, a resolute look came over her face and she drew a deep breath. "Would you like to remain for the night?"

Zevran grinned, relaxing upon the bed. "Can you do that thing with the electricity again? Only harder."

Wynne laughed, and the moment of awkwardness and tension passed. "I may have a few other tricks you'll enjoy as well," she said with a satisfied smile.

"Ah! You mages are marvelous, wicked beings! No wonder the Chantry keeps you locked away. If everyone knew what you were capable of, you'd have all of Thedas at your feet, begging for your favors...." his steady stream of flamboyant praise and flattery was soon muffled as she pressed against him once more.
Challenges

Chapter Summary

Elissa fulfills her dare and finds herself rethinking the amount of risk she takes.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Sten, Elissa/Zevran

Much like the snow-covered mountain, the reception they received upon arriving at the village of Haven was frosty. Taken aback by the distinct lack of welcome, Elissa led her party outside of town into the thick, pine-filled mountain forest. Which was where everyone apparently decided to go mad.

She stared at Sten as the other members of their party warily watched them face off. "You're welcome to try," she sneered at him with a confidence she did not feel and heard Alistair groan in dismay. This was insane. Sten had not just challenged her to a fight for control of the party and she had not just accepted.

It was a sentiment Alistair appeared to agree with. "This is crazy. Sten, you can't seriously intend to fight her. She's--"

"One word about how I can't fight because I'm pregnant and you'll be next on my list," Elissa snapped, whirling on him. "I'm not going to tolerate insubordination from the Qunari, and I'm certainly not going to tolerate it from you."

"You're half his size and you're not our best fighter," Alistair snapped back, and Elissa blinked in surprise at his tone and her own reaction to it. This was not the time to be aroused by Alistair's sudden and unexpected assertiveness.

"I'm done with questions to my authority," she said flatly. "Get out of my way. Now."

Sten drew his sword and Elissa her daggers, taking care to remain far outside his considerable reach. He would be more prepared for her speed and agility after their encounter in the Fade, but she'd had time to work on some of the techniques she'd learned from Isabela. Perhaps she might manage to surprise him after all.

He came at her with a roar and a swing of his sword--the damned thing was practically as long as she was!--and she heard the whistle and felt the rushing wind as she managed to just barely whirl away from a blow that would have cleaved her in two. It gouged a deep furrow in the sod beside her. She used the momentum of the turn with which she had dodged the blow to carry her behind the giant while he pulled at his sword, working to wrest it free of the frozen ground. She dropped low and kicked her leg out with all her force, thrusting her foot into the back of his knee. His leg buckled under him and before he could recover, she brought the hilt of her dagger down upon his head with all her strength.

The blow did not, as she had hoped it would, knock him unconscious. It did, however, daze him enough for her to strike him again. The second blow did the trick, and Sten slumped to the ground.
Her heart thundering in her chest, her hands shaking with adrenaline, she glared up at the rest of the party, particularly at Alistair, who looked as though he'd been struck a blow to the head. "Does anyone else want to challenge my leadership?"

Fortunately, no one seemed inclined to try, and Elissa pushed herself up from the ground. "Leave us," she ordered. "Go pitch camp and get supper started. I'll wait here until the Qunari awakens. We have matters to discuss."

Alistair appeared to be on the verge of arguing--most likely ready to point out that she'd have no assistance if Sten awoke ready for another fight--but then he looked down at the unconscious Qunari and swallowed whatever he'd been about to say. To emphasize her confidence in her safety, she picked up Sten's sword and set it beyond his reach. She met Zevran's knowing eyes with a smile that was far more confident than she felt as they filed out of the clearing to look for a likely campsite.

While they were gone, she rolled the Qunari over with great effort and began to make preparations. It was not a long wait. His low groan sounded more like a rumble coming out of the earth than anything made by a flesh-and-blood being, and his eyes fixed on her.

"You do not fight like a proper warrior," he accused, making no effort to move.

Her fist collided with his jaw. The impact was unarguably more damaging to her hand than to his face, but she managed to turn his head and make him grunt nonetheless.

"Is that proper enough for you?" she taunted, leaning down close to him.

His violet eyes were flared with more than anger as they met hers.

"You think I'm weak because I fight from a distance using my bow or with sneak attacks rather than just hacking mindlessly away at things. You think I'm weak because I think things through, because I take the time to gather my forces rather than simply charging at the archdemon unprepared, because I won't needlessly throw away the lives of my people if I can avoid a fight and settle matters some other way. You think I'm weak because I'm smaller than you. I cautioned you once against making that assumption but apparently you weren't paying attention, or maybe you just believed it didn't count because we were in a dream. So here's where I prove to you that you can't break me."

Without invitation her teeth closed on the tendon of his neck, just as they had in the Fade, but this time there was no hesitation, no unwillingness. His flesh tore and his blood flowed freely before she let go. With his blood staining her mouth, she raised her head and said, "It doesn't matter how big or strong you are; I will take you and walk away smiling. For every hurt you do me, I will do you one better, and when it is over there will be no more question of whether I am strong enough to get the best of you."

She rose up off him and removed her armor; it was far too cold to be fucking outdoors on the ground, much less to do so nude, but she stripped nonetheless, her nipples immediately tightening painfully in the frigid air. When he continued to lay there, unmoving, she glared at him and snapped, "Are you going to strip, or are you willing to concede the point without the demonstration?"

She was being reckless provoking him, and she knew it, but she wasn't about to back down. If she lost control of the party and he led her people headlong to the archdemon without an army at their back, it wouldn't matter how badly he injured her. Unless she convinced him of her strength now, it was over. She was relying on him to flinch first. If he decided to call her bluff, he could rip her limb from limb.

She thought of all she knew of him and wondered if she may have miscalculated. Sten, who
regretted killing the farm family that had tried to help him. Sten, with his love for cookies. Sten, whom Leliana teased for being a big softie, catching him out in acts of gentleness. Elissa knew was playing a dangerous and potentially disastrous game by attempting to rouse his temper. All she could do was pray to the Maker that he would back down before he hurt her too badly.

Sten snarled at her and began to strip off his armor and the clothing beneath as she stood there hoping he would interpret her shivers as being a result of the cold rather than fear. And then he was upon her, pinning her to the ground with all his considerable weight. She hooked her legs around him and arched into him as his open mouth landed on the slope of her breast.

"Yes," she grated, bracing herself when she felt his teeth on her skin. To her astonishment, he hesitated. She grabbed him by the plaits of his white hair and pulled his head closer. "Do it!"

His teeth sank into her shoulder, rather than her breast, but still it the pain brought tears rushing to her eyes. Denied the outlet of screaming, lest their companions come running, instead she keened shrilly in her throat, biting her lips as she struggled against the pain. Her fingernails gouged deep into his back and she drummed her heels hard against his back, but she did not plead for mercy.

When he finally pulled away, she bent her head and returned the favor, this time biting deep into his bicep until he gave a pained moan. "Parshaara!" Sten growled and pushed her away.

Elissa licked her bloodstained lips with satisfaction. "Had enough already?" she taunted. "Each bite you take, I will take another in return. I'll only stop once you do."

"I could tear your flesh from your bones if I chose, kabethari," he grumbled.

"Then why aren't you doing so?" Elissa demanded sharply. "If I'm so weak, so very fragile, here on the cold ground beneath you, why do you stop?"

At her words, Sten rolled onto his back, pulling her above him, taking the punishing cold of the frozen ground onto his own flesh instead of hers. "Perhaps I like your flesh where it is," he answered, his hands coming up to cover her breasts.

"Oh, how drolly male of you," she mocked. His hands clamped punishingly on her soft flesh, and she knew she would bear bruises, but still she gritted her teeth and scoffed, "I will not yield!"

"Then you are a fool!" he snapped impatiently, pinching her nipples hard.

"Perhaps," she gasped, whimpering, unable to suppress the sound. When he let go and the pain had passed, he stroked his huge thumbs over her sensitive nipples, drawing from her a whimper of an entirely different sort. "Or perhaps my will is simply stronger than yours. Maybe I can endure what you cannot."

Her own fingertips closed over his hard flat nipples and she began to pinch, harder and harder, until her fingers began to tremble and her muscles cramp, and still she refused to let go. Finally he snarled a curse in his strangely melodic language and forcibly pulled her hands away. She sat up straight, pushing her breasts forth in an offer for him to do his worst, but though he caressed her, he made no effort to inflict further pain.

She slid down his body then and took his cock into her hand. Thank the Maker, his dream had exaggerated, though not by much. His was still by far the largest cock she'd ever seen, large enough to give her pause. Her hand didn't come close to closing all the way around him and she knew that even with preparation, taking him in would be an effort.

But she let none of that knowledge show in her face. Instead, she licked him from base to tip, sliding
back the sheath of skin to run her tongue over the sensitive head. She closed her lips over the slit at the end of his cock and sucked away the fluid there as her hand cupped his large, heavy sac. Again she licked, and again, letting her saliva coat him. Sten's massive hands closed around her upper arms and jerked her up his body until she straddled him once more.

"If you pursue this, I will not be merciful with you," he warned as she lifted herself above him.

"Yes, yes," she replied in a bored voice. "Strange you should feel the need to warn me when I never asked."

She reached down to position his cock and, setting her jaw, began to lower herself upon him. Her blazing eyes never left his as she forced herself down, her body yielding and opening inch by intense inch. The oil and stretching with which she had prepared herself while he lay unconscious was working well, but it was still an ordeal, feeling him stretch and fill her until she was certain she would indeed break. As she strove and struggled to take him in, growling and keening with effort, Sten's eyes widened in surprise. Clearly he had not been expecting her to accomplish the task.

"How--"

"Anaan!" She gasped the word she'd heard him use in triumph before when the head of his cock finally butted up against her womb, her body quaking with effort, her thighs aching with the struggle to straddle his enormous body. It hurt to be stretched so completely, to the very edge of her endurance, especially with having given herself so little time to adjust. Still, it was a good hurt, intense rather than injurious. She embraced it, rode it, let the strange alchemy of sex transform it to pleasure. Already she could feel her muscles loosening, her cunt getting wetter to supplement the oil and saliva she'd used. All it would take was a motion from him, a touch to her clitoris, and she would come.

Making sure his eyes were upon her to see her claim pleasure from the ordeal of taking him within, Elissa slid her hand down over the small, hard bump that now rounded her belly to caress herself. She closed her eyes, yielding to sensation, rippling around him. Her sheath loosened and she sank upon him even farther. Sten groaned beneath her.

"Are you planning to gawk all day until we freeze to death, or do you intend to fuck me?" she asked when her shudders had subsided. She pushed herself up as much as the poor leverage she could gain straddling him would allow for and sank back upon him again and Maker it was good. Good to be filled so thoroughly she wondered that she could stand it at all, so thoroughly that she was kept constantly perched on the knife-edge between pleasure and pain.

Sten's hands closed over her hips and he pushed up into her and she let out a low, groaning cry as she came again. The heat of passion, of effort flared across her skin, warming her, and suddenly the biting cold was an afterthought. Sten's hands began to guide her movements, taking the burden off her thighs, and with the easing of that last bit of tension she loosened still further, until his length was almost completely engulfed by her.

"Maker," she moaned, rising and falling with the help of his hands, closing her eyes and throwing her head back. "Yes. Fuck me."

"I have no wish to injure you," Sten rumbled, and she could feel the shaking in his hands that spoke of the effort to restrain himself. He thrust up harder, pulled her down more forcefully, and she cried out in mingled pain and pleasure.

"Then yield," she panted. "For I will not."
"Parshaara!" he shouted in frustration, pushing her off him abruptly. He rose to tower above her, huge and magnificent in his nudity.

Elissa stood, quaking with cold at the lack of his warmth as arousal fled, and watched warily as he dug through the packs he'd set upon the ground when he had challenged her. He spread out his bedroll at her feet with an impatient flap, then took up his own long cloak and draped it around her shivering shoulders, fastening it beneath her chin.

"It is too cold in this barbaric country," he complained. "There is no pleasure to be found in freezing to death."

His cloak was blessedly warm, trailing on the ground at her feet. Sten knelt upon the bedroll before her and she looked down at him cautiously. "Just what am I to infer from this sudden concern for my comfort?"

"That I yield," he said, surprisingly calmly. "If we are to have pleasure with one another, let us do so in a civilized manner."

He reached for her then, and Elissa went willingly, gratefully as he pulled her down to straddle his thighs. His giant hands cupped her backside and held her up as her legs encircled his waist. Her hand reached between their bodies to grasp his cock and she tilted her hips, angling to align her entrance with his shaft. He eased her down, and they both groaned as the head of his cock began to push into her.

Taking him in was easier this time, but this time she let herself slow down and enjoy it, enjoy the stretching and the exquisite tension as he filled her. When he flexed his thighs and nudged more deeply into her channel, she gave a soft whimper of pleasure, pulling the sides of his cloak around his shoulders so that they were both covered by it. Between his body and the cloak, she soon felt gloriously warm and relaxed, moving fluidly up and down upon him, angling her hips to restrict the depth of his strokes when it threatened to become too much for her to bear.

She leaned back, letting his arms bear her weight, letting herself flow with the rolling surges of his hips. He took her weight upon his arm, his hand spread over the base of her spine where her back flared out and melded with the swell of her ass. His mouth came down upon her shoulder, but he nibbled rather than bit, using just enough pressure to make her body tense deliciously around his cock as she whimpered her approval.

His other hand found her breast, lifting and stroking. His fingertips were firm but not punishing when they closed over her nipple and squeezed until she moaned.

"More," she panted, placing her hand over his. "Harder."

He obeyed, pinching down until she cried out and began to writhe, and he thrust harder in response, driving into her. She felt her orgasm building, felt it curling her toes, tightening in her belly, and she wanted, needed, craved more to shove her over that blindingly bright edge.

"Hurt me," she gasped, arching over his arm, pushing against him with her hips to drive him in deeper. "Now. Please!"

His hand clenched on her breast, his fingertips clamping painfully on her nipple, and Elissa cried out as her body seized, pulsing around his cock with wave after wave of pleasure.

It was as though a dam burst and restraint was swept away, Sten losing his caution and reserve as he pulled her roughly up and down on his cock, thrusting much harder than he had dared before. Elissa
rode him, rode the crashing, thundering crest of ecstasy as one climax blended into another and another. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, her mouth locked on his neck, sucking and biting until he protested. Her cries grew louder as she forgot to worry about alarming their companions.

When it became too much, she drew close to his body, limiting the depth and angle of penetration until she could recover. When it wasn't enough, she leaned away from him and let him drive up into her, let him jerk her down with bruising force. She began to beg, begged him for more, begged him to fuck her, to hurt her, begged him for the Maker's sake to never stop.

She was drenched in sweat and gasping for breath between sobbing screams of passion when he spilled her on her back, but her thighs embraced his hips as he hammered into her, his own control dangerously thin. It was too much, too good, so intense that she began to fear she'd lose sight of the line between pleasure and injury. She thought of her babe and feared she may have gone too far.

But she could not beg for mercy or for him to cease, even now. The point she intended to prove still remained. She had set this in motion and she would see it through, would make sure he would never mistake her for being weak again. She could never rely on besting him in a fight; this was the only way.

She shuddered helplessly as another orgasm ripped through her with almost agonizing force, and tears leaked from the corners of her eyes and yet she would not stop. Instead, she rode it, let it carry her to that place where she was floating, apart from her body. She drifted as sensation overwhelmed her body, again and again, until Sten roared above her, pumping into her with short, jerky, uncontrolled thrusts of his hips. His hot seed filled her, and she knew when he withdrew there would be so much of it that it would gush out of her.

She moaned at the loss when he pulled out of her, felt the steady stream of his discharge as it flowed from her cunt. She lay there shivering, panting, and for a moment she wasn't sure she could move. Perhaps he had broken her after all. But his strange, violet eyes were intent upon her, and by sheer force of will she pushed herself up, made herself rise despite the aches and bruises and the sheer weakness of shock at her ordeal.

She drew her shoulders up and back, standing straight and erect even when her knees threatened to buckle. She would not yield, would not let him see her appear weak. Not until she heard what she needed to hear.

"I was wrong, kadän," he said at last, sitting on his haunches, nude in the cold, sweating and panting. "You are strong enough."

She nodded in acknowledgment of his admission and, when she was sure her legs would support her, began to seek out her clothing. She dressed beneath the warm folds of his cloak and once she was in her tunic and breeches, gave the garment to him. Her smallclothes and breeches grew uncomfortably damp and cold as his seed continued to seep out of her, but there was little she could do about that now. Instead, she ignored the discomfort and began to fasten her armor around her, grimacing at how tightly her cuirass now fit. She would need to loosen the buckles very soon, and by spring it would no longer fit at all.

Once dressed, she looked at Sten again, forcing herself to project an attitude of calm control. Finally he asked, as he had when they began, "What now?"

"Just get back in line, Sten," she said coolly, unable to suppress the weariness in her voice, and turned from him, fighting the urge to limp as she walked back the way their companions had gone to make camp.
Alistair was the first to greet her as she came over the crest of a small, rocky rise to the flat valley very they had pitched their tents. A campfire was blazing and a fragrant stew was simmering, but all she wanted was the quiet of her tent.

"Are you all right?" Alistair asked her, frowning with concern.

"I'm fine, of course," she said, forcing a small smile. "We won't be having any more trouble with Sten."

Alistair looked over her head and she turned to see Sten approaching the campsite, bearing his packs and bedroll and sword. He gave her a grave nod and moved to the far edge of camp to begin setting up his own tent.

She made her way to her tent and ducked inside, finally giving voice to the aching moan she'd been suppressing. Zevran soon appeared with a bucket of warm water and helped her remove her armor, giving an appreciative smile at her collection of blossoming bruises and abrasions. Her hand caressed his hair as he knelt and stroked between her thighs, tasting her, sampling the copious fluids Sten had left behind as she'd promised him he could. But even as he brought her soft, rippling pleasure, her mind was far away.

She lay down then, and let him bathe and massage her, let him dab healing potion over the angry bite wound on her shoulder, but she felt detached from his ministrations, concerned with the slight cramping in her womb. It may have simply been the discomfort of an excess of pleasure, but it frightened her, for she knew she had endangered her babe.

Her babe.

As the weeks passed, the concept of the child within her womb had begun to take form as something real and tangible, rather than the abstraction it had been when she first discovered her pregnancy. She had been thinking of it solely in terms of the things it represented; the possible fulfillment of her aspiration for the throne, the last of the Theirin dynasty—aside from Alistair, naturally—or even an impediment to her ability to fight the Blight.

Now, it was becoming something more, a person, a child she would love and nurture and raise to adulthood. And she had just risked the life of that child.

"I should never have accepted your dare," she said, her arms beneath her chin as he massaged her back. "It was a foolish, reckless thing to do and I knew it. Perhaps I could have found another way to settle this problem with Sten if I'd thought hard enough about it, but instead I let myself be goaded into fucking him even knowing it was dangerous."

"I am sorry," he answered softly. "You are right, of course. I should never have issued the dare in the first place, yes?"

She rolled up onto her side, facing him. To her dismay, tears stung her eyes. "When I first met you, Zevran, I was thrilled to find another person so like me, someone who understood simple, straightforward pleasure, someone who would make no demands. But now I see there is a danger to that as well. Either to find new heights of pleasure to explore with you, or perhaps simply because I want to to prove to you that I am as unreserved as you are, I push myself beyond what is wise or safe. But I am not like you, Zevran. The only thing binding you is the oath you gave me. But I have responsibilities. To the Grey Wardens, to Ferelden, to my babe...."

She looked away then, lying down once more with her head buried in her arms. He resumed his massage, but there was something cautious and questioning in his touch. He was no longer taking for
granted his access to her. And it hurt, for him to be that careful, to lose that freedom to touch and be touched without concern.

And yet, undoubtedly it was also for the best.

"It's not really fair," she said, her voice choked with tears. "I never had my chance to be a young woman, reveling in my newfound sexual freedom without a care. My virginity was carefully hoarded for a precise purpose, and no sooner was that end met than I was pregnant and alone, mired in politics and war. But fair or not, I can no longer pretend to be a carefree girl coming into her womanhood. I am a Grey Warden, and as unlikely as it may be, I am a war leader, and soon I will be a mother. I need to begin to act like it and stop taking foolish chances."

"Would you like me to go?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she said with a sob. "Perhaps not for good. I still need you; you help make the burden easier to bear. But for tonight... yes."

Alone, she dressed and curled into a ball on her bedroll. She tenderly held the small swell of her belly and wept until at last she fell asleep.
Elissa and company return to the ruins of Ostagar to lay the king to rest and Alistair makes a discovery.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Alistair (UST), Elissa/Zevran (implied), Elissa/Teagan (implied)

Elissa did not invite Zevran into her tent again until they were on their way back down the mountain with the pouch of precious ashes tucked into her pack, and the nights they spent together thereafter grew more infrequent. Instead, she spent a great deal of time alone, thinking on what had passed in that mountaintop temple.

The question the Guardian had posed to her kept echoing through her mind.

In order to seduce the father of your child, you pretended to be someone you are not. You would have lived a lie to achieve your goal. Do you believe you would have been happy, married to him?

She had felt the eyes of her companions upon her, particularly Alistair, whose curiosity about the father of her babe remained undiminished. Despite his more active courtship efforts, she had yet to find a way to tell him about the scheme she and her parents had concocted to have Cailan annul his marriage to Anora and make Elissa his queen.

Sighing, she had met the Guardian's eyes. No, I do not believe I would have been happy. The goal of having him was one born of youthful vanity and ambition. I have always prided myself on my honesty, and the half-truths were bitter on my tongue when I told them. I assumed that with time I would be able bring him to accept me as I truly am, but it's very possible that I would only have brought myself to disgrace.

Elissa hadn't known until the moment she spoke those words to the Guardian how foolish her ambition for the throne had been. Her parents had considered the goal a worthy one in terms of the promotion of their family interests, but she had only been interested in her own glory. She had thought to spend her days in idle luxury and decadent sensuality, taking her pick of the handsomest and most eligible noblemen Ferelden had to offer.

She had not considered what her responsibilities as queen might have been. Had she attained her crown while she had been so childish and vain, she would certainly have glutted herself on pleasure and ignored her obligations entirely. Coupled with Cailan's lack of interest in statecraft, it would have been a disastrous match.

Now she understood, now when it was too late. Now she understood duty and responsibility, understood how to set her vanity and sensual urgings aside to attend to greater matters.

It was a bittersweet lesson, and as she contemplated who she had been and who she was becoming, her nights in Zevran's arms came to have the feeling of a farewell.

She was met by an overjoyed Teagan at Redcliffe as she crossed the bridge to the castle bearing the ashes, but she scarcely had a chance to greet him before Arl Eamon awoke and then it was back to
politics, namely how to bring down Loghain. Elissa noted with derision that Eamon was much more interested in who sat upon the throne than in defeating the Blight; indeed, the Blight seemed only a convenient excuse to justify his political maneuvering.

She spent the night in Teagan's bed and that, too, felt like a farewell.

The following day, they departed Redcliffe Castle to head east into the Brecilian Forest in the hopes of finding the Dalish elves. In terms of distance, it should have been more efficient to travel first to Orzammar, but spring was not yet fully upon them and the danger of storms in the mountains was still very real. It would be fatally foolish to travel that deep into the Frostback Mountains until well after the spring thaws.

With financial resources once again becoming scarce, before heading into the Brecilian Forest they journeyed once more across the Bannorn, completing some jobs they had found on the Chantry board and with the Blackstone Irregulars—even a particular assignment from Master Ignacio charging them to deal with some Qunari mercenaries. It was as they were crossing Bann Loren's lands that fate chose to remind Elissa once more of Cailan.

She recognized Elric Maraigne immediately. He had been one of Cailan's trusted bodyguards. Indeed, he had been on watch outside Cailan's tent the night that Cailan had first bedded her, one of the guards instructed to allow her unrestricted access to the king, night or day. He had been a friend and confidant of the king, and so she had made a point to get to know him as well. Without a doubt, if any one survivor of the slaughter at Ostagar knew what had passed between Cailan and herself, it was this man.

Unfortunately, she arrived too late to save him. By the time her company had dispatched Bann Loren's soldiers, Maraigne was dying of his wounds.

"You," he gasped, blood flecking his lips, as he recognized her. "My Lady Cousland!"

"Shh, Ser Elric," she murmured soothingly, kneeling at his head. "Do not stir yourself. I am naught but a Grey Warden now. Wynne, is there aught you can do for him?"

"No, I'm afraid not," the mage said apologetically. "His wounds are too severe. The best we can do is make him comfortable."

"A Grey Warden...." Maraigne whispered. "Please, I must tell you...."

The tale he told and the request that followed made her blood run cold.

Go back to Ostagar.

Go back to the place where she'd lost her chance at being a carefree girl for just a while longer, where so much hope had been lost, where so many memories had been born in such a short span of time. Go back to where so many people had died in vain and left her and Alistair alone to battle the Blight.

Duncan. Daveth.

Cailan.

She didn't want to do it. Didn't want to return to that place and see the wreckage left behind. And yet....

Maric's sword. Cailan's armor. It was Alistair's birthright. It was her own child's birthright. How
could she not attempt to retrieve them? How could she not attempt to find the remains of her king, the man she had intended to marry, the father of her child, and see them disposed of properly?

She'd never had the chance to do so with her parents. For all she knew, they still lay rotting in the larder of Highever Castle while Howe's swine desecrated the place.

She met Alistair's anxious eyes across Maraigne's dying body and nodded grimly.

"Of course we'll go."

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It was as hellish as she could have imagined, seeing those ruins again, covered with darkspawn refuse and an ice-crusted layer of the winter's last great snow. It seemed there was no part of Ostagar that had not embedded itself in her memory in those few short days she had been there.

The skeleton of Cailan's sumptuous pavilion wherein she had surrendered her maidenhood in a gamble for the crown.

The charred remnants of the huge fire by which Duncan had made his camp, the fire which had glowed brightly through the canvas of his tent as the desire which had been brewing between them since the moment she saw him at Highever finally met its fulfillment.

The shattered temple where she'd first met Alistair and found herself charmed by his wit, where she'd watched Daveth and Ser Jory die before she raised the chalice to her own lips.

The Tower of Ishal, where Cailan had deliberately sent his half-brother and the woman he'd hoped to marry to keep them out of the coming battle, knowing—even if he chose not to admit it—that he would likely fall.

Finding Cailan's papers proved an easy enough matter. The key was exactly where Maraigne had said it would be, and within the chest she had spied many times in Cailan's tent was the king's correspondence. Elissa glanced through them briefly and her breath caught in a startled gasp before she had an opportunity to contain the sound. Alistair looked at her curiously, but she shook her head.

"It's nothing," she muttered. "These... these could prove useful later."

Recovering Cailan's armor was somewhat more difficult, but still straightforward enough. It was when they found his body that her stomach lurched and she quickly had to rush to the edge of the parapet to vomit into the canyon.

When the spasms had passed, she staggered over to the scaffolding upon which his desecrated corpse was hung and began ripping frantically at the twine binding him there. His skin was cold and stiff and dry from the winter's freezing winds. Scavenging birds had pecked at his face until all that was recognizable was his glorious golden hair.

"Help me, Alistair!" she snarled, drawing her dagger to hack away at the bindings when they proved so difficult her fingers began to tear and bleed. "We must build him a pyre!"

"We will," he said calmly, her brow etched with consternation at her reaction. He caught her hand that held the dagger, stopping her efforts. "But first we have to get what we came for. I promise you, we won't leave him like this, but if we build a pyre now, it's going to draw every darkspawn in this place to us. You know that."
Meeting his eyes, Elissa drew a deep, shuddering breath and nodded. Alistair turned to Cailan's corpse and gravely repeated the promise, speaking words of respect she'd never heard him use before when referring to his half-brother.

When she returned, it was with Duncan's dagger in her hand. She sent most of the party ahead to find a safe location to make camp for the night while she and Alistair and Wynne worked. The others hadn't been there. They didn't understand what had been lost that night in Ostagar. They owed no loyalty to Cailan as their king.

With implacable persistence, she cut Cailan's corpse down from the obscene display while Alistair hauled large fallen beams and logs to build the pyre, and Wynne gathered smaller pieces of wood for the kindling. Once the pyre was built, Alistair lifted Cailan's nude body atop it and stepped back. Without looking to him to see if he wanted to do the honors, Elissa took up a torch and set it to the kindling.

She watched as the greedy flames began to crackle, devouring the smaller twigs and branches and licking at the larger pieces. Heat from the fire began to spread across her skin, so hot that she knew she ought to step back, but she could not move, could not blink as the first flames touched Cailan's ravaged, dessicated skin.

It was then she felt the flutter, the first quickening of her babe within her womb. She gasped and her hand flew to her belly, and after a moment the tiny sensation came again, so slight she might have thought it was merely a muscle twitch if she hadn't known....

The smoke burned her eyes, and tears began to pour down her cheeks. She sobbed, in sorrow and in joy both, as she watched the flames consume the father of her child.

She didn't know how much time had passed when she finally looked away from the fire, but the sky was beginning to darken. They would need to join the others in camp, and quickly. Wynne, she realized belatedly, had already left. She looked over to Alistair to tell him they should go, but she found his eyes riveted on her, or more specifically, to the hand that still rested over her abdomen. He stared for a long moment, and then he met her gaze.

His jaw hardened and he walked away quickly, leaving her behind.

She felt too weary and overwrought for a confrontation, and yet she followed him after a moment. She could see the glow of the campfire in the distance when she finally grabbed his arm and pulled him around to face her.

"Is it your intent to discuss this in the middle of camp, then?" she demanded. "Or would you rather not get it done with here?"

Alistair released a sigh so impatient and explosive it startled her. "Maker's breath, where to begin?" he asked disbelievingly. "You're carrying my brother's child!"

"Yes," she answered, much more sedately than she actually felt with her heart stuttering in her chest so.

"And it didn't occur to you that maybe I should know about this?"

"Of course it did!" Elissa snapped. "When do you think I should have told you? Back in Redcliffe, when you thought I was a degenerate whore? Or maybe after you confessed your relationship to Cailan? Tell me, what would you have assumed had I told you then?"

"Probably exactly what I'm assuming now, which is that you're far more interested in the throne than
"in me," Alistair sneered.

"Precisely. So, when would have been a good time to reveal this to you?"

"How about before you let me believe you had feelings for me?"

Elissa shook her head in denial. "No! I will not accept that charge. If you care to recall, I stopped making advances toward you before you told me King Maric was your father. Since then, the only one who has done any pursuing has been you."

"You weren't exactly running away," he observed.

"Of course I wasn't." Elissa's shoulders slumped with weariness. "I was attracted to you almost from the first, and after what happened in the Circle Tower, after what you did there for me...." to her disgust, tears filled her eyes once more and she dashed them away impatiently. "I never pretended with you, Alistair. Not ever."

"But you pretended with Cailan."

"Yes. I pretended. I may have been a virgin when I went to his bed, but I was far from innocent. I made him believe that I was reluctant, that he seduced me rather than the other way around."

"You said he was going to marry you."

"He was, or so he told me," she answered. "Anora was childless after over five years of marriage. There was concern for the continuation of the dynasty after Ferelden fought so hard to restore the Theirin line to the throne. He vowed to set her aside and marry me in the hopes that he might get an heir. It was a convenient solution to the political pressure that was mounting, both over the matter of an heir and also Anora's common blood."

"And that's the scheme Duncan knew all about?" he asked incredulously.

Elissa sighed. "Yes. Duncan wasn't going to take the chance of the Grey Wardens being exiled again. As far as he was concerned, the closer the ties between the Grey Wardens and the throne, the better our position would be to recruit support against the Blight."

"But if he knew Cailan was after an heir, why would he make you a Grey Warden?" Alistair asked. "I don't know if he told you this or not, but it's extremely rare for Grey Wardens to have children."

That brought Elissa up short. "No. He never told me any such thing," she said, stunned. "Oh, Maker! How quickly the game might have unraveled had I turned out to be barren!"

Indeed, the possibilities were chilling. "Ah, well, I suppose he assumed that problem would be dealt with at a later time. His immediate and pressing concern was the Blight. It wouldn't matter if I was set aside later, or if the Wardens fell out of favor down the road, so long as he had the aid he needed immediately," she sighed. "But Duncan erred, too. He was too conciliatory, too willing to placate Cailan. And now they're both dead and the schemes I had once carefully concocted no longer really matter."

"Why didn't you mention any of this when Arl Eamon started talking of putting me on the throne?"

"Because the moment I put my child up as a rival to your claim to the throne, I become Arl Eamon's enemy, and we aren't going to get far against Loghain or the Blight without him," she explained.

"Why would he—?"
"Because you are the key to his rise to power." When Alistair would have protested, she cut him off. "No, you must listen to me. He may be fond of you, but beyond all else he is one of Ferelden's highest noblemen. If he can, he'll put you on the throne and position himself as your closest advisor and try to rule Ferelden through you. Whether or not you choose to allow this is up to you. But I drank Fereldan politics in at my mother's breast, Alistair. I understand how this game is played. Believe me when I say Eamon wants power and he will use you to get it."

Alistair gave a frustrated yell, kicking a chunk of ice across the rocky landscape. "Agh! Blasted politics give me a headache! How do you people do this? How do you think this way? All this... scheming and maneuvering?"

Elissa shook her head ruefully. "Maker only knows. Sometimes I think we must all be mad to play the game, much less relish it the way we do. But you are now one of 'us people' however deplorable you may find the idea. You need to begin to understand these things, or they will destroy you.

"Eamon doesn't know me, doesn't know if he can control me," she continued as Alistair absorbed her words. "If he thought he could, I am sure he would back putting my child on the throne—since his claim is actually stronger than yours by right of blood—likely with Eamon himself as sole regent, or at least head of the regency council. My child is, after all, his grand-nephew. But since Eamon doesn't know whether or not I'll permit such a thing, instead I would be a rival to be subdued. At best, he'll stint in the aid he gives us. At worst, he'll seek to discredit me politically, or perhaps even do me or my child harm. I can't take that risk, not with the Blight spreading every day."

"So what does that mean?" Alistair asked. "That you don't intend to reveal to anyone who fathered your child?"

"I don't know," she answered simply. "If I were the girl I had been when I set out to position myself as Cailan's queen, I'd assert my child's claim and attempt to make myself regent. But I can't do that, because it will only prolong the civil war and lead to the deaths of more of the soldiers we need to fight the Blight. You said Duncan told you the Wardens do what they must. Well, so will I. Our first priority is stopping the Blight. In order to do that, we need Arl Eamon's support to end this civil war of Loghain's. If getting his support means denying my child his or her birthright, then that is what I must do. It won't matter who sits on Ferelden's throne if there is no country left to rule."

"Then you're no longer interested in a crown?" he asked wonderingly.

"I wouldn't say that," she answered with a cheeky smile. "I am, after all, a Cousland. A Fereldan noblewoman, born and bred. Striving for greater power and influence is what I do. But I'm not the fanciful child I once was. The allure of the throne is considerably less than it used to be, now that I see the cost of achieving it."

Alistair fell thoughtfully silent, turning away to continue his walk toward camp. His pace was slower, now, allowing her to fall into step beside him. Before they crossed the circle of tents, he stopped again.

"What did you mean when you said it was up to me whether or not I allow Arl Eamon to rule Ferelden through me?" he asked with a troubled frown.

"I meant exactly what I said. If we defeat Loghain, Alistair, there's a good chance you're going to be king. You may not want it, but it's still there. You need to decide if you intend to be more than merely Eamon's mouthpiece."

"I see." He bowed his head, looking down for a long moment. "Back in Denerim, you told me I needed to look out for myself more than I do. I suppose this is the sort of thing you meant?"
"This is precisely the sort of thing I meant," she said gravely.

He lifted his eyes to hers, straightening his shoulders. "I'm beginning to think you were right. All my life, my decisions have been made for me. Go to the monastery, become a templar... Maker's breath, I even had to be conscripted to become a Grey Warden. I need to stop letting everyone else make my decisions for me. I need to take a stand and think about myself for a change, or I'm never going to be happy."

"Oh, dear," she said, giving an tragic sigh of grief. "Well, there goes my diabolical scheme to make you my sexual slave and rule Ferelden in your stead."

"Hey, now!" he protested. "You never told me there was a downside!"

"Alas, too late now," she said mournfully. "Once you go down that road to self-determination, there's no going back."

"Well then," Alistair's voice dropped to low, devastatingly sexy murmur. "Maybe I'll just have to make you my slave instead."

The pang of longing was so intense it nearly doubled her over; not merely physical arousal, but of her love for him, her desire to be held by him after the emotional extremes of the day.

"Don't do that," she said, suddenly serious.

"Don't do what?"

"Don't say something like that unless you mean it."

"Who says I don't?" he insisted, drawing closer. So close, so damned close she couldn't breathe, so close all she needed to do was stretch upward a little bit and she'd feel his lips upon hers. "Maybe it's time we stop tiptoeing around this."

"No," she shook her head, feeling another wave of tears threatening. "Not tonight. I'm in love with you, Alistair. I want you more than I think I've ever wanted anything or anyone. But you need to decide whether or not you're absolutely certain I'm not more interested in your claim to the throne than I am in you. And you need to think about what's going to happen if you do wind up on the throne. An association with me—degenerate whore that I am—may not be in the interests of your rule."

Alistair's mouth opened and closed repeatedly as several protestations made their way to his lips only to be swallowed back down. Finally, he gave a grim nod. "You're right. As usual."

Taking her hand in his, he bent and bestowed a courtly kiss to her knuckles. He looked at her once, his eyes hungrily devouring her, and then he shook himself and walked away.

Elissa stood there, swaying with desire and a much more intense emotional yearning.

"So," Zevran's voice came out of the darkness behind her. "You and Alistair have nearly brought your foreplay to its conclusion, yes?"

Drawing a deep, calming breath, she raised her eyes to his. "Yes."

He nodded slowly, as though satisfied. "Ah, that is no doubt for the best," he said. He, too, drew near, laying his hand along the side of her face and bestowed upon her lips an almost chaste kiss. "Good luck, my sweet Warden."
She turned into his hand, kissing his palm. "Thank you, Zevran. For everything."

He nodded once more, and then he, too, walked away. After a long moment, she turned and began setting up her tent, where she retired alone.
Of all the many ways in which Leliana found Ferelden inferior to Orlais, the most egregious of these certainly had to be porridge.

It seemed to be a Fereldan staple; not only did her companions travel with bags of oats to make it every morning, it was invariably served whenever they had the opportunity to stay at an inn or even at Redcliff Castle.

Horrid, bland stuff it was, no matter how much sugar or salt one used (and the longer they traveled, the harder sugar and salt became to find.) Naturally, they had no milk to add to it, and so it was simply sticky, tasteless gruel, occasionally served with a side of cold or salted meat.

Thus, it was with delight that Leliana discovered early-spring berries clinging to a bush in the Brecillian Forest as they wove their way through the woods in search of the Dalish elves. She had left camp at daybreak to do her vocal exercises where she would not disturb her companions, and came back triumphant with her pouch full of berries to add to the porridge simmering in its pot near the fire.

It was as she was stirring the porridge that she heard a dismayed curse and frustrated moan from the Warden's tent.

"Is everything all right, Elissa?" she called out as she approached the tent.

"Come in, Leliana," the Warden sighed.

The source of the young Warden's discontent immediately became apparent as she stripped off her unbuckled leather cuirass. The woolen tunic beneath, once comfortably loose, now clung snugly at her waist, and when she lifted the tunic....

"Maker's breath!" Leliana gasped. "The early-spring flowers aren't the only things in bloom, yes? Where did that come from?"

"I don't know," Elissa whimpered plaintively. "It just appeared overnight. I daresay I'm considerably more pleased to see the melting of the snows that this. Yesterday I could buckle my armor, and today I can't!"

"It's... it's so precious!" Leliana giggled. "May I touch it?"

"Oh, for Andraste's sake!" the Warden grumbled querulously, stepping close so that Leliana could touch the mound of her belly. "You could at least pretend to be a little sympathetic."
"I'm sorry," the bard said as contritely as she could manage, resting her hand lightly on that hard lump beneath the taut skin. "Perhaps I can help you with your buckles?"

"It's no use," she sighed, stepping away and pulling her tunic down over her abdomen. "There's not enough strap left to loosen them further, not if I want it to actually stay buckled."

"Well, perhaps we might run into Bodahn Feddic again soon. He may have something for trade, no?"

"Out here?" Elissa asked, arching her eyebrows dubiously. "You think we'll run into him in the middle of the forest?"

"Oh. Well...." Leliana stammered uncomfortably, embarrassed by her thoughtlessness. The Warden groaned.

"No one is ever going to take me seriously like this," she complained dejectedly. "I'll be wrapping my armor around myself with makeshift belts, looking like the worst sort of rag-tag beggar. How can I expect anyone to entrust their troops to me? I couldn't possibly look less like a general."

"Oh, come now, you mustn't think that way," Leliana crooned, wrapping a comforting arm around Elissa's shoulders. The young Warden sighed again and leaned into Leliana, resting her head against the bard's shoulder. "We will find you new armor," Leliana said encouragingly, "and you will look beautiful and powerful and skilled and no one will dare question your ability to bring us through the Blight."

"Will I?" Elissa murmured doubtfully, sounding every bit as young as Leliana knew her to be. "I'm afraid, Leliana," she whispered. "Thus far the one thing that has consistently gotten us through is my ability to use sex to sway situations in our favor. If I lose my appeal, if people start finding me repulsive, what then?"

"Oh, don't be silly!" Leliana chided. "No one could ever find you repulsive! You will always be beautiful no matter how big your belly becomes, and when they see it, all others will think is that you are young and strong and healthy, for you will not allow them to think anything less, no?"

"Besides," the bard continued as Elissa remained huddled against her side, "it is not only sex that has gotten us through. Perhaps at first it was, but I seem to recall a very distinct lack of sex as we dealt with those horrible cultists standing between us and the Urn of Sacred Ashes."

Elissa gave a watery chuckled, wiping her eyes. "That's true. Though I do think the whole ordeal may have been easier had Zevran gotten his wish and we'd found an orgiastic sex cult rather than dragon-worshiping zealots."

"But then you would not have had the chance to understand you can solve problems without resorting to sex, no?" Leliana said, stroking Elissa's hair. The Warden rested against Leliana for a moment longer, then straightened.

"Thank you, Leliana," Elissa said. She lifted her eyes and smiled, and it was then that Leliana realized just how close she was.

Kissably close.

She stared at those full, smiling lips for far too long, and when she met Elissa's eyes, she saw something reflected there.

Awareness.
Awareness of the sort she hadn't let herself feel for far too long. Not since Marjolaine.

Not since Commander Raleigh.

There had been beautiful women in the Chantry, and she'd admired them, but it had been a detached sort of admiration, more academic than desirous. She had acknowledged their beauty without ever feeling any inclination to do more than simply look.

When she'd found Elissa in the inn in Lothering, naked and covered with bruises and reeking of Loghain's soldiers, for a moment she'd felt an awful sense of recognition, had felt the memories rushing back. She'd done what she could for the Warden—as Revered Mother Dorothea had once done for Leliana—but Elissa had not had the luxury of hiding away in a cloister for years to lick her wounds. Instead, she'd strapped her armor back on and taken back upon her shoulders the yoke of a burden she was far too young to be asked to bear.

Seeing the Warden denied that time to heal, Leliana had waited for the girl to break instead, waited for her to come apart, armed herself with platitudes and empathy and encouragement for when the day finally came, but it hadn't.

Instead, Elissa had found a different way to cope. Neither better nor worse, simply... different. Rather than hiding away, the Warden had stood defiant in the face of propriety and expectation and declared with action, not words, before an entire tavern full of men that she and no one else owned her body and her pleasure, whatever use she chose to put it to.

If there had been any one moment when it appeared the Warden was ready to break, it had been in the Circle Tower, when she'd once again found herself in a position of not having full control of whom she chose to have sex with. She'd left the Tower with pain and despair in her eyes, and she'd slept alone for some time afterward.

Since that night when Leliana had escorted Elissa out of the tavern in Redcliffe, the bard had very carefully maintained a certain distance. It was clear the Warden was too young and wild and uninhibited, too many of all the things Leliana had been trying so hard to suppress for so many years.

Elissa had never pushed. But after the Circle Tower, Leliana had finally confided in the Warden about Marjolaine and what had happened with Commander Raleigh and his men. And when she had met Elissa's eyes, she had seen that terrible recognition in her as well.

But the Warden had not questioned, had not judged. She had not voiced even the slightest hint of suspicion over a spy's presence in her company, despite Ferelden's volatile political situation.

Instead, she had helped Leliana track down and deal with Marjolaine. And now the last of Leliana's tormentors from those awful events of the past were dead and Leliana was free. Free from fear, free from haunting memories of love and betrayal....

...Free from the desire to pretend to be something she was not.

Leliana had embraced a safe, chaste, cloistered life because it was safer than letting herself feel passion and the thrill of adventure again, safer than risking of betrayal. But it had not been who she was. Like Elissa, she was a wild, untamed thing, full of danger and yearning for excitement.

Elissa had recognized that in her as well. And still she never pushed, never attempted to exert her will or urge for more than Leliana was comfortable yielding. And now, suddenly, Leliana found herself unexpectedly filled with this undeniable awareness of the Warden, keen as a dagger's blade.

Awareness. And wanting.
Leliana's eyes clung to Elissa's lips as though she could taste the Warden by sight alone.

They both stood there as though frozen, neither daring to make the first move. Elissa, because she knew how Leliana had been hurt, and Leliana...

...Leliana because she couldn't quite believe she was finally going to take the chance again after so very long.

The first touch of her lips upon Elissa's was as sweet and gentle as the very grace of Andraste herself. Elissa parted to her, let Leliana's tongue flick gently at her lips, demanding nothing. Leliana sighed softly into her mouth, a sound of quiet desperation as her hands—her fingers calloused by bow and lute-string alike—came up to cup Elissa's face and deepen the kiss.

Elissa's tongue eased out to meet hers, her lips clinging to Leliana's. Maker, but it had been so long since she'd felt the blooming heat of arousal it felt almost new again, nearly painful in its intensity, that delicious cramping ache. Leliana was amazed to find, despite her history of being an accomplished seductress in her own right, that she was trembling like an untried virgin. It was terrifying and exhilarating and she wasn't sure if she wanted to run away or if she wanted it never to end.

She broke the kiss with a reluctant moan, holding Elissa tightly to her, stroking the younger woman's gracefully curving back as she gasped, "Andraste's mercy, Elissa...."

"Shh." Elissa's arms encircled Leliana's waist and she rested her head on Leliana's shoulder once more. This time it was the Warden comforting her, rather than the other way around, as their embrace had begun. "It's all right, Leliana."

"I should go," Leliana murmured, aware of the note of reluctant longing that made her words more of a moan than a declaration. "The others will be awake soon, and we will need to break camp, no?"

"I understand," Elissa said softly, pulling away. "I won't ask you to do anything you don't wish to do."

Something in her words awoke the Leliana-who-once-was, the bard who had teased and flattered and flirted and seduced her way through the courts of Val Royeaux for the sheer excitement of it, and Leliana found herself replying saucily, "You're assuming I don't want to stay."

"I'm trying not to assume anything," Elissa answered carefully, her own voice husky.

Leliana reached for her again, abandoning caution and uncertainty. Her lips were hungry and demanding upon Elissa's, devouring the moan that rose up out of the Warden's throat, her fingers threading through the hair at Elissa's temples to steer her head where Leliana wished her to go.

When they broke apart again, it was with a great deal more effort. Elissa's eyes were glazed with passion as she slowly opened them and met Leliana's once more.

"I assure you, I would very much like to stay," she said. "We can continue this later, yes? Perhaps tonight?"

Elissa gave a slow nod, visible composing herself. "I would like that very much."

"Then for now I will go see what we can do to fix your armor." Before she could change her mind, Leliana ducked out of the tent.
There were times throughout the day in that lush, budding forest that Leliana wondered what had come over her to make so brazen a promise. She knew there could be nothing more than an idle evening or two between Elissa and herself, particularly as she listened to the Warden flirting throughout the day with Alistair. It was clear where Elissa's heart was given, and Alistair's as well, even if the two of them seemed to be taking a terrible long time to settle matters.

It was also clear, as she listened to the conversation between the two of them, that Elissa's views on sex were even more permissive and scandalous than even she had imagined.

"Wait, wait, wait...." Alistair said, his face growing pale. "You... practiced your skills... with your parents?"

The Warden had the grace to look somewhat embarrassed, but she still nodded calmly and said, "Yes, Alistair. And my brother. Or my sister-in-law."

"Oh, Andraste's knickers!" Alistair muttered. "I'm not going to be shocked. I'm not going to be shocked. Maker's breath. If I let myself be shocked every time I discovered something like this about you, my heart would just give out."

Elissa laughed. "I admit, here you'd be within your rights to be at least a little shocked. It's certainly one of the more inviolable taboos."

"Right. Then... why?"

"Honestly, Alistair, because who else would I practice on?" Elissa asked logically. "Only a handful of the most trusted guards and retainers at Highever Castle understood how our family operated, how we used sex to... sweeten trade deals, to win land concessions, to appease adversaries and cajole friends. These people didn't know they were being manipulated, of course. They didn't know they'd been chosen as carefully as any assassin ever chose his mark, or that my father may have sent my mother or brother to them very much the way a panderer would assign a whore to a customer. They thought they were engaging in an illicit affair, either something born of heat and passion, or something closer to the heart. And that was another skill we had to learn; to make the person we were seducing believe the sex had nothing to do with whatever other issues were at stake, while simultaneously using it to engender goodwill and concessions.

"But my maidenhood was being preserved for a purpose, so who could they trust to teach me the ways of pleasure and assess my progress and expertise without running the risk of losing control and taking my virginity, quite possibly with me as a very willing accomplice to the deed? And since my mother and father were the experts, the connoisseurs of pleasure and passion, who better to teach Fergus and I what we needed to know? After all, once you break enough taboos, the rest begin to just seem silly and arbitrary."

Alistair had no ready answer for that, and after a moment, Elissa continued, "Tell me, when you were learning to be a templar in the monastery, did you truly believe your weaponsmaster wished to kill you when he pummeled you with his sword and shield on the training grounds?"

"It certainly felt that way at times," Alistair muttered. "But no, no I suppose I didn't really believe he wanted to kill me. However hard he tried."

"Well, it was much the same with my mother and father," Elissa said simply. "In most ways they
were very ordinary, loving parents. They did not lust after Fergus and I, never victimized us for their own pleasure, to way some families do their children. But they did feel it was necessary to impart these lessons to us. And so they did.

"But... you said you also... practiced... with your brother." Alistair looked troubled at this, and Elissa sighed.

"Yes. Fergus and his wife Oriana did not stand so much as tutors toward me as they did my... relief valve?" Elissa gave a bittersweet smile, full of love and sadness and memory. "Of all people, Alistair, you should come closest to knowing the frustration of chastity. It was desperately hard sometimes, to know all these things about pleasure, but never to get to truly experience them. I was allowed release, but only very carefully, in ways that did not jeopardize my maidenhead. Fergus and Oriana understood that, and did what they could to help me bear the burden of it. Oriana, perhaps, knew best of all. She'd been an Antivan courtesan before she wed Fergus, and actually had an upbringing very similar to my own. So, yes, to satisfy your curiosity. I turned to my brother and his wife for pleasure, rather than merely learning. You may condemn me for that, if you wish."

"I don't want to condemn you," Alistair said. "It just seems... tragic, I guess, in a way. You never had a time to enjoy your innocence. You shouldn't have had to turn to your brother for pleasure. Didn't your parents understand how hard it was for you?"

"It was not my parents' doing!" Elissa protested, laughing. "They didn't force those restrictions upon me; I forced them upon myself. I set the goal of becoming Cailan's queen, years before I would have been allowed to yield my virginity to anyone. They merely advised me on what was necessary to meet my goal. Had I gone to them and informed them that such was no longer my objective, they would have helped me decide what I wished to do, even if I decided I wished to go straightaway to a brothel and be done with the damned waiting."

"But don't you ever wish you'd had a time of innocence?" Alistair asked.

Elissa hummed thoughtfully. "I confess, sometimes I do. I think, perhaps, it was much harder on me to have a woman's knowledge in what was still very much a child's body. Even just a year or two more, perhaps, would have made it easier to bear."

"And what about your own child?" Alistair gestured to the long belt securing Elissa's armor around her waist; it had been Zevran's. Today he was wearing his second dagger at his hip rather than on his back. "Will you teach him or her, the way your parents did you?"

"I don't know," Elissa answered slowly. "I suppose it depends on a great many things. It feels disloyal to my parents to say it, but sometimes I think it might be pleasant to have a less... cynical view of sex. To not always look for the angle or the advantage in it. To enjoy pleasure for its own sake not as a rare treat, but always. Maybe I can offer my child that freedom."

Elissa shook herself free of her melancholy and said more lightly, "Besides, who knows what the future may hold for us? Perhaps we will not be allowed the freedom from scrutiny for such things. My parents were able to get away with raising their family as they did because Highever Castle was a very insular, secluded place, far away from the gossips of court and public life. Or, as you said, perhaps I will simply allow my child a bit more time to enjoy his or her innocence, and then some day offer him or her a choice. It's possible he, or she, will not wish to learn."

Leliana watched Alistair as he fell silent, and saw how he still struggled, how Elissa's ways and upbringing were different and troubling for him. Was this, then, what still kept the two of them apart?

Leliana supposed, if she were still clinging to the pious persona she had cultivated for the Chantry,
she might have struggled as well, but truthfully she'd seen too many things in her time spying upon Orlesian nobility to be unduly shocked.

Leliana found her body humming with the low buzz of expectant arousal as evening descended and they stopped to make camp for the night. The guard duty roster had become much less grueling after their descent down the mountains from Haven, when they had picked up perhaps their oddest companion yet, the golem Shale.

Prior to that, they had kept watch in pairs, all except for Elissa. The Warden had argued and protested vociferously, but after the Circle Tower the party had staged something of a small mutiny one day when Elissa had quite literally fallen asleep while walking. Wynne had taken it upon herself to inform the rest of the group how excessive sleepiness was quite common for pregnant women, and so behind the Warden's back they had put it to a vote.

They then informed her that they had enough people in the party to keep three watch shifts in pairs without Elissa taking her turn. She'd been furious, but Wynne had settled the matter when she pointed out, quite rationally, that the Warden would do them little good if the soundness of her judgement was impaired because she was asleep on her feet. That had put an end to the arguing, but not the grousing, and often when her nightmares awoke her, Elissa would relieve someone of their own shift, but most nights she did not keep watch.

Once Shale joined the party, however, everyone began to get more rest. Declaring it was unfair for Shale to keep watch alone (or perhaps, simply not trusting Shale and the golem's disdain for "squishy" people) they pared their watch rotation down to one flesh-and-blood person, changing over in the same three shifts, and the golem. Therefore, every member of the party was guaranteed a full night's rest at least every other night.

Unfortunately, Leliana had first watch on this particular night, and she fretted that perhaps Elissa would be asleep, or would change her mind, before Leliana's shift was over. The Warden had just ducked into her tent with an inviting arch of her eyebrow Leliana, and she was debating whether or not she was willing to ask someone to take her shift when Zevran approached.

"Ah, fair Leliana," he called flamboyantly, "I was wondering if I might request a favor of you."

"What is it you need, Zevran?" Leliana asked cautiously, not trusting the twinkle in the assassin's eyes.

"It's the spring, you see!" Zevran declared, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "So invigorating! I find myself unable to rest this evening, and so I thought I might ask if you would be willing to trade me your watch shift tonight, in exchange for mine tomorrow."

"Unable to rest, hmm?" Leliana asked skeptically. "Zevran, you didn't happen to be sneaking around outside the Warden's tent this morning, did you?"

"Sneaking? No!" the assassin shook his head as though the idea were ridiculous. "I merely heard sounds of dismay as I awoke this morning and thought I might render assistance, only to find our fair Warden was being quite capably assisted already."

"I see," Leliana said with a blush. "Very well, then. Thank you, I will be happy to trade shifts."

Smiling, Leliana rose from the log she had been sitting upon near the fire and crossed the clearing toward the Warden's tent, then suddenly turned back to the Antivan, who was looking smugly pleased with himself.
"And Zevran?" she called. "I assure you if you hear any sounds tonight, they will not be of dismay. And if I discover you've been lurking about investigating their origin, you will have the particularly embarrassing task of explaining to the Warden how you accidentally came to be pierced by one of my arrows tomorrow, yes?"

"Ah!" Zevran looked dramatically crestfallen. "So very cruel, my beautiful bard. Go. Go to your rest. Your privacy is quite safe."

Leliana ducked into the tent to find Elissa had already discarded her absurdly strapped-on armor and was giggling silently at the exchange.

"That was cruel," she chided. "You've no doubt ruined poor Zevran's entertainment for the evening."

"Serves him right for being such a sneaky little lecher, no?" Leliana smirked as Elissa approached and began to help her unbuckle her own armor.

"Hmm. His particularly delightful brand of lechery has stood me in very good stead," she answered candidly. "I'd highly encourage you to try it sometime."

"Perhaps sometime," Leliana shrugged noncommittally and pulled her studded cuirass off. "But I did not come here to discuss Zevran."

She drew Elissa to her, her hands slipping up the Warden's shoulders to cup her face, sipping delicately at her lips as a bee might sample a spring flower. Elissa made a very agreeable sigh and emboldened, Leliana drew her closer, reveling in the feel of the Warden's soft breasts pressed firmly against her own.

Leliana set her own pace, and Elissa allowed it, never pushing or rushing or urging for anything more than what Leliana was willing to give. She took her time, undressing the Warden slowly, exploring. Elissa was shorter than Leliana, her shoulders not so broad, her hips more slender. So very different from Marjolaine, who had been a tall woman.

She explored those breasts, so oddly heavy and full, nearly disproportionate to her slender frame. She kissed the soft, nearly translucent skin, traced the conspicuous blue veins with her tongue, drew the strangely large, dark nipples into her mouth. When she gently squeezed one of her nipples, a very small bead of thick yellowish fluid appeared, and Leliana licked it away.

"So beautiful!" Leliana purred, and she kissed away the uncertain frown that wrinkled Elissa's brow. With each kiss, each caress, each sigh and whimper, Leliana felt herself begin to regain her old confidence and assurance, spreading Elissa on the bedroll beneath her. She kissed the insides of the Warden's soft white thighs, ran her tongue along that warm, glistening cleft. She caught Elissa's hands in her own, interlacing their fingers, and held firmly as Leliana devoured her pulsing pearl, thrusting her tongue deep within, wringing pleasure from the Warden until she moaned and thrashed and begged for more.

She used her fingers, delving, stretching, pumping with slow, almost cruelly gentle strokes, or with rapid thrusts, deep and hard, until Elissa was sweating and writhing and screaming beneath her, clenching around Leliana's hand. It was powerful and intoxicating to have the self-possessed Warden so beyond control, so completely at Leliana's mercy, so helpless to the pleasure Leliana brought her.

Elissa was limp and pliant when she finally begged Leliana to cease, her body weak and trembling with the aftershocks of release. Leliana slid up Elissa's body and kissed her again, deeply, gratefully, her own body alive and singing with longing. Their limbs entwined as they rocked against each
other, rolling until Elissa lay on top of Leliana.

And then it was the Warden's turn.

She was as gentle as Leliana had been demanding, kissing sweetly, caressing so very softly and carefully, meeting Leliana's eyes intently as she asked, *is this all right? or do you like this?* until Leliana nodded eagerly, gasping out eager permission for more. Elissa's mouth drew at Leliana's nipples, the gentle pinches of her fingers overwriting the brutal clenches that had once left such bruises.

Elissa licked her way down Leliana's flat belly, her breath stirring Leliana's wet auburn curls. Her fingers slid delicately and slowly into Leliana's slick cleft, as though tenderly erasing the cruelty of the last caresses she had known there, her tongue stroking and circling Leliana's bud until Leliana arched and moaned, crying out her encouragement, shuddering in a climax so sweet and gentle it brought tears to her eyes.

Only then did Elissa become more forceful, licking harder, stroking faster, more firmly, her thumb grinding against Leliana's nub while her fingers curled within Leliana with rapid flutters until Leliana felt certain she would fly apart. Her mouth covered Leliana's pearl, sucking insistently as her tongue stroked, and then she was flying, soaring, as though the sweet, warm light of Andraste's mercy was shining upon her. When Leliana came back to herself, she was sobbing in Elissa's arms, feeling strangely weightless and freed of a terrible burden she hadn't even known she carried.

She fell asleep with her head against Elissa's breast with Elissa caressing her hair, feeling stronger and safer than she had in years.

*****

Alistair gawked when Leliana emerged from Elissa's tent in the morning, and he gawked even harder when Elissa followed her and bestowed a sweet kiss of farewell upon her lips. Hearing the former templar's choked moan, they turned to see his red face and huge eyes and then they were hugging each other and giggling madly while Alistair hurriedly excused himself.

It was later that morning that Elissa approached Leliana with a flower, only half-blossomed in the early spring morning. It wasn't until the Warden encouraged Leliana to sniff it that her eyes widened and she stared at Elissa in amazement.

"Andraste's Grace!" she said in amazement. "You remembered!"

"I did," Elissa said softly, pushing herself up to kiss Leliana's cheek. "Thank you."

"Whatever for?" Leliana asked, puzzled. "I should be thanking you!"

"For making me feel beautiful again," Elissa answered, gesturing down to the ridiculous belt binding her armor about her.

"Well, thank you for helping me feel strong again," Leliana replied, breathing deeply of the flower's fragrance. "I will always be grateful, yes?"

The strolled along in companionable silence then for several moments, until a voice called, out, "Stop! You can go no further!"

Startled, they looked around to see a number of elves emerging from the dense trees, bows trained
most inhospitably upon their company.

But it wasn't the bows Leliana was paying attention to.

"Elissa!" she hissed excitedly as the Warden began to draw herself up and pull the mantle of leadership around herself like a cloak. "Look at what the women are wearing!"

Elissa paused, canting her head to the side as she studied the elven woman with the bare midriff approaching them. And then she began to smile.
"I don't like this forest," Elissa announced to no one in particular as they surveyed the accursed campsite, which now no longer looked nearly as inviting as it once had. The tents were in tatters, the bones of countless unwary travelers scattered about. She looked at her companions, each of them appearing pale and drawn after their narrow escape from the shade that had attacked them.

Disgusted, she kicked the root of a tree. Her toe protested. The tree, thankfully, did not.

"You know, next time we get attacked by one of those angry trees, I'm gonna tell it you did that," Alistair drawled. He looked peaked himself, though in somewhat better shape than the rest of the party. Even Sten seemed shaken.

"I don't like this forest," she said again, flopping wearily down on the ground and leaning against the tree she had kicked as though it were now suddenly a best friend upon whom she could hang during a drunken evening in a tavern.

"Yes, I'm getting that impression." Alistair said calmly. "Any particular reason why?"

Elissa frowned. "Hmm, let's see. Talking trees? Angry trees? Talking werewolves who are intelligent enough to set ambushes? Hypnotic campsites that try to kill us? An apparently mild-mannered elven keeper who seemed quite reasonable up until the moment I was fitted for my new armor, but who then all of a sudden began glaring daggers at me once he noticed I was pregnant? And, of course, another distraction from our business of actually gathering our army to fight the Blight."

"All right, you have a point," Alistair conceded.

"We need to move," she said, rolling her head against the bole of the tree. "We can't stay here, but we're not fit to travel either. Help me get everyone on their feet; Wynne looks especially weary. We'll put some distance between us and this place and rest for an hour or two. Then we'll see if our people are able to continue, or if we need to stop for the day and make camp."

Alistair gave her an odd look. "Our people?"

"Well... yes. I'm not the only Grey Warden here, you know."

"I know, it's just... you're the one who has gotten us this far," Alistair said earnestly. "When they talk about the Warden, it's you they're speaking of, not me."

"Be that as it may, Alistair, I'm not doing this alone," Elissa said firmly. "There have been moments when we would have failed had you not been there. There are times you... keep me on the right path, when I might have otherwise been more callous about matters. And as we proceed onward...."

She gave a troubled sigh, and Alistair stared at her. "What is it?"
"This... strange reaction of Zathrian's is troubling me," she confessed. "We were in that Dalish camp long enough for me to tell that the fact that I'm pregnant shouldn't affect his assessment of my competence one way or the other. The Dalish seem perfectly reasonable in that respect and I saw pregnant Dalish women being treated with no reservations. And yet, Zathrian has a problem with me. I don't know what it is or how to solve it.

"On top of that, as we progress from this point onward, we are going to begin encountering people who are going to judge my fitness as a leader by my pregnancy, particularly in military matters. I'd like to say that I won't allow them to do that, that I'll kick their prejudiced asses if they try. But if it comes down to digging in my heels about their silly bigotry or getting the aid we need with the least possible time and effort, I'll choose the latter. To that end, it may be that we will need for you to start presenting yourself as at least as much a leader in our endeavor as I am, to reassure those people, however foolish they may be."

"I... I'll do what I can," Alistair answered after a long moment. They both rose and began urging their companions to do the same. "You know, I'm really not... comfortable with leadership," he added as their party began trudging reluctantly onward.

"I don't actually believe that," Elissa declared.

"You don't believe I'm not comfortable with leadership?" Alistair arched a dubious brow. "Because I, being me, would be the one to know."

"I think you've never given yourself a chance as a leader, never even allowed yourself to think about it," she said firmly. "All your life you've been told that being a leader is the absolute last thing you'll be expected to do. Not only was it not expected, it was downright undesirable for you to show such a quality, lest you be perceived as a threat to the succession."

"This is true," Alistair acknowledged. "Templars aren't exactly known for their initiative. They take their lyrium and go hunt mages wherever the Chantry tells them to, at least until they go crazy. Not a lot of room there for free thinking."

Elissa nodded. "Precisely my point. I have to admit, sending you to the Chantry, unfair as it was to you as a person, was a very effective maneuver for eliminating you as a threat to Cailan's rule. You wouldn't produce any heirs to muddle the succession, and you would hopefully have any inclination toward rebellion or independent thought drummed out of you." She frowned and mused, "Damnably clever scheme, actually. I wonder whose idea it was. Maric's, or Eamon's?"

"You know, the fact that you can nonchalantly analyze the benefits of a plan that would have condemned me to a life of misery is a bit off-putting."

"Sorry," Elissa murmured contritely. Giving him a bright smile, she offered, "Have I mentioned how grateful I am that the whole thing came apart when Duncan conscripted you?"

Alistair smiled and looked pleased at that, walking beside her much closer than was strictly necessary for polite conversation. Elissa would have welcomed the bumps and brushes, except that it meant his cool metal armor kept coming in contact with a lot more skin than she was used to exposing in such a non-intimate setting. Nonetheless, her body hummed with awareness and thrilled at his proximity and the easy physical contact which hinted of a step toward more.

How strange that she should respond to him like this, that she should find his barely-innocent flirtation exhilarating. So used to easy liaisons, she should have found this slow, simmering build-up to be tedious, and instead it was breathtaking, leaving her heart pounding in her chest and an almost queasy sensation fluttering in her stomach every time he was near.
With her penchant for aggressive lovers, she never would have imagined that a bashful virgin who'd nearly had all the initiative beaten out of him would have been the one she'd fall in love with. And yet....

...She could feel it within him, that potential for aggression, carefully leashed, waiting. But on top of it all, there was his goodness, his tenderness, his caring. The fact that he regarded sex as being more significant that just an opportunity for casual pleasure meant that when he did give himself, he would be giving much more than just his body. And though he was taking his time about it, it was undeniable that he was offering it all to her.

It terrified her almost as much as it aroused her.

She ordered a rest once they'd put some distance between themselves and the haunted campsite. A small fire was built and everyone found a reasonably flat stretch of ground upon which to lay their bedrolls. Shale, seeing how drained they all were, volunteered to keep watch alone while they rested. If she needed further proof that the narrow escape from the shade had depleted them, especially their mages, it came with the fact that nearly everyone fell quite quickly asleep. Soon, even Sten was snoring softly as Elissa found herself attempting to get settle in on the hard ground.

"Problems?" Alistair asked, sitting propped up against a tree. He hadn't bothered to strip off his armor since they weren't entirely certain they were camping for the day, and he looked nearly as uncomfortable as she felt.

"This Dalish armor doesn't offer much in the way of warmth," she complained, pulling her cloak over herself. It was true. The leather was incredibly supple and soft, and by some mysterious quality, also amazingly protective, as Varathorn had demonstrated when he drew a freshly-sharpened dagger across it without even scratching it. She'd not only had to trade in her old studded leather armor, but also promised to spend time gathering large quantities of ironbark to procure a set for herself.

While it accommodated her growing belly quite nicely—if not, perhaps, as protectively as she would have preferred—it left a great deal of her bare, and the spring had not yet warmed to the point where it was comfortable to be running about half-dressed.

Although, it was nearly worth it to see Alistair's reaction when he first caught sight of her in the armor. His jaw had dropped and his eyes had slowly traveled up her legs and then fixated upon the gentle swell of her belly. Only Leliana's giggling and teasing him for gawking had pried his eyes away. Ever since, his gaze returned to her bare midriff with amusing regularity.

As she huddled under her cloak for warmth, Alistair stared at her a long moment, as though weighing a decision. He looked around at the forest as though assessing it for threats and then he rose and began to unbble his breastplate. His boots and greaves followed, leaving him in the simple, patched and worn woolen tunic and breeches he wore underneath his armor. Taking up his sword and shield, he walked to where she lay watching him and set them down nearby.

His eyes were grave and intent as Elissa moved over without a word, making room for him. He lay down behind her, drawing her close and draping her cloak over both of them. She wasn't sure if it was his body heat or the electric awareness of his body next to hers, but suddenly she felt much warmer.

"Better?" he murmured, his voice low and husky.

"Much," she answered, trying to stay relaxed as his arm settled around her waist, the other pillowing her head. "You know, you don't need an excuse."
"I know," he whispered into her hair. "But it saves a lot of awkward and embarrassing fumbling with words to have a smooth lead-in like this."

"I like your awkward and embarrassing fumbling with words," she smirked.

"Oh, really?" his voice took on a note of curiosity. "All right, how's this? All this time we've spent together—the tragedy, the brushes with death, the constant battles with the whole Blight looming over us—will you miss it, once it's over?"

"Oh, yes, it makes me tear up just thinking about it."

He laughed. "Right. There'll be no more running for our lives. No more darkspawn," he wriggled slightly, settling in nearer, "and no more camping in the middle of nowhere."

"Hmm, you're right. I would definitely miss this," she said teasingly, but he had grown serious and still.

"It's... strange, coming to care for you like this. You're nothing like like the sort of woman I always imagined I wanted," he mused.

Elissa nodded, feeling the woolen sleeve covering his arm rough against her face. "I was thinking much the same thing earlier about you."

"Maybe it's just because we've been through so much together. Maybe I'm fooling myself. Am I? Or is there... something more here?"

Elissa sighed. "Perhaps you weren't listening when I told you I was in love with you?"

"Oh, I was listening," he assured her. "And I've tried to do what you said, tried to think things over, tried to give it time, to be sure. Maybe it's too soon. I'm don't seem to be sure of anything. I don't know anything anymore."

"I don't either," she whispered with a desperate urgency, hating that it had to be so complicated, that so much had to hang in the balance.

"Well, is it too soon for this?" he pushed himself up, leaning over her as she rolled onto her back to stare up at him. Without hesitation, he closed the distance between them, his mouth gentle but confident upon hers, seeking a response she was all too eager to give. His hand rested carefully on her bare waist, where it hardly curved anymore above her hip, and his other was behind her neck, holding her up, drawing her closer.

When they finally broke apart, he rested his face beside hers, his breath warm and slightly ragged in her hair.

"I don't know," she answered his question with a breathless attempt at humor. "I may need more testing to be sure."

Alistair breathed a soft chuckle against her ear. "Well, I'll just have to arrange that then, won't I?"

When he pulled back to look at her again, his eyes were serious. "What about Leliana? I mean, sure, seeing her come out of your tent has fueled my fantasies for days now, but I don't like the thought of leading her on. Or Zevran, for that matter, though you don't seem to spend much time with him anymore. Is that even an issue?"

"No," she shook her head with a smile, "on both counts. They're both merely good friends, and they
both understand how I feel about you. There won't be any complications there, at least."

"That's... good to know. Maker's breath, you're beautiful," he sighed, stroking her cheek with the his
knuckles. "I am a lucky man."

Elissa closed her eyes and shivered at the terrifying sense of certitude that accompanied his words.
This was it, then. They were really doing this, consequences and complications and potential for
heartbreak and devastation be damned. It felt like jumping blindfolded off a ledge, with no idea how
far she would fall.

With nothing left to do but wait for the impact of landing, she sought Alistair's lips again and knew
she wasn't falling alone.

Hunger. Maker, but he was so hungry! She could feel that craving in the trembling of his fingers at
her waist, as though he'd turn feral and ravenous if he just allowed himself to let go. And she wanted
him to. Sweet Andraste, yes, she wanted him to. But aware of their resting companions around them,
and without even a tent to offer the illusion of privacy, she knew it wasn't the time.

His fingers, however, didn't seem to be giving a great deal of thought to the notion of privacy or the
lack thereof. They heedlessly slid up her ribs to come to rest on the soft leather covering her breast.
Her nipple hardened instantly and his fingertips grazed wonderingly over the small knot it formed,
drawing a gasp from her which he swallowed greedily as she arched, pressed into his hand.

Under the concealing folds of her cloak, his hand explored her breast. He forgot about kissing her as
he became more fascinated with her response to his touch. His fingers tried to wedge inside the tight
leather encasing her breasts, but were frustrated by the lack of access it afforded.

His voice practically growled near her ear, "I suppose with the dangers of werewolves and angry
trees, and all that, now isn't the time to be running off into the woods alone for some privacy?"

She laughed softly. "Inadvisable, as well as downright conspicuous."

"Oh, now you develop a sense of modesty!"

"It was your modesty I was trying to consider," she shot back quietly. "I don't know if it's possible to
actually die of blushing, but I'm certain we'd find out when you strolled back into camp and had to
deal with all the knowing looks and smirking."

"You raise a very good point," he murmured, kissing her jaw. His lips traveled down and her resolve
weakened when his tongue darted out to taste her neck. Without even meaning to, she shifted,
rocked against the thigh that had managed to slip between her legs without either of them noticing it
as they had embraced. Her breath caught in a gasp.

"What?" Alistair breathed, lifting his head at her reaction. Meeting his eyes, Elissa deliberately
repeated the motion, let him see her pleasure, watched his pupils dilate in response. He wedged his
thigh more firmly between hers, ground it against her, and she mewled softly in pleasure.

"Is that good?" he whispered, transfixed, as her eyes drifted shut and she lifted her hips again,
seeking more.

"Dear Maker, yes...." she sighed, turning slightly to face him more directly. She could feel the pulse
and jump of his erection against her as they rocked against each other, his thigh deliberately pressing
firmly against her damp smallclothes under the soft, pleated leather skirt she wore.

His hand stroked firmly over her breast again as she shamelessly rubbed herself up and down on his
thigh. She felt him staring at her face, watching her strained, intent expression, listening to her hiccoughing gasps as she worked for her pleasure. It came with a soft, whining moan and a gentle ripple, an almost soothing, lulling thing and she smiled softly up at Alistair as it passed.

"That was...." he gazed at her in wonder, his mouth working as though to find words.

"...only the beginning," she promised him, lifting her fingers to his lips. He kissed her finger, and then her palm, and finally his head dipped down kiss her again, and Elissa gave an elated sigh as she opened to him, welcomed his probing tongue as he grew bolder, more demanding. She could feel his cock, hard and insistent against her hip, and her hand slipped down to cup him through his breeches.

"Oh, Maker's breath...." Alistair groaned softly, tearing his mouth from hers to nudge urgently against her palm.

Watching his eyes, she began to pull at the laces of his breeches, slowly and deliberately, giving him a chance to tell her to stop. Instead, he lay there waiting, tense and trembling in anticipation. They sighed together when her fingers slipped inside his smallclothes and curled around his erection. Without hesitation, he pumped into her hand.

"Sweet Andraste...." he growled. "I swear to you I've been working on endurance, but I don't think I'm going to last long this time."

"Then don't," she whispered, watching him as intently as he'd watched her moments before. "Just let go."

Groaning, he surged into the sheath formed by the ring of her fingers and palm, and she squeezed hard, feeling the wide ridge of the head of his cock pull back through her hand before pushing out again, the loose sheath of skin aiding the glide of his shaft through her palm.

"Elissa...." Alistair moaned her name. Gradually the tempo of his hips increased, became less controlled. And still she watched him, watched him surrender to passion, give himself over to his need. His hand shot down and captured the head of his cock and he made a strangled sound as he gave a few more quick thrusts and shuddered.

"Maker's breath, what you do to me...." he panted, slowly opening his eyes. He withdrew his hand from under the cloak and glanced around, clearly looking for someplace to wipe his palm.

Watching him, Elissa caught his hand and brought it to her mouth. Alistair practically squeaked when her tongue darted out to capture the seed that was leaking between his fingers, but he opened his palm to her, and she cleaned it with slow, sensual strokes of her tongue. She made love to his hand, drew his fingers into her mouth one by one and sucked them clean, made him flinch ticklishly when her tongue delved deep between his fingers.

All the while, he watched her, enraptured. There was no hint of revulsion on his face, and it wasn't until she realized that such a thing was exactly what she was watching for that Elissa realized she'd been testing him, testing just how accepting of her shamelessness he was willing to be.

When she caught herself doing it, she made herself stop. Not here, not now, not with him. With Alistair, she vowed, she would not look for the angle, the catch, the hidden trap or secret advantage. If he still had reservations, that was a risk she would have to take, but she would allow nothing but pleasure in the sex they shared. No games. No gambits.

Releasing his hand, she smiled again, uncertainly this time, much less confident now that she had denied herself the ability to use pleasure to manipulate him. But Alistair merely kissed her again,
tasting himself on her lips and tongue and sighing agreeably.

Feeling once more that exhilarating sense of falling, she rolled away, nestled her backside against him, and fell asleep in his arms.
Communion

Chapter Summary

In order to win the trust of the werewolves, Elissa must commune with the Lady of the Forest.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Lady of the Forest, Lady of the Forest/Swiftrunner, Elissa/Alistair

Content Warnings: Anthropomorphic sex, vine-sex

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Elissa wondered if it was a hazard of her particular worldview that made her jump so quickly to thoughts of sex. Or maybe it was simply the natural and unabashed nudity of the werewolves and their Lady of the Forest. The sensually caring way she interacted with them, a priestess surrounded by her adoring acolytes, sang to the part of Elissa that was always aware of things on an erotic level.

Whichever it was, the others in her party noticed as well. Or perhaps they'd just been in Elissa's presence too long. Zevran looked wickedly amused—despite his sympathy for the elves—Morrigan intrigued, and Alistair....

"Please tell me this isn't heading where it seems to be heading," he murmured in Elissa's ear as they watched the Lady stroke Swiftrunner.

"I have no idea where this is heading," she replied softly, even as Swiftrunner's body evidenced a specific response that clearly indicated where he, at least, would like things to go. Or one thing in particular. "But I can tell you I have absolutely no intention of fucking a werewolf who could easily infect me with a curse that we may not be able to cure."

"Oh, thank the Maker," Alistair whispered reverently as she turned her attention back to the Lady of the Forest.

"We will accept your offer of hospitality for the evening, since it is too late for us to make it back to the Dalish camp and Zathrian today, and the forest is full of many dangers at night," she said graciously. "That is, provided you can guarantee that none of my people will be infected with this curse, however accidentally."

"We shall commune amongst ourselves only, then, if that is your wish," the Lady acceded, and turned her attention back to the werewolves.

Elissa looked at her companions. "You are each free to make your own decision on how you wish to pass the evening, but I would caution you against taking unnecessary risks, lest you find yourself sporting fur."

And so they came to find themselves sitting on the outskirts of the werewolves' communal den in the ancient elven ruins, dining on cold rations while the werewolves feasted messily on freshly-caught game. Despite all the battle she had seen, Elissa found the sight of their blood-covered snouts ripping
at the entrails of the buck to be a bit much for her stomach and turned away from them.

"Is that the only reason?" Alistair asked after they had eaten and their companions were busying themselves laying out their bedrolls not far from the exit to the werewolves' den.

"Hmm?" Elissa turned back to him, momentarily distracted by the distinct shift in the atmosphere among the werewolves. Now that their hunger was sated, they were settling in, cleaning themselves and each other with slow strokes of their long tongues as the Lady passed among them, caressing them each in turn.

"The curse?" he prompted as Swiftrunner knelt before the Lady, his clawed hands strangely gentle as they stroked down her back while he nuzzled her breasts. His long, sinuous tongue reached out of a fanged mouth to caress her nipple.

Elissa shuddered, perverse arousal tightening her body. Since their covert caresses in the forest two days previously, she and Alistair had not had any opportunity to fulfill the promise of their new understanding. Tension and awareness hung between them like some delicious, mouth-watering aroma, promising a feast in the near future.

"Is the curse the reason I declined to 'commune' with them? Is that what you're asking?" she said, looking away from the display with difficulty.

"Yes," he said, looking resolute and uncertain all at once. That caught her attention, and she studied him more closely.

"You're asking if I refused because of you."

Doubt wavered in those beautiful, expressive golden eyes. "I suppose I am," he admitted. "We haven't really discussed what effect... we... are going to have on the way you deal with things."

"What effect would you like us to have?" she asked carefully.

"I don't really know," he said slowly. "I suppose the part of me that's still the naïve Chantry boy would love to hear you say you only want to be with me. The idea of not having you all to myself is maddening. But the part of me that has sworn to start doing what's best for me and hang what everyone else expects isn't sure it's worth losing you over. You once said you weren't going to change, after all, no matter what I thought."

"Alistair...." Elissa said, reaching for him, but he stood stiff and determined, not bending to her touch.

"Let me finish," he insisted. "There's also the fact that Duncan recruited you for a reason. He felt that... what you do would benefit the Grey Wardens. If I'm going to start being more of a leader here, I need to start thinking more like he did, right?"

"Oh, Alistair," she sighed, saddened by his sudden look of brave conviction and the loss of innocence that it signified. "I'm not entirely sure I'm good for you."

"Don't say that!" he said adamantly, striding to her to take her by the shoulders. "Being near you makes me crazy. Half the time, I feel like my head's going to explode! But I can't imagine being without you. Not ever."

Gratefully, Elissa leaned her forehead against the veridium plate covering his chest, letting the caress of his hands up and down her arms soothe her remorse for being the cause of his lost naivete. It may have frustrated her, but it was a part of the integral him that she had come to love.
"In answer to your question," she said softly, looking up at him, "yes. You're at least part of the reason why I wouldn't consider joining them, even if the curse weren't a factor. I want you, and the thought of anyone else right now isn't all that appealing for me. I can't promise there's never going to come a time when I won't find sex to be the most expedient way to achieve our ends—though, if I'm honest with myself I suspect those times are going to become far less frequent the more pregnant I appear. But I can promise you that I will, at the very least, discuss it with you first. I can't say I'll necessarily do it to ask your permission, or your blessing. But maybe... consult with you, to find another way, or try to at least help you understand why?"

"That... sounds fair," Alistair said with a serious nod. "I guess we'll just... see how this goes?"

Elissa gave him a cheeky smile, unwilling to let him see just how deeply she feared everything coming unhinged on this one matter. "Not quite the ringing declaration of undying love and unquestioning support I hear in my dreams, but it will have to do for now," she answered.

"So you dream about me, do you?" Alistair's voice dropped low as he turned from her to spread out his bedroll. She felt something correspondingly low in her body surge in response as he took her bedroll from her and deliberately laid it out next to his.

"Oh, gracious yes," she said, deliberately adding a breathy note to her voice as she returned his teasing in kind. "I'd be perfectly happy to elaborate, if you'd like."

"I... think that would lead to the sort of conclusion I really don't want to have in dusty, haunted ruins surrounded by werewolves without even the benefit of a tent around us."

"Hmm. Suddenly I'm regretting choosing not to leave the ruins tonight after all," Elissa grumbled, turning to survey the cluster made by her people to ascertain whether all were settled in securely. "Wait. Where's Morrigan?"

From behind her, she heard Zevran give a low, lusty chuckle. "Our witch apparently decided the adventure was worth the risk, yes?"

"And you didn't?" she turned to arch an eyebrow at him.

"Ah, it was tempting, but it would not do to spoil my beauty with fur."

Sten grumbled from where he kept watch not far from Shale, strategically positioned between the party and the congregating werewolves, and she thought she may even have heard a giggle from where Leliana lay on her bedroll with her back to them. Elissa smiled at Zevran and shook her head as she sat upon her own bedroll and looked out into the large chamber of the ruins where the werewolves were clustered with each other and the Lady. Where Morrigan was, she couldn't say. Either the mage had found someplace private with a particular companion, or she had shifted into something rendered indiscernible by the mass of furry bodies.

"What are you doing?" Alistair asked as he settled in on his bedroll beside her. Like the rest of their party, he had not removed his armor this evening, even to sleep. None of them felt trusting enough of the werewolves to take that risk.

"Watching," Elissa answered simply, regretting the fact that she could no longer hug her knees to her chest the way she once would have done.

"...Watching?" There was a squeak to Alistair's voice as he echoed her. "I'm assuming you don't mean in the 'guard duty' sense?"

"No, Alistair," she said with a low laugh. A number of the werewolves had already separated from
the pack, in pairs or small groups, forming a small circle of clusters around the Lady, who was surrounded by Swiftrunner and three of the largest male werewolves. They rubbed their furred bodies against her and she touched each of them with her strange, twig-like fingers. They stroked their muzzles along the side of her face in an unmistakably canine gesture, and yet the clawed hands that caressed her did so in very human ways.

Alistair was still staring at her, and Elissa realized she had gotten distracted and hadn't finished explaining herself. "If they're going to be shameless enough to put on a show for us, why should we be ashamed to watch?"

He harrumphed dubiously, and Elissa shook her head, smiling. "Not everyone enjoys watching, of course, and you certainly need not do so if it disturbs you, but there's great beauty in the act of sex. Whether it's making love or just pleasure or even animalistic rutting, it's an art. Even when it's messy and disgusting and absurd and undignified, it's still surpassingly beautiful. There's a reason my father enjoyed watching my mother with other lovers, you know, beside the fact that it provided a convenient means for circumventing any inclination toward jealousy."

"All right, I'm listening," Alistair said slowly. She heard him move, and then his mouth was near her ear as he sat behind her and rested his chin on her shoulder. "Tell me what you see here."

"Trust," she murmured. "Look at Swiftrunner's hand—paw?—on the Lady's breast, those claws just barely pressing against her skin. He could shred her if he wished to. Will he suddenly turn brutish? Will he close his hand, pierce her flesh? Will he hurt her? Will she enjoy it if he does?"

She turned her face, looked at him solemnly. "It takes great trust to allow yourself to be vulnerable to someone you know can hurt you at a whim. Indeed, that's the very essence of love, isn't it?"

Alistair's lips dipped to brush her neck, and he said softly, "So there's a lesson here."

"Not one I had thought to find, but I suppose there is," she answered with a pensive frown. Shaking off her trend toward melancholy, she turned her attention back to the Lady and her mates. "Ah, but look there. He's pressing harder with his claws, almost hard enough to break the skin, and she likes it very much indeed. See the way all her muscles tighten, the way she arches into the touch, seeking more, the way her hips move? It's almost a dance, but no performance could ever be choreographed so flawlessly, no planned movement could ever be so utterly sensual."

She fell silent then, and Alistair with her, watching the way the Lady writhed as one of the other werewolves drew his claws down her back, hard enough to leave scratches without drawing blood. Another actually took her entire neck in his fang-filled mouth and she merely let her head fall back, trusting implicitly that the creature would not rip her throat out. Her face was a sublime mask of ecstasy, and Elissa found herself giving Alistair a very wicked grin.

"Our Lady likes risk," she purred. Something in Alistair's eyes flared at that, hinting at a dark hunger he himself cherished. Her breath caught at the sight of that feral gleam, and when his lips closed over hers, it was with a savagery she thought the werewolves would be hard-pressed to rival.

The guttural, growling speech of the werewolves intruded upon the harmony that had settled upon the den, like a discordant note in a primal symphony, and reluctantly Elissa emerged from Alistair's kiss to turn her attention back to where Swiftrunner and his companions were now in urgent discussion with the Lady. Giving a nod of acquiescence, the Lady turned directly toward Elissa and began to cross the cavernous chamber to where the party was camped.

Immediately Sten's sword rang free of its scabbard and Shale's rumbling footfalls shook the chamber floor as their guards interposed themselves between the advancing werewolves and the rest of the
party. Alistair pushed himself to his feet, reaching for his sword, and she heard Zevran's daggers clear their sheaths and knew that he, too, had risen.

Elissa deliberately remained seated, forcing herself to watch the Lady and her consorts placidly as they approached. Leliana's bowstring creaked and she felt a surge of alarm that this could all go badly before they even knew the Lady's purpose in approaching.

"Stand down," she ordered with a calmness she didn't feel, slowly standing. "If they meant to attack us, they would be charging, not strolling casually over." Alistair and Sten lowered their swords slightly, but remained perceptibly alert.

"Swiftrunner is concerned by the fact that you commune amongst yourselves, but will not do so with us," the Lady said once she stood before Elissa. "He fears it may signify some duplicity on your part. I have tried to assure him this is not so, but he will not be placated."

"If I'm not mistaken, one member of my party is indeed taking part in your communion," Elissa said sedately. She still could not discern Morrigan's whereabouts. What if the witch had gone hunting, or simply prowling?

"She is not your leader," Swiftrunner snarled.

"No, she is not," Elissa agreed. "I am, and as much as I would like to prove my good intentions to you, I will not expose my babe and myself to your curse. Nor would my people allow me to do so. You, Swiftrunner, so clearly protective of your Lady, should understand that."

"Then will you consider communing with me?" the Lady offered.

Swiftrunner protested, concerned with letting one of their party touch his Lady, but she silenced him with a calming touch, looking expectantly at Elissa.

Elissa felt Alistair's eyes and turned to look up at him. "I suppose this is where I consult with you," she murmured. She felt the rest of the party drawing back, offering them privacy.

"I'm not seeing another way around this," he answered reluctantly, "at least not one that doesn't involve a body count I'd really rather not have tonight. Do you believe they'll keep their word, that it will only be the Lady?"

"I do."

He sighed, nodding. Then his jaw set and he closed in on her, kissing her angrily, desperately. "Do it," he whispered harshly. "Fuck every creature in the forest if you must. Just, please... tell me I'm on the list somewhere."

She jerked with the spasm of shock and arousal that shuddered through her at hearing his beautiful voice, gone low and growly with frustration, use that word, a word she'd never imagined would cross his lips. Wide-eyed, she nodded. "You are the list, you fool," she said emphatically, kissing him again.

She sat and removed the boots that protected her legs to the knee. Then she turned to the Lady and followed her into the rough circle formed by the werewolves. Swiftrunner snarled at something behind her and she looked back to see Alistair had come with her.

"You have your protectors," he said without meeting Elissa's eyes, giving a respectful nod to the Lady and glancing significantly at Swiftrunner and the other werewolves. "I think it only fair that she should have hers."
She stared at him in wonder for a moment, realizing just how deeply he was taking to heart her admonishment that she needed him to lead beside her.

Elissa wondered at her own strange reluctance as the Lady of the Forest drew near, smelling of the seasons of life and growth; the spring's new flowers and summer's freshly-tilled earth and the autumn's crisp, dried leaves. That the Lady was beautiful and exotic was undeniable, and yet all she could think of was the man at her back, at whether he would be angered or repulsed should she give herself over to passion with the Lady. What was she becoming, that she should want only him?

The Lady's arms twined around her, and she felt them begin to move in ways no arms ever could. They were... transforming, she realized with wonder, writhing, lengthening, sprouting new shoots. She was being embraced by living, moving vines.

Tendrils crept out and with more dexterity than any fingers could ever manage, unlacing the tight leather encasing her breasts. The cloth bindings securing her breasts loosened, and Elissa gave a gasp as gravity sank its cruel claws into flesh made tender by her pregnancy and pulled. And then she felt the Lady's skin against hers, was overwhelmed by her scent, cool and fresh and indescribably alive.

There it was; desire. Elissa let it fill her, flood her, let herself embrace the Lady and pull her closer. There was an odd texture to her skin, she thought, caressing the Lady's back down to her waist where the vines began to cover her. Waxy, almost, like leaves, rather than flesh.

The Lady's breasts were cool and firm as they pressed against Elissa's, and there was an energy to her; it felt like magic, but much subtler, not something that was summoned or harnessed. It was simply a part of her. It felt as warm as the spring's first rays of sunlight on her skin, despite the coolness of the Lady's flesh.

Her hand came up to cup the Lady's breast and Elissa dipped her head, licking softly across her nipple before drawing it into her mouth. She tasted like berries, like chilly water from a mountain spring fed by melting snows, like earth and grass and fog all at once. All of that and more. Elissa held the Lady tighter, suckled harder at her breast, barely noticing when the writhing tendrils of the Lady's hands unfastened the pleated leather around her hips and let it drop to the floor.

More tendrils brushed delicately over her nipples and Elissa gasped, for it was foreign and disconcerting and yet still undeniably arousing. They twined about her hardening nipples, forming snug rings that gently pulled and pinched. Their unusual texture scraped just roughly enough to heighten sensation without being uncomfortable and Elissa found herself unconsciously rocking her hips in response.

Her smallclothes seemed almost to melt away at the urging of those tendrils, sliding off her hips and down her legs effortlessly and then she was bare and surrounded the the Lady's essence, by her power. She could no longer feel Alistair's eyes upon her, nor even the tense and predatory gazes of the werewolves. All that mattered was the Lady.

She did not know how she came to be lying upon the marble floor of the chamber, the Lady hovering over her. Those vines caressed her in more places than mere fingers ought to have been able to accomplish, and she writhed in pleasure, feeling both perverse and indescribably free. The Lady slipped down her body, her breath like a cool breeze whispering across Elissa's skin. She paused reverently at the gentle swell of Elissa's belly and kissed it softly, as though bestowing a blessing, and Elissa felt warmth and wonder flood through her.

The Lady's tongue had a strange texture as it parted Elissa's folds, velvety and cool, like thick moss upon the bark of an ancient tree. Elissa closed her eyes and let herself be pleasured, and she understood why the werewolves called this communion, for it was much more than sex. She could
feel the life of the werewolves surrounding her, each one both savage and sentient. She could feel the life of the trees whose roots were creeping into the ruins, reclaiming them for the forest. She could feel the forest beyond the ruins, ancient and full of mystery. She even thought she could feel the elves, far away, and how similar their presence was to the forest.

The Lady's mouth jolted against Elissa at the same moment she heard Alistair draw his sword. The sense of awareness fled, and she looked up in alarm to see that Swiftrunner had dropped to his knees behind the Lady and begun to couple with her. His clawed hands remained very carefully on the Lady's hips, however, and Elissa gasped, "It's all right, Alistair!" as the Lady's tongue found her clitoris and stroked firmly across it.

He looked down at her questioningly, and she wondered for a moment how she must appear to him, embraced by the Lady's vines, hovering on the brink of rapture. Her eyes pleaded for his forbearance, for his understanding, and slowly he lowered his sword, and it was then that she saw something else in his eyes.

Desire.

She held his eyes for as long as she was able, let him see her pleasure as the Lady's tongue caressed her, until her eyes drifted uncontrollably shut and she was carried away on sensation. The sense of communion, of oneness, was back, and this time the presence of Swiftrunner was a bright beacon within it. She could feel not only the feral instinct which drove him, but also the tenderness of his adoration for the Lady. She began to understand that he could feel her as well; it was why he had needed to join them, so that he could sense her in this way, to trust her.

And then thought was impossible, for the thrusts of Swiftrunner's body into the Lady drove her against Elissa, adding surges of pressure to the stroking, twirling pleasure of the Lady's tongue against her nub. Something cool and smooth slipped inside Elissa and began to swell. She came with a startled cry as she realized it was another vine, delving carefully but deeply within her and beginning to grow.

She arched her hips off the floor, bucking wildly as she rode out the waves of pleasure, and another orgasm followed hard on the heels of the first. She heard savage growls and howls echo through the chamber and realized the werewolves had fallen to rutting, giving themselves over to their ferocious desires. On it went, and on, as the tendril fucked her firmly and deliberately, and the Lady's tongue brought her to the pinnacle again.

Swiftrunner howled and slumped above the Lady. Elissa felt the resurgence of his humanity as his desire was sated and he embraced the Lady tenderly. Another stroke of the Lady's tongue brought her to a gentle, shivering climax and then the Lady began to withdraw from her.

The entwining vines slipped away from her body, retreating. The penetrating tendril shrank and withdrew from her. Elissa lay there, gasping and awed, as Swiftrunner helped the Lady to her feet. After a moment, she reached for Alistair's hand and he did the same for her.

"Now you understand," the Lady of the Forest said calmly.

"Yes," Elissa nodded, accepting the clothing Alistair offered her. She bowed slightly to the Lady. "Thank you."

Unable to find any words that could adequately express her wonder, she turned from them and went back to the small enclave her party had established. Her companions—except for Morrigan, who had not returned—all waited watchfully.
"You may all rest tonight," she assured them softly as she dressed. "We're in no danger here."

Nodding, Zevran turned away and began to remove his armor so that he could rest more comfortably. Leliana did likewise, and soon even Sten and Alistair were unbucketing their plate.

Settling upon her bedroll, Elissa waited, feeling a warm glow of peace as Alistair took off his armor and lowered himself beside her.

"You were right," he murmured as he took her into his arms. "That was beautiful."

Elissa didn't answer, but instead waited for him to decide how he would handle this new discovery. Finally, after a long moment, he gave a rueful chuckle.

"This is the strangest courtship ever," he declared, kissing her hair. Elissa smiled and as always, felt that hum of desire at his nearness. Even sated and tired, she wanted him.

"I suppose it is," she murmured.

Finding nothing else to say, she snuggled in closer and let herself drift to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I swore I wouldn't do it, but it happened anyway. To my beloved RCD-OP: this quasi-tentacle-sex is for you. Thank you to RCD-beta and others who encouraged me to do a Lady of the Forest encounter.
(Interlude D) Reprieve

Chapter Summary

Elissa and Alistair share an afternoon of peace together in the forest.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Alistair

To Alistair’s relief, it didn't take sex to get Zathrian to agree to break the curse upon the werewolves. Instead, it took a hug.

As he so often found himself doing, Alistair watched as Elissa reasoned with Zathrian. Once she learned of the fate of his children, Zathrian's reaction to realizing she was pregnant suddenly made a great deal more sense.

"Tell me, do I favor her?" she asked softly, somehow managing to be understanding of the elf’s pain in spite of her fury at his deception.

"Yes," Zathrian answered, his shoulders hunching slightly with the pain of the admission. "As much as a human might. Had she borne the shemlen child of the beasts who raped her, it might have looked very much like you."

Somehow, Elissa got through to him, was able to make him see the harm the curse was doing to his own people and the need to break it. Her trust and mercy toward the Lady and the werewolves helped to guide Zathrian. He gave his life, and the curse was ended.

Elissa was pensive for days as they made their way back to the Dalish camp. She answered Alistair's flirtations with perfunctory smiles, but her eyes were distant. It caused Alistair no small amount of worry. It would be his luck if he were to lose her interest before he even had a chance to progress beyond courtship.

He remembered those early days after Ostagar when he had been lost in thought and memories and remorse. Elissa had pulled him out of it, not with half-hearted teasing, but by getting him to talk about it. Was that simply her way, he wondered? Or was that her role, as their leader? Was it something he should be doing, if he was going to help take some of the burden of leadership from her?

"Would you like to talk about it?" he offered at last, and her troubled eyes finally turned to him.

"I've been thinking that despite my best efforts, I'm a hypocrite after all," she said slowly.

That was unexpected. "What?! You may be the most sincere person I've ever met. How would you ever get that idea?"

"I remember that last night in Highever. I remember my little nephew with his throat slit, my sister-in-law laying in a pool of her own blood, her beautiful body a defiled, mangled wreck. I remember my mother vowing to subject herself to Howe's men's 'sport' if it bought me a few more moments to make my escape."
Tears flashed in Elissa's blue eyes, then, and she dashed them away, turning her gaze from his. "And I wonder... had those werewolves been named Howe, would I have given over my vengeance as Zathrian did? Or would I have persisted, no matter how many centuries passed, no matter who suffered along the way?"

"You wouldn't," Alistair told her emphatically.

"How can you be so sure?" she asked, a hitch to her voice.

"I've seen you, all these months," he said, pulling her to him. She stiffened for a moment, and then sank into him. "All the trouble you go to to spare lives everyone else has written off. Maker knows you're entitled to your vengeance, and I swear I'll be there with you on the day you take it, but you won't take it at the cost of innocent lives. And I promise you if it looks like you're heading in that direction, I'll let you know."

Elissa sighed, and suddenly everything within her eased as though she had laid aside some terrible burden. It was the first time Alistair really let himself consider just how much he had expected her to take on, how tardy he was in beginning to help her bear some of it.

It was fortunate, he supposed, that she was trained to lead, to rule. Better still that despite her youth, she was self-possessed enough to cope with such responsibility. Anyone else might have cracked. No. Laying it all upon her the way he had had definitely not been his finest moment.

Elissa was still quiet and thoughtful when they returned to the Dalish camp and she related to Lanaya —now the new keeper, Alistair supposed—what had happened. He had thought they might stay among the Dalish for a day or two after they secured the keeper's agreement to honor their treaty, but instead they merely restocked what supplies they could from what the Dalish had to offer and set out that same day.

They would cross Ferelden yet again and go deep into the Frostback Mountains to Orzammar. It would be a long journey, and Alistair could see their people were tired. Wynne's shoulders sagged wearily, Leliana's cheerful smile was absent, Zevran was making no effort to flirt with anyone... even Sten seemed more stoic than usual.

On top of that, the weather had turned unseasonably warm for early spring and except for Elissa in her ridiculous scrap of leather that could barely be called armor at all, they were all still geared for cooler weather. Everyone seemed distinctly wilted.

Not least of all Alistair himself. Maker's breath, how was it that he always managed to forget over the course of the winter just how bloody hot it could get inside plate armor on a warm day?

Finally he'd had enough. When they emerged into a large clearing not far from the stream they had been following, he called a halt.

"Um, look... everyone, stop. We're going to make camp here today," he announced.

Their reaction was about what he'd expected it to be for any attempt at leadership on his part: carefully blank faces and blinking eyes darting uncertainly toward Elissa, who had turned her own quizzical gaze upon him.

She stared at him a long moment, but thankfully didn't see fit to undermine him, either by questioning his command or reiterating it using her own authority. Instead, she obligingly began setting down her pack and bedroll, and soon the others were doing the same.
"Is there a reason why we're making camp in the middle of the afternoon?" she asked under her breath as he began unloading his own burdens.

"You've been distracted. Maybe you didn't notice just how tired everyone is. Some of the fights in the forest and ruins took a lot out of them," Alistair answered, unbuckling his chestpiece. Without the steel encasing him, the day was suddenly not so unbearably warm. His legplates and boots soon followed. "This seems like as good a spot to camp as any; the stream is nearby, so we can all bathe, and we haven't bumped into anything nasty for a while, so it appears to be fairly safe. I thought we might stay a day or two, rest up a bit. Maybe sort through our gear and decide which of the winter supplies we can do without. It will practically be summer by the time we get into the mountains again; we may as well lighten our loads."

When she didn't answer, he looked up to find her watching him intently. "What?"

"Nothing," she said, giving herself a small shake as she stared at him with a wondering smile. "Those are all truly excellent ideas."

Having laid down her pack, she placed her fists at the small of her back and arched, stretching with a long sigh of relief. The motion pushed her rounded belly outward, and Alistair nearly swallowed his tongue.

He hadn't really noticed the changes of her pregnancy until she had acquired her Dalish armor, but since she had, it was rapidly becoming an obsession with him.

Suddenly, Alistair began to smile, and it was Elissa's turn to ask slowly, "What?"

"I just realized, we're weeks away from Orzammar."

"Yes. Yes, we are," she agreed cautiously.

"Until we get there, we have no crises to resolve, no allies that need placating, no duties that need discharging. No distractions."

"This is all true," she acknowledged. "But what's your point?"

"We may never have another time when it's so close to being just the two of us," he said, no longer smiling. Indeed, suddenly he was deadly earnest.

Understanding lit Elissa's face. "Ahh. You're absolutely right. What, then, do we intend to do with this reprieve?"

"Come with me. Into the forest. Right now."

Her eyes widened. "You're sure?"

"Yes," Alistair breathed, his heart pounding. "After Orzammar, after we get the dwarves to fulfill their treaty, it's all going to be... politics and war and the archdemon. I don't know what's going to happen. And I don't know if there's ever going to be a truly right time, but I'm absolutely certain there's never going to be a better time."

Elissa drew a deep breath and nodded. "All right, then."

Before he knew it, Alistair had scooped up his bedroll and was practically dragging her by her hand into the woods at a run, ignoring Zevran and Leliana's laughter and cat-calls.
Alistair refused to let himself think too much. Instead, he loped along, to the bank of the stream, looking for someplace warm and dry and far enough from camp to afford them some privacy. Elissa giggled merrily as she followed until they reached a sunlight-dappled hollow.

The air was even warmer here without the shade of the trees, and it smelled rich and fragrant with new growth. Suddenly Elissa wasn't giggling anymore, as he threw down the bedroll and spun to take her up into his arms, lifting her off the ground as his lips found hers hungrily.

Her skin was warm and slightly damp under his fingers after their run, the scent of her sunwarmed hair intoxicating. Doubt and uncertainty and insecurity kept wanting to creep in but he pushed them back and just let himself feel as her hands delved under his ragged woolen tunic to grip him tighter, her fingertips kneading firmly into the flesh of his back.

He ducked and she jerked the tunic over his head, and then her lips and teeth began to do marvelous things to his neck and shoulders. Her tongue ran down his chest and, oh, Maker... Alistair's head fell back, his hands clenching on her shoulders as her tongue stroked his nipple.

Somehow his shaking fingers managed to find the thin leather thong that laced the tight, brief leather armor covering her breasts and release it. His hands eagerly pushed it from her shoulders, anxious to get at the soft mounds he'd been admiring for so long, but he found himself frustrated by the linen strip binding her breasts. With a groan he tore at the knot tying it and Elissa hissed, her hands flying up to cup her own breasts when he pulled the cloth away.

Concerned, he pulled back. "Does that hurt?"

She shook her head. "Only for a moment, when the bindings first come off and there's nothing supporting them anymore," she said with a small smile. "There. It's already better."

His hands came up to cover hers, and slowly she eased her own hands away. Then there was only his hands on her flesh and he had to close his eyes for a moment, the sight was so powerful. He wanted to... he wasn't really sure what he wanted to do, now that he had his hands on her breasts. That had been a bit of a goal in and of itself, and he hadn't put a great deal of thought into the follow-up.

He was a mass of conflicting desires, wanting to wait passively as Elissa guided and pleasured him and at the same time wanting to touch and taste and know every inch of her right now. But it was the sight of her belly there just beneath his hands that settled the matter.

That hard, rounded belly, so flagrantly displayed, did something to him. The knowledge that it was his brother's child she carried awoke something dark within him, something primal and possessive. It was driving him mad, had been driving him mad for days and days since she'd gotten that damned Dalish armor.

He surrendered to that madness.

Without ever intending to do anything of the sort, he was on his knees on the ground, pulling her down with him, practically ripping off her boots. He wasn't sure if she unfastened the pleated leather around her waist or if he did, but she definitely lifted her hips to allow him to slide it down her thighs, and her smallclothes afterward.

And then she was on her back on the ground before him—Maker, he hadn't even laid out the bloody bedroll!—and he was upon her, sucking and licking and groping, touching her harder than he'd ever thought to touch her, not so much caressing as laying claim. She may have said something about slowing down, but he was beyond hearing anything but the roaring of his own pulse in his ears.
Madness. That was the only word for it, that Alistair found himself lying between her legs with no knowledge of how he came to be there, frantically pushing his breeches and smallclothes down his hips. When he felt the head of his cock brush the softness of her sex, any remaining hope of control was lost and he was pushing and prodding blindly, no idea where he needed to go but knowing he needed to be there right now.

Her hand was there, guiding him, and when he pushed she parted to him and then he was inside her and Maker's breath! she was tight and hot and wet around him. He pulled back and pushed deeper, and deeper. He wasn't sure that keening sound she was making was a good thing or not and he knew he should slow down enough to find out but she felt too good and the only thought that made any sense to him at all was more.

Elissa's knees came up to grip his hips at the same time he shoved himself up on his arms and reared back. He opened his eyes and saw her lying there beneath him, her eyes clenched shut and her face contorted by something somewhere between ecstasy and pain. He surged forward and her mouth opened on a long moan, her hands gripping his upper arms so tightly that her nails dug into his skin. Even that pain felt good and so he repeated the movement, driving harder, deeper, and she wailed, her nails scoring him again, and again on the next thrust.

This wasn't progressing anything like the way he'd imagined it would. It wasn't loving and romantic, it was savage and needful. He'd thought he'd explore her slowly, pleasure her but instead he found himself simply taking her and Maker help him, he couldn't bring himself to care about the other things as his control began to fray and unravel.

He drove into her again, and again, straining and pumping, and the only thing that kept him from simply going until he was spent was the knowledge, somewhere in the shred of consciousness he retained, that she'd left his brother's bed unfulfilled to seek out another man.

That mattered.

Even as the thought occurred to him, Elissa's hand was moving between their bodies, and it pulled him back enough to realize he didn't just want her to give herself pleasure, he wanted to know what was necessary for him to give her pleasure.

Beads of sweat rolled off his skin as he gasped, "Show me!"

Her eyes fluttered open, dazed and unfocused, as Alistair took his weight upon one arm and wedged his hand between them with hers. He had no idea what he was seeking, though, and his own desire for release was making him shake. But then Elissa's fingers were upon his, leading him until he felt something small and slick and hard beneath his fingertips. She began guiding his fingers in circles upon it.

"There. Harder. Oh, Maker, yes...."

Her mouth fell open as her eyes drifted shut. She let out another gasp as her hips tilted slightly and he felt her clench around him and sweet Andraste he hadn't thought it could feel any tighter....

"Yes, Alistair. Like that. Ooh, Maker's mercy, now move...."

He did as she bade, and once he was in motion again it was nearly impossible to remember why he'd stopped in the first place. He drove into her as though he were possessed, as though his very life depending on reaching the deepest part of her. His fingers stuttered to a halt and forgot to circle, but it no longer seemed to matter because she was lifting her hips to meet his thrusts and each time they slammed together it drove his fingertips against the nub he'd felt and reminded his fingers of their job.
Elissa was moaning and giving short, breathless cries that he could hardly hear because the roaring was back in his ears and the wet heat of her was incredible and dear Maker if this was madness he never wanted to be sane again and then it was all flying apart in light and sound and ragged thrusts as he found his release deep within her. She lifted her hips and his fingers remembered to move and then she was crying out and shuddering and clenching and holy Andraste it was almost like coming a second time when she tightened around him.

When the pulsing of her hot sheath finally stopped and she lay breathless beneath him, Alistair almost collapsed on top of her. Some instinct reminded him of the baby at the last moment and he pushed himself over enough to topple to the side. The ground was dirty and itchy and uncomfortable against his sweaty skin but he was too busy remembering how to breathe to find the energy to care. He wondered that Elissa didn't seem to mind it, however, and began to feel self-conscious about his behavior.

Was she offended? Displeased? Should he apologize? Promise to do better next time? Beg her for the chance to prove he could do better next time?

But, no, she was rolling over to snuggle up against him and she was smiling contentedly. Beads of perspiration stood out against the skin of her forehead and he wanted to kiss them away. Before he even realized he intended to do so, he was.

"Mmm," Elissa sighed, opening her eyes. "Feel better now?"

"Andraste's blood, yes," Alistair answered emphatically, still panting slightly. "I feel like perhaps I should apologize."

"Whatever for?"

"That... wasn't how I meant for things to go," he said, resting his cheek against the top of her head as she nuzzled his shoulder. "I always thought I'd... go slower, take my time with it, do it better...."

"Better?" she lifted her head to arch an eyebrow at him. "My, you are ambitious," she said with a teasing smile.

"I mean... less frantic pawing and groping and more tenderness and romance."

"Tenderness and romance has its place," she shrugged. "But I'm perfectly happy with frantic pawing and groping sometimes as well."

Sighing, he stroked his hand down her ribs until his fingers encountered the mound of her belly, and he grew still. "How...?" he halted, swallowing, hating himself for the impulse to ask the question. "How was it with Cailan?"

He saw her start to smile, saw a teasing response rise automatically to her lips. But when she looked at him, saw how sincere he was, she swallowed it and grew serious. "I played a role with Cailan," she said, dropping her eyes. "What happened between us wasn't real; it was all a lie."

"But what did happen?"

"I made him force me," she sighed. "I played the reluctant maid when he was set upon seduction. I kept escalating the game, responding enough to make him desire more and then protesting, only to yield again and whet his appetite still further until he was desperate. I even made him think I'd use deadly force to defend my own honor, to awaken his battle-lust, made him see me as an enemy to be vanquished."
Alistair swallowed hard, staring at her in disbelief. "He raped you?"

"No!" Elissa shook her head emphatically. "I was willing. But he didn't know that. He thought he raped me. I made him think it, and his remorse gave me the handle I needed to manipulate him."

"But if you refused and he didn't stop, isn't it the same thing?" he persisted, disturbed. "It doesn't matter that you were pretending; as far as he knew, you were unwilling. He should have stopped."

"Perhaps you're right," she said, resting her head on his shoulder once more. "Cailan was a very spoiled and impetuous man. Good-natured, yes, and very kind so long as life pleased him, but he saw no reason that what he desired should not be his. It was those very traits that led him to think he could go against a Blight with an insufficient army simply so he could claim the glory for defeating it all for himself. I knew that, long before I ever went to Ostagar. It wasn't for his sterling character that I intended to wed him, after all. I was young and foolish and nothing mattered except my childish ambition. I didn't know any better. I didn't think what life with a man who could be 'made' to rape a woman might be like."

"And here I just set upon you like an absolute brute," Alistair grumbled, and a horrifying thought occurred to him. "There were moments... I think you were saying something to me, but I couldn't tell what it was. Were you asking me to stop?"

"No," she said. "Never once did I say any such thing, I swear to you. And if I had, you would have stopped."

"How can you be so sure?" he asked uncertainly.

"Because you are not Cailan," she said simply. "You understand self-restraint."

"I didn't feel terribly restrained a few minutes ago," he said with a chuckle.

"No," she answered with a wicked grin that made certain parts of him twitch with interest, "you most certainly didn't."

"Maybe I should try that again, this time with a little more of that tenderness and romance I always envisioned?"

Elissa gave an exaggerated sigh. "Well, if you insist...."

But first they got off the prickly ground and bathed, pausing only to allow Alistair to shuck the breeches he'd never managed to fully rid himself of in his earlier haste. The stream was frigid, and they could barely do more than splash water on their skin and clean off the dirt from the ground and the sweat and fluids of their lovemaking before they retreated. Elissa's nipples were rock-hard points sitting erect on the mounds of her breasts when they emerged, and their skin was cold and dotted with goose-flesh.

He took the time to lay out the bedroll, and then they sat together, pressed against one another until the heat of their bodies warmed them and the sunlight shining down into the clearing dried their skin.

With the overwhelming urgency of his long-denied need sated, Alistair was able to slow down and regroup, to remember the things she had said to him about pleasure so long ago in the Fade, the things he'd been experimenting with over the past several days since that first afternoon together in the forest when they had first slept in each other's arms. Not that they'd had much time or opportunity for experimentation, unfortunately, but he'd managed to steal a few more covert caresses as they lay together at night, both too aware of the presence of the other to truly sleep.
Trying to ignore her breasts for a moment, he leaned in close and began to explore her ear with his mouth. He traced the shell with his tongue, pulled on her earlobe with his lips. When she gave a pleased hum and tilted her head to give him better access, he took it for encouragement and sucked lightly.

When she closed her eyes and sighed his name, he could have shouted in triumph.

The skin of her neck tasted marvelous, and soon he was licking there less for her pleasure than his own. The tendon between her neck and shoulder practically begged him to nibble upon it and when he did, her hips rocked and she moaned softly. He wanted to hear that sound again, and again.

His hand returned to her breast, this time with a distinct purpose in mind. His thumb brushed across the peak of her nipple and there was a new sound, an even better sound. When his fingers closed over her nipple and squeezed gently, she hummed her approval and murmured, "Harder."

"Won't that hurt?"

"A little. Sometimes a little is good. And once in a great while, a little more is even better."

Obligingly, he squeezed harder and Maker the way she moved as she bit her lip and whimpered made his body surge in ways he'd never imagined could result from seeing pain on the face of the woman he loved.

When he released her she sagged limply against him, panting in a way that was almost better than the initial reaction to the pain had been. Her eyes when they opened to meet his were liquid and strangely peaceful.

"Again," she gasped after a moment.

His fingers closed upon her other nipple and he pinched firmly. Her body went rigid, and she writhed against him and fought to pull away. Instinct told him not to let go, despite her struggles, until her mouth opened on a wordless cry.

"Enough for now," she whispered as she caught her breath, and Alistair's hand gently soothed over the nipple he'd handled so roughly and her response was such that it seemed the gentle caress was much more intense than it had been before, as though she were now more sensitive even to light touches.

By now, he was hard and eager again, but content to take his time and continue his exploration. His hands covered the soft swell of her belly that had been preoccupying him so and he slid down to stroke his face across the oddly taut skin, examining the outer edges of the mound with his hands, tasting her skin. He practically wallowed against it, and looked up, abashed, to see her gazing at him with adoration.

"That's... quite a fetish you've got there," Elissa said, her voice sounding choked. She reached down to caress his face, and he paused, resting his head on her abdomen.

Seeing her reaction, it suddenly occurred to him that what he was touching was more than just an object of erotic fascination. Come the summer, she would be a mother, and if Alistair was still a part of her life, this child would be a part of his life as well.

His brother's child.

*Her* child.
Without intending to do it, he placed a kiss on her belly, and then another on her hand as it cupped the side of his face.

"Did I mention that I love you?" he said out of nowhere, his heart pounding much harder than it should have been.

"I love you, too," she murmured, closing her eyes—though not before he saw the sheen in them.

It was a long moment before he continued his exploration, sliding still further down her body. Suddenly her sex was before him, all dark curls and a musky aroma that filled his head. It also appeared to be incredibly confusing, all hair and folds of skin with nothing that leaped out and screamed touch here!

For Andraste's sake, where was the nub he'd caressed earlier?

"Show me?" he repeated the words he'd spoken earlier, and this time it was nothing at all like the demand it had been before.

He heard Elissa chuckle softly, but her hand slid obligingly down her body as she spread her legs wider.

"Different caresses can do all sorts of marvelous things, depending on how far lovemaking has progressed." Alistair had never thought a lecture could be arousing, but she was doing something with her voice, something throaty and purring, and it made it hard to concentrate on her words. "Early on, a light stroke of the fingertips, here, along the outside of the lips. Just a tease, a hint of more to come. Or perhaps a finger firmly along the center, as though you would part the folds, but then you withdraw to tease some more."

Her fingers parted, formed an inverted "V" as they pressed on her flesh and pushed the folds apart, and suddenly everything was slick and shiny and pink. Her scent intensified and Alistair thought if he hadn't spent his mad hunger in such a furious rush earlier, surely that aroma would have driven him to it now. He wanted to rub his face in it, bathe in her essence and before he knew it he was tasting her and....

"Oh, Maker's breath!" he groaned, because she tasted better than she smelled, tangy and smoky and just a hint of sweetness also. He wanted to lap every drop of that flavor from her, wanted to suck it out of her, wanted....

"Here," Elissa's voice reached him when he was on the cusp of diving in and devouring her. Her fingertip pressed against a small, incredibly convoluted spot at the apex of her crevice and her hips instantly shifted at her own touch. "Everything else is pleasant, and a tongue inside can feel amazing. But if your concern is with giving pleasure, this is where you need to focus your attention, just as you did with your fingers. Firm strokes, unless your intent is merely to tease, increasing the pressure the more intense the pleasure becomes. You'll know by my sounds. Silence means it's time to try something new, or seek guidance, if you prefer. You can draw circles with the tip of your tongue, or figures-eight, or attempt to trace letters and write out the Chant of Light even."

"Not the thought I want to be having in this particular position," Alistair growled, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

Elissa's entire body seemed to shimmy as she giggled. "I didn't say you had to; your name will do just as well. Though, perhaps if the Chantry knew of that particular trick they might change their stance and encourage such pursuits. Soon the Maker's name would indeed be sung out from all corners of the earth."
Alistair’s head fell against her thigh as he laughed helplessly. "You... are a wicked woman," he gasped breathlessly. "According to the sisters at the monastery, I should be struck by lightning right about now, and here you are tempting fate with your blasphemy!"

"I'll take my chances," she snickered then humming as his tongue found that spot and stroked firmly across it. "Mmmm, at least if that lightning strikes, we'll go to the Fade happy."

Alistair had no response for that, because he suddenly found his mouth very busy. He held her folds apart with his thumbs and threw himself into the endeavor. Her hands stroked his hair as he experimented, listening to her sounds, feeling the helpless shifting and pushing of her hips as she strained toward his mouth. The flavor wasn’t as strong here, and he found his tongue occasionally delving lower to sample it again, and when he thrust his tongue inside her and her hips came up off the bedroll, it was sublime, especially with her pleased moan ringing in his ears.

In time he discovered a pattern that seemed to satisfy his need to simply devour her which also brought those amazing sounds from her throat, and the more enthusiastic he was in his efforts the louder she became. The hands that had caressed his hair now clenched in it and she ground her sex against his mouth.

Alistair was drunk on her flavor and aroma, and the throbbing of his ignored cock was almost an afterthought, because he felt he could do this forever as long as she kept making those sounds. He seized upon a moment of inspiration and pushed two fingers into her and was gratified by her cry of pleasure.

"Yes. Oh, yes, Alistair... Maker, yes...." she panted, writhing as he began to work his fingers in and out in time to the strokes of his tongue, harder and faster until his hand was plunging with a force he hadn't ever imagined using with her. Her cries grew louder, more frantic, more breathless, and when he shoved his fingers in deep and sucked hard on that spot, she went rigid her hips arcing, and she wailed his name.

He felt the pulsing and clenching of her muscles, felt the spasms shudder through her. He rested his head on her thigh as she subsided, with small shivers occasionally rippling across her body. In that moment of triumph, he felt like he could have single-handedly taken on the archdemon and the whole darkspawn horde and won the battle.

Second to his completely self-satisfied pride by only a very little was the fact that the need he'd been content to ignore before was now suddenly roaring and insistent, filling his head with the demand to be inside her now.

"Please," he breathed, pushing himself up to meet her glazed eyes. "May I...? I need...."

"Say it," she demanded, her eyes dark and her voice low and rough with something he couldn't name.

"I need to fuck you," he growled, the words rushed with his urgency. That darkness in Elissa's eyes flared into a blaze and suddenly she was in motion.

He didn't know how he ended up on his back, how suddenly she was on top of him, straddling him. He found he didn't much actually care as her mouth came down on his, hungry and demanding. When she broke the kiss and reared up, he pushed eagerly against her, his cock trapped between their bodies. She lifted off him and took him in hand and then she was sliding down onto him, taking him inside.

Maker's breath, how was it possible to forget in such a short amount of time how hot and tight it was
inside her, how her muscles clenched and pulled at him as she rose up and down and drove him deeper and deeper inside her body?

His hands rose up to cover her breasts and he pulled on her nipples and her body tightened in response. Remembering her writhing movements earlier, he pinched down hard and sweet Andraste, the tension of her surrounding him increased and the motion of her body above him was indescribable.

He was able to take his time and watch her, watch the way her breasts bounced as she rode him, the way she rolled her hips forward when she settled fully down on him, as though seeking a different sort of pressure than merely that of him filling her. But soon his pulse was roaring in his ears again and his hands were shaking as he pulled on her hips, adding force to drive her down upon him harder while he braced his feet and thrust up to meet her.

She was sweating and panting, her breasts wet and heaving as she worked, her eyes clamped shut with an intent look of concentration on her face. Her hand slid down her round belly and Alistair watched as her fingers circled and rubbed, watched as she brought herself to climax. The sight was unbelievably arousing. Her head fell back and a long, undulating moan fell from her lips as she tightened and clenched and shuddered.

And then he was following her, thrusting blindly up into her until the heat and pressure that blossomed and grew at the base of his cock spilled up into her in spurts so powerful it was nearly agony. Alistair groaned as his body seized and released, holding her hips hard enough to bruise.

When awareness returned, she was a slick, sweaty, overheated mass upon his chest, licking and kissing and sighing with contentment.

"Is it always... like that?" he panted when he regained the power of speech.

"Only if you're very lucky," Elissa chuckled.

"Oh, good," he said with relief. "I'm not entirely sure... too much of that... wouldn't just... kill me."

When she laughed, her muscles clamped and she bounced on his softening cock and it felt almost excruciatingly good, but when she stopped laughing and simply snuggled, it was almost better.

"Then again," he murmured, kissing her, "at least we'll go to the Fade happy, right?"
"So...." Alistair drawled as he lay on the bedroll in the tent they now shared, watching as Elissa begin to remove her armor. She gave him a cautiously amused look. Too many delightfully erotic conversations began when he opened with that word in that tone.

She shivered with the chill; they were well into the Frostback Mountains, just days away from Orzammar, and though it was nearly summer elsewhere, at this altitude the nights were still quite cold. She was looking forward to diving under the blankets and warming herself next to his body.

Not that she could dive anymore, necessarily. Her girth was increasing with each passing week, it seemed, with less than three months left in her pregnancy. Sleeping on the ground was becoming an agony, and her most pressing goal at present was to acquire a bed in an inn somewhere in Orzammar for the duration of their stay.

Her advancing pregnancy was also beginning to hinder her and Alistair's pleasure, or at least require them to seek more inventive positions, for Alistair could no longer lay on top of her and she was not as agile as she had once been.

"Yes?" she prompted, turning her thoughts back to whatever he was about to say.

"How in Andraste's name did Duncan get mixed up with your family?" Alistair asked, rolling to his side and propping himself up on an elbow. The blanket slid down, revealing the rippling expanse of his chest, and Elissa smiled as she eagerly welcomed the frisson of desire that never failed to run along her nerves at the sight of him.

"Move over," she demanded, and he made room and drew the blanket up over her as she snuggled down next to him.

"The answer should be obvious," she said simply as his arms encircled her and she began to feel warm again. "You told me yourself that Duncan was from Highever."

"As the reigning nobles, you know everyone from Highever, then?" Alistair asked, his tone dubious.

"Don't be sarcastic," she chided. "Of course not. But as I understand it, Duncan and my father did know each other when they were younger. I don't know the details. Perhaps they were boyhood friends, or maybe they were older. They may even have been lovers. I'm not sure."

Alistair froze. "Duncan... and your father?" he asked haltingly.

"Well, I can't say for certain, but it would explain a great deal."
"Duncan liked men, then?"

"He certainly liked my brother," Elissa answered with a lascivious grin, remembering Fergus's satisfied smile after the nights he'd spent with Duncan. "Whom, I will add, greatly favors my father as a young man."

"Maker's breath," Alistair breathed, rolling onto his back to stare up at the canvas of the tent. "That's... not what I was expecting to learn, though I don't know why I'm surprised at anything you tell me anymore. Duncan liked men."

Something about his tone seized Elissa's concern and she lay silently trying to identify what it might mean. Then her eyes widened, and she pushed herself up to turn and look at Alistair.

"Alistair...." she said, half in wonder and half in sorrow. "You might have had Duncan and you never even knew it. Oh, I'm so very sorry!"

"What? I... no! That's not...." Alistair stared at her, his eyes panicky as he sat up.

Elissa lifted her hand and let her fingers lay on his lips, stilling his protests. "Truth," she said softly, reminding him of the promise that she had wrested from him when they were still back in the Brecilian Forest, that he would always be honest about his desires with her, no matter how odd or perverse they might seem to be.

"I'm... not certain I would have wanted that," he said, drawing a deep, shuddering breath. "I... don't think I'm particularly interested in other men."

"Hm. Pity," she pouted, letting her eyes twinkle teasingly as she attempted to lighten the suddenly tense mood. "There goes my little fantasy of seeing you with another man."

"What?!" Alistair squeaked again.

He stared at her in disbelief, but Elissa merely offered him a shrug and an unabashed smile. "Can I help it if I think you'd look beautiful with your cock in another man's mouth?"

He almost winced. "Boundaries?" he sighed.

"Very well," Elissa nodded, desisting. That had become something of a safety word for when she hovered on the edge of discussing something that made him too uncomfortable. "Back to our initial topic, then. We're not speaking of other men, we're speaking of Duncan."

"Yes, we were," Alistair said, his shoulders drooping. "I guess if I'm honest, the idea doesn't fill me with horror. Truthfully, some days I think I'd do just about anything to get to spend a few more minutes with Duncan, to let him know how much he meant to me. Even that."

"That's fair enough." She hugged him and after a moment the tension left his shoulders. He drew her into his lap, cradling her almost like a child as he tucked the blanket around them again.

"As to Duncan's relationship with my family," Elissa resumed her tale, "I'm not sure when he made his way back to Highever; after he became Grey Warden, I imagine. Perhaps he was even Warden-Commander by that time. By then, Father was already married to Mother and for whatever reason, Duncan was admitted into the very small and select circle of confidantes who knew Mother had once been a whore and that father often derived pleasure from watching her with other men. From there, whenever he was in Highever on his rare recruitment trips, he would stay with us for several days."

"So, tell me about you and Duncan." Alistair requested, his arms tightening around her possessively.
"Well, there isn't really all that much to tell," Elissa said thoughtfully. "Until he came on the trip where he recruited me, he hadn't been since I was... twelve or thirteen, I think? Far too young to entertain him, certainly. I knew that Fergus and Oriana entertained him on that visit, as mother was in Orlais. I remember being very jealous of their satisfied smirks over breakfast."

"And what about when he came back?" Alistair demanded, and his voice had dropped, gotten rougher. She felt his cock hardening beneath her and looked at him in amazement, speechless for a moment.

"You... Oh, you perfectly devious pervert!" she accused with an attitude of contrived outrage. "You take pleasure in hearing about me being with other men!"

Alistair gave a low growl near her ear. "The thought of you with other men drives me mad," he said, his hands suddenly hard on her arms.

"I know, and that's why you like hearing about it!" Elissa shot back triumphantly. "Your jealousy gives you the perfect license to unleash your more brutish desires, because you're still not comfortable being that aggressive without an excuse."

Alistair tumbled her off his lap and onto the bedroll, the blanket trapped beneath them, pinning her as best he could without being able to lay his body upon hers. "Are you going to tell me or not?" he insisted, nipping her neck with his teeth.

"Make me!" she dared him, glaring at him defiantly as his nostrils flared.

Alistair's teeth traveled to her shoulder and began to sink in, cautiously at first, then with more force until Elissa was gasping and mewling, struggling to get away.

"Tell me!" he insisted when he finally let go, leaving a perfect ring of bloodless imprints to redden on her flesh.

Elissa laughed. "Duncan pulled my hair when he wanted my obedience," she taunted, her heart thundering against her ribs so strongly she thought surely Alistair could see it, must be able to smell the copious arousal seeping from between her folds.

His cock was purple-red and furiously engorged as his fingers snaked into her hair and as she watched, a droplet of fluid trickled from the tip. Oh, yes, he was enjoying this new game.

Alistair jerked her head back with a vicious tug and as though a level had been pulled, Elissa felt the need to submit settle over her, peaceful and voracious all at once. She didn't struggle against the hand in her hair, except for a slight resistance of her neck muscles that made the tension harder and more painful. She licked her lips eagerly as the fingers of his other hand found her nipple and he pinched hard, as she had taught him to do. Harder, even, harder than ever before, until she writhed and whimpered and begged for him to cease, which he took his time about doing.

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Alistair's mouth closed over hers in a demanding kiss, his tongue plunging into her mouth roughly. She was breathless by the time he broke the kiss, and he was sweating and shaking, but his hand jerked her by the hair again.

"Tell me!"

Elissa obeyed.
The last few days before they reached Ostagar were the worst. They had been playing with fire, and they knew it. It came to a head when Elissa had desperately tried to impale herself upon him, pleading with him to fuck her. He'd been forced to wrestle her to the ground while she growled and sobbed with frustration. After that, Duncan stopped touching her at all, stopped the reckless game of *everything but* they had been playing, where each night they crept closer and closer to the line.

He not only stopped touching her, he stopped responding to her flirtations, and since flirting with him came as easily and naturally as breathing, that meant they barely spoke. He became this silent presence walking just head of her, at once hungry and forbidding, and in those days, Elissa found herself mourning for her family all over again, for there had never been a lack of touching or flirting with *them*.

She began to wonder if he even wanted her at all, or was this fatalistic certainty that they would fuck someday all one-sided? She'd wanted Duncan from the moment he'd come back to Highever. The last time she'd seen him, she hadn't been old enough, but she knew Fergus had greatly enjoyed his time with Duncan, and Oriana spoke highly of his prowess and stamina.

Knowing that, Elissa had figured that having Duncan was as inevitable as the tide. He was one of the few who knew absolutely everything about her family, one of the few with whom she would never have to pretend. That was very wise of her father, Elissa thought, to cultivate such a friendship, to give her family members a person with whom they need not play a part.

He'd been with everyone else, every other member of the Cousland family; of course Elissa would have him someday. But she hadn't imagined how dark and desperate those days on the road to Ostagar would be, how angry and frustrated they would both become, playing at sex but never actually having it.

Perhaps Duncan had decided the prize wasn't worth the wait. Or perhaps he was angry at her for forcing him to give his word that she would reach Ostagar a virgin. And why shouldn't he be angry? She was furious with herself for it, barely able to remember why her ambition had been so bloody important to begin with.

Until, that was, she remembered her father's dying words about foiling Howe by emerging from his betrayal with the Cousland name flying higher and covered with more glory than ever before.

By the time Duncan brusquely informed her they would reach Ostagar the next day, she felt terribly lonely, lost, unsure of anything anymore.

She was unable to sleep that night, tossing upon her bedroll with her mabari lying nearby while Duncan kept watch by the campfire. Finally she rose and went to him.

"I want you to take me," she announced somberly.

"Elissa...." Duncan started at her, and the stern, unapproachable demeanor he'd been wearing for days melted away. "No. I can't."

"I don't care about the king anymore," she said desperately, unable to still the trembling that took her as she spoke. "I don't care about any of that. Maybe I'll find a way to convince Cailan without proof of virginity. Maybe I won't, and I'll have to discard the whole scheme. It doesn't matter to me anymore. I want it to be you."
"As honored as I am by your request," Duncan said slowly, "I still can't. I gave my word, before your father, my friend. I won't betray that."

"Then why are you angry with me?" she cried out in despair, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I would give you anything you ask for, but Andraste's mercy, I can't bear this silence any longer! Not from you! Until I know Fergus is alive and well, you're all I have left! The only one who really knows me."

In an instant, Duncan had her in his arms, as she sobbed out her despair. "I'm not angry with you, Elissa," he whispered, pressing kisses her tear-streaked face, "I'm angry with myself. I'm angry for giving my word that night in the larder, knowing I would be alone with you for weeks. I thought perhaps your grief—and mine as well, for I cared for your family and mourn their loss—would make the desire less, but instead it's simply made us both desperate."

He sank down then and she went down, too, huddling miserably in his arms as he poured out his confession. "You're so very young," he said tenderly, "Too young for what you're being asked to do. In other circumstances, I would never have considered recruiting you at such an age, and I certainly wouldn't desire you the way I do. Perhaps your father's excesses and perversions have rubbed off on me too much, or perhaps it's simply the fact that I know I haven't long to live. I can't say more, not to you, but one way or the other, this Blight will claim my life and I know it.

"I'm angry with myself for wanting you, and more specifically for wanting to be the one who claims your virginity, the one thing I've sworn not to have. I'm angry that it matters to me, when I've intended all along to take your father's place as your panderer and use you as a whore for the benefit of the Grey Wardens. It's a despicable thing even to consider, but I will do it because I must."

Elissa's tears had subsided to soft hiccoughs by then, and she looked up at him, her eyes wild and pleading. "Then take it out on me," she begged him. "Punish me however you desire if it assuages your anger. Just... not with silence, please."

Duncan shuddered powerfully, his hands tightening unconsciously on Elissa's arms. "Do you know what you're asking?" he said, his voice carefully neutral.

Elissa drew a deep breath. "Of course," she answered. She did. Games of dominance and submission, of pain and punishment had all been part of her instruction.

He paused a long moment, and Elissa was afraid he would refuse, but instead he closed his dark brown eyes and nodded. "Then choose your word."

She swallowed hard, but her eyes were peaceful as she answered softly, "Eleanor." Duncan practically flinched at the choice.

Duncan rose and began unbuckling the belts that crossed his chest, the ones that held the scabbards for his swords. "What are you, then?" he asked after a moment.

The question confused her, and she ventured cautiously, "Your devoted servant, my lord?"

He was upon her in a single stride, one hand fisting brutally in her hair and jerking her head back with such force that the pain brought tears to her eyes again. "Wrong. I'm no one's lord. And you, Lady Cousland, are certainly no one's servant."

"Then I am whatever you wish me to be, ser," she said, feeling the peace of surrender slide over her like a silken cloak.

"I am the Warden-Commander," he said with exaggerated patience, as though she were unendurably
stupid. "And you are a slut. A virgin slut, but a slut all the same."

Heat flooded her body at his words, arousal and humiliation mingling to make her smallclothes desperately wet and uncomfortable. She'd known it all along, of course, that a slut was exactly what her parents were bringing her up to be, but no one had ever called her that to her face.

"As you say, Warden-Commander," she murmured, dropping her eyes as her face flamed. "I am a slut."

"What sort of slut wears clothes?" Duncan asked scornfully. "Remove them and quit pretending to be more than you are."

Her eyes still downcast, Elissa rose and began stripping before him. He'd seen her naked a dozen times over their lust-fraught journey from Highever while they teased each other into a frustrated fury. But never before had she stripped so frankly while he stood there with his arms crossed, watching her critically. It left her feeling unbearably vulnerable and self-conscious as she removed her boots and woolen stockings, the tunic she wore under her leather cuirass and also slept in, and finally her smallclothes.

Finally she stood before him, naked and chilled, as he sat down on the ground at the foot on her bedroll. "Come here, slut, and lie down."

She did as he bade, lying upon the bedroll before him, and when she was on her back, he commanded, "Spread your legs."

With a shiver, she opened her legs, not widely, but enough to have obeyed. Duncan responded with a slap to her inner thigh.

"Don't be ridiculous!" he snapped. "How can I possibly see anything like that? Spread them."

"Yes, Warden-Commander," she whispered, her body tightening with another surge of arousal, the flooding warmth of her cunt at odds with the chilly autumn air against her folds as she parted her legs as far as they would go, laying exposed before him.

Duncan growled. "Are you intentionally trying my patience, slut?"

She shook her head, swallowing hard at the menace in his voice. "No, Warden-Commander," she denied breathlessly.

"Then bend your knees, put your heels to your ass, and show me your cunt."

She felt nearly nauseous with humiliation as he spoke to her as though she were a hopeless imbecile, but she obeyed, bracing her feet wide apart on the bedroll almost near her backside. The effect, of course, was that she was suddenly spread obscenely before him, her cunt open to his gaze in the light of the fire.

Duncan reached out with one finger and traced her wet folds almost delicately. He gathered her moisture upon his finger, until it glistened and reflected the flames. He studied it impassively and then casually sucked it clean. His fingertips returned and paused before her opening, directly outside it. He held there, his fingers rigid, not touching her but so close that with each breath either of them drew, she could feel the slightest brush, a whisper against the outside of her channel.

All it would take is the smallest movement, a firm push, and her maidenhead would be gone, and with it her dilemma.
"I could pierce you right now, before you could even muster a protest," he said, a hint of dangerous fury in his deliberately calm voice.

"I wouldn't protest," she vowed. "I will surrender my virginity to you if you demand it of me, Warden-Commander."

"Of course you would," he sneered. "You're a slut, after all."

Another sickeningly strong surge of mortification made her shift and wriggle, and she felt the brush of his fingertips more firmly against her opening.

"I am," she agreed.

"Fortunately for you, I am a man of my word," he said coldly, withdrawing his hand. "This is intended for my king, and I will not interfere. Thus, it is useless to me."

Without warning, he spat. The glob of his spittle hit directly upon her opening with startling force and Elissa cried out and bucked in her surprise. Arousal was pulsing so powerfully in her sex she thought she might come without even being touched, but he just glared at her cunt as his saliva began to cool and run down the crevice between her buttocks.

Soon, his finger was prodding her there, spreading his spittle around her rear entrance. "I could take you here, tonight, but there's too much potential for an accident that could damage your maidenhead. So instead, I'm going to ask for your oath, here and now, slut. I will be the first to have you here. Do whatever you must to placate Cailan, but this you will save for me."

"I swear it!" she gasped as his finger pushed inside the tight opening. Every muscle within her tensed at the unaccustomed pressure but it eased as he worked his finger in and out, slowly, carefully.

"If you intend to come tonight, slut, you'd best get to work," Duncan said nonchalantly, glancing down at her dripping cunt again. "I have no intention of bothering myself with your pleasure."

It only took a few strokes of her own hand, so powerful was her arousal, and then she was clenching around the single finger in her ass. Her climax crashed over her like a storm-driven wave in the Waking Sea and her cries rang out in the silence of the night-draped Hinterlands.

She was still shuddering with the aftershocks when he withdrew his finger and pushed himself to his feet. She lay there, nude and exposed on the bedroll as he stripped off the rest of his armor and clothes. He retrieved a vial from his packs and tossed it down beside her.

"Get up on your knees," he commanded. When Elissa complied, he approached, his cock bobbing before him. Without thinking she reached for him, only to recoil when he slapped her sharply across the face.

Stunned, she stared at him as he barked, "Did I tell you to touch me, slut?"

"No, Warden-Commander," she gasped, blinking back shocked tears. The blow itself hadn't hurt nearly so much as the utter humiliation of being slapped like the lowliest, most disobedient servant.

"Now, what was that lecture your mother was delivering the day I came to Highever?" he asked mockingly. "Something about how sometimes a man who wants to dominate you will wish to fuck your mouth? If I let you pleasure me, you are in control, and that is not acceptable tonight. Nor, for that matter, are a whore's deceptive little tricks that mask your struggle. If it pleases me to make you gag, slut, you will gag."
He seized her by the hair then, dragging her mercilessly forward, and it hurt. She gasped and cried out and he took advantage of her open mouth to thrust his cock between her lips and all the way to her throat. She had no opportunity to prepare herself, much less use any of the ploys he'd cautioned her against. His cock slammed against the back of her mouth and immediately her throat rebelled, convulsing around his invading shaft and it plunged in and out of her mouth, hard and fast.

Tears immediately came to her eyes as she choked, unable to breathe, but he had no mercy for her plight. Flaring spots of light were sparking behind her eyes when he finally withdrew to let her catch her breath, coughing and spluttering. She shuddered as she fought back her gorge, and the moment she had recovered, he was jerking her to him again, forcing his cock into her mouth once more. She felt it pass into her throat, and then she was again struggling even to breathe.

She fought him; she had no choice. Every survival instinct within her told her to fight, to win her freedom, to gain a breath. But the more she resisted, the harsher he became, letting her go only long enough to catch her breath and then thrusting into her mouth once more. And though she was not inexperienced with this game, Duncan was better endowed than her father or Fergus, and soon her jaw was aching, her throat sore and bruised, her face ravaged by tears and effort, and still he fucked her mouth, unrelenting and pitiless.

She had decided she would attempt to gasp her mother's name the next time he released her when his cock swelled and grew impossibly hard in her mouth, and then he groaned and his salty seed surged across her tongue and down her abused throat. It was a relief to know he was done, but paradoxically, she mourned the loss of his brutality.

When he released her, she collapsed, gasping and sobbing and coughing into the bedroll. Duncan stood towering above her, and the only indication that he was moved at all was the slow unclenching of his fists at his sides as his breathing gradually calmed.

She knew she must look a frightful mess, her hair snarled and her face covered with dried tears, but for the first time since they had left Highever, she felt something akin to peace. Abasing herself before him calmed her rage and grief and fear.

Duncan, however, clearly was not yet at peace. Whatever demons were driving him, they had not yet been sated. She could tell by the tension that yet lingered in his posture, by his unyielding stance, by the fact that he had not yet found his way back to the kindness she normally knew from him.

She wanted that kindness, needed it. She needed him to be the comforting presence he'd been in those early days after they left Highever, before their frustrated desires had made him withdraw.

On her hands and knees, she crawled over to the pile of clothes and armor he had discarded and retrieved one of his belts. She folded it and bit down on the leather, its oily taste creeping across her tongue, and crawled back to him bearing it in her mouth. She dropped it at his feet and then knelt before him.

"Would it please you to beat me, Warden-Commander?" she asked softly.

"How easily do you bruise, slut?" he asked, taking up the belt and running it through his hands. "If I leave welts, will they linger and raise questions when the king takes you to his bed?"

"I'll make up a story," she vowed recklessly. "We had an unfortunate battle with bandits who stumbled upon our campsite one morning before I had put on my armor, and one of them was armed with a scourge and landed several blows before you managed to dispatch him. My understanding is that Cailan doesn't think matters over very deeply; it shouldn't take much to make him believe."
"If you're thinking that clearly, slut, a beating is the least you deserve right now," Duncan growled and took up the belt.

And so he beat her, as she knelt before him. Fiery streaks of agony chased across the flesh of her back and ass and thighs, and she screamed and groveled and pleaded for him to cease. When she tried to crawl away, he dragged her back. When she tried to cringe low upon the bedroll and make less of a target of herself, he pulled her back up so that she was fully exposed to him again. He was merciless, and he mocked her cries and pleas. She could hear his ragged, growling breaths and knew that he fought some battle she was not privy to as he rained down his rage upon her.

She was immune to the appellation of "slut" by now, but when he cursed her for a cocktease, the injustice of the accusation shamed her and caused her to burst into great, wracking sobs of despair. She ceased her struggles, surrendering to the beating and letting it scour her of her guilt and frustration over the trap she had created for them both.

The lashes became something to be welcomed, ridding her of her own frustration and despair. She embraced them, and though her body still shrank from the blows and writhed when they landed, her mind reveled in them, rolled with them, took comfort from them.

Duncan's breathing was harsh when he tossed the belt aside and fell to his knees next to her. His rough, calloused hands stroked the welts he had left, igniting them to pain once more. Elissa sobbed and whimpered, her face pressed into the bedroll, but Duncan was not finished with her, and soon he had her on her back, pinned to the bedroll, looming above her.

"Has the fight gone out of you now, slut?"

By now she was weary, and yet whatever demon hovered between them had not yet been exorcised, and she shook her head. "Never."

His hand closed on her breast—not merely her nipple, but the flesh of her breast—in a crushingly brutal grip and Elissa cried out.

"Fight me," he demanded, and weakly she attempted to push him away, the pain in her breast agonizing and constant until he released her.

He grabbed her hair, then, near the scalp at the back of her head and pulled until her neck arched painfully. His other hand found the nipple of her other breast and pinched mercilessly. No teasing, sensual pain this, but utter torment, and Elissa wailed and thrashed until he let go.

"Fight me, slut!" he gritted, giving her head a jerk, and his fingers closed upon her nipple again.

She nearly managed to buck him off in her initial lunge, and suddenly she was a mad thing, a wounded animal caught in the jaws of a trap, clawing and hissing and biting at him as she struggled to win her freedom. She nearly succeeded, and he surged forward to lay his weight upon her and pin her down more firmly. Against her thigh, she should feel his cock rousing again.

He did not relent until she subsided, exhausted and whimpering. Her nipple had gone numb in his grip and pain flooded through it when he released his grasp upon it, drawing a pained moan from her lips. He switched hands, then, and turned his attention to her other nipple.

"Again! Fight me!"

She hadn't the endurance to put up any sort of useful struggle this time, but she attempted to all the same. It was sheer luck that allowed her to land a lucky blow to his face when she swung her fist out wildly. When his head snapped back to look at her, his brown eyes were hot and furious and his
mouth came down upon hers, his tongue plundering as he renewed his grip on her nipple, clamping down even tighter.

She didn't need him to tell her to fight, but her struggles were weak and exhausted, and by the time he relented, all she could do was lie there, arching and mewling in her agony.

She was defeated, and they both knew it. Duncan pushed himself up and stroked his cock for a long moment, looking at her thoughtfully, and Elissa shuddered, thinking perhaps he had changed his mind and would fuck her anyway.

Instead, he took up the vial he'd retrieved earlier and poured a puddle of oil into his palm and began to smear it across the flesh of her breasts and in the valley between.

He straddled her torso and laid his cock along the hard plate of her breastbone. She stared at it as though she had never seen it before. Then he pressed her breasts together and began to pump into the oil-slicked sheath they created.

The sight of the head of his cock emerging from between her breasts was the most unimaginably erotic thing she'd ever seen, and all she could do was stare at it, her breath half-driven from her with each thrust. She looked up into Duncan's face, but his eyes were closed, his face contorted with rapturous concentration. She didn't know where he was; perhaps even back in Highever with her mother and father, but he was not with her in that moment.

She wanted to open her mouth and suck on the head each time it thrust forth, or at least lick it, but she remembered his harsh response to her attempt to take the initiative when she had reached for him earlier and didn't quite dare. She hadn't the strength to endure another round of punishment.

When she looked up again, his eyes were open and he was looking down at her and he was there with her, not elsewhere in memory or fantasy. But more importantly, his eyes were placid and kind. He'd made his peace with whatever ghosts were haunting him.

His seed jetted across her upper chest and the side of her face, and for the first time in days, she smiled at him when his shudders subsided. He pushed his weight off her before he crushed her and lay beside her instead.

After a long moment, he rose and retrieved a waterskin and a cloth, and he cleaned her gently. She lay peaceful and limp as a newborn babe beneath his ministrations as he washed the tears and sweat and seed from her face, the oil from her breasts, and even gently cleaned his dried spittle and her own lingering wetness off the folds of her cunt. She obediently rolled onto her stomach when he commanded and he massaged a healing salve onto her welts; she could feel the elfroot's magical properties begin to work instantly and knew a moment of regret that she would bear no marks from her ordeal.

Then he dressed her and donned his own tunic and breeches.

"Don't we need to keep watch?" she asked. They were the first words she had spoken since their session had ended.

"Neither of us has any energy for it tonight, I think," he said ruefully. "We will have to take our chances."

They had never slept together before, always retiring to separate bedrolls, for Duncan had said the temptation would be too strong. But that night he lay down beside her and took her into his arms and placed a tender kiss upon her brow as she drifted off. And her last thought before she entered the
Fade was that whatever might transpire with Cailan once she reached Ostagar, no matter the disposition of her maidenhead, Duncan was truly the first man to claim her.

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"You cared for him," Alistair said wonderingly. The tale hadn't been long in the telling—which he'd made it much longer than it had needed to be with his insistence on acting out the juicier bits, at least those that weren't made impossible by her pregnancy or his own uncertainty about inflicting pain upon her—but he had forgotten the dominating role he'd assumed at first, and instead was staring at her raptly.

"Yes," Elissa said softly. "I was not in love with him, but yes, I cared. At first, only because he was in many ways a piece of home, but by the time we reached Ostagar, I cared for him on his own merits."

"And what happened after you left Cailan?"

Smiling, Elissa reached for her pack nearby and withdrew the vial of oil she kept. Initially she had used the same oil she kept for polishing her blades, but Zevran's decadent tastes had rubbed off on her and now she carried a vial of lighter, sandalwood scented oil for this purpose.

She offered it to Alistair, who looked at it cautiously. "Perhaps you'd like to act that out as well?"

"Maybe," he said, staring at it. "Tell me what happened."

"I could scarcely believe it when Cailan let me leave his tent without seeing to my needs," she said, lying down with her back to him. "I was sore, for Cailan had not been gentle, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was that I was now free to have Duncan inside me the way I had wanted him all those weeks. I went directly to his tent."

Behind her, she heard the cork squeak as Alistair unstopped the vial and sniffed the oil.

"He was on his cot, and I went straight to him and mounted him and demanded he fuck me, and he did, and it was marvelous. But it occurred to both of us almost at the same moment that he couldn't truly have me that way, not to completion. Perhaps if he'd been fair and golden like Cailan, I would have risked it, but if I'd borne a child with his complexion, there could have been no explaining it away. And so there we were, both nearly undone by our need and frustration. All that remained to us was the fulfillment of my promise to him."

"How?" Alistair demanded.

"He used the oil, spread it upon his fingers, poured it along the crevice of my backside," she said, twitching as Alistair's hand caressed one of her buttocks hesitantly. She waited a moment before resuming her tale, and was gratified when his hand returned, this time stroking carefully along the cleft of her ass. With each pass, his fingers grew bolder, came closer to delving into the breach.

"As he had done before, he started with one finger, and it was slick and oiled and went inside me easily." She didn't need to look at him to know he'd come to his decision, for suddenly Alistair's movements were resolute. The scent of the oil filled the tent and his hand slid easily between the globes of her ass, smearing a generous quantity of the oil along the cleft.
His finger found her puckered opening and began to prod. "Gently," she hissed, pulling one knee up before her as best she could to open herself a little wider to him. "This can be one of the most incredibly intense sensations lovemaking has to offer, but if undertaken carelessly it can be sheer agony."

"Tell me about Duncan," he insisted, but the pressure of his finger eased, and he began to rub and tease her opening rather than simply poke at it.

"He worked his finger in and out, in and out, over and over," she sighed as Alistair's slicked finger slid home slowly and carefully and her body began to adjust to the intrusion. "He pressed against the sides of the opening, coaxing it to relax. When he withdrew his hand, he added more oil and then he worked two fingers inside."

Soon, Alistair was matching his actions to her words as her tale unfolded, working his fingers into her body and spreading her tight entrance ever wider, relaxing the muscle more. She didn't tell him Duncan had stopped with two fingers, that he had wanted her to suffer a little for denying him the freedom of her cunt, however unfair the sentiment may have been. Alistair was even larger than Duncan had been, larger than any man she had known save Sten and the soldier who had brutalized her in Lothering, and so when he added a third finger without instruction from her, she gladly yielded to it and let him spread her open her even more.

"He spread the oil generously on his cock, then, and when he was slick and ready, he began to press inside."

Alistair lay behind her on his side then, mirroring her posture, but Elissa drew her legs up and moved forward so that she was almost curled into a fetal ball with only her ass pressed to him. It opened her up more, made access easier, and Alistair guided his cock to her rear entrance and began to push with slow, gentle pressure.

She hissed at the burning sensation as the widest part of his head passed inside, but it was quickly gone and then there was only pleasure and pressure and fullness and "Oh, Maker...."

She wasn't sure if the groan was hers or his. It may have been both. Alistair's hand pressed against the small of her back as he kept pushing forward, sliding ever deeper into her ass until his hips brushed her backside.

"Sweet Andraste, I had no idea," he moaned behind her.

"I love this," she murmured, gasping softly. Now that he was seated, she uncurled slightly, and he spooned against her back. "In some ways, the sensation isn't as gratifying—I won't be able to come without some other stimulation—but never do I feel this full, any other way."

"It's so tight!" Alistair muttered, and she felt his hand shaking as it cupped her hip. "Maker's breath, I can hardly bear it...."

"You can move," Elissa said, rolling her head from side to side as though it would somehow relieve the excess of sensation. "Just start out slowly. Give me time to adjust."

"Is that what Duncan did?" he insisted, making her moan with just a small thrust.

"At first," she said with difficulty. It was getting increasingly harder to think about anything except the enormous pressure within her, filling her so completely she thought she might not be able to stand it. "But he was still frustrated, still punishing me for not truly being his. He quickly became demanding."
Her words proved prophetic as Alistair grew more confident, more reckless. Only the limitations of their side-lying position saved her from the same sort of reaming Duncan's possession of her had devolved into. Still, Alistair was soon thrusting into her with abandon and she moaned helplessly.

"Oh, Maker... please..." she sobbed. "Oh, Alistair... yes... I can't... yes...."

Her cunt was dripping wet when her hand found her folds and she began to stroke. But Alistair's hand came around her hip and caught her wrist as his other hand fisted in her hair and jerked her head back.

"Who are you thinking of when you do that?" he demanded, growling in her ear as he thrust forcefully into her ass. "Me, or Duncan?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him a pride-saving lie, but she'd sworn to always be honest with him when she'd made him promise the same.

"Both," she confessed, humiliated. She sobbed with pleasure as he positively hammered into her. "You're both... here inside me... right now. In my dreams... sometimes I'm shared between the two of you."

"Oh, Andraste's mercy!" Alistair groaned, but incongruously, his movements slowed and he pulled her back against him, cuddling her. He was shaking with need, and his cock was still hard and throbbing within her stretched opening. He hadn't found his release yet.

"What are you doing?" Elissa asked desperately, needing him to move again.

"So often I want to drive the other men you've been with out of you," he panted, kissing her ear, her shoulder, the nape of her neck. "I would do it if I could."

"But...."

"I want Duncan to remain here with us," he said solemnly. "I don't want to drive him out,"

"You won't," she promised. "You can't."

"Then do it," Alistair breathed. "Make yourself come with him on your mind and me inside you. Let me feel it."

Another shudder ran through her, and her hand found her aching clit and began to stroke. It didn't take long, as she remembered Duncan's kindness, his passion, his desperation as he walked bravely through what he knew would be his last days.

The tension was already mounting, gathering at the base of her spine and spreading outward in waves of tight heat. It burst upon her and she greeted it with a wordless cry, the muscles of her ass clenching on his cock.

With a moan, Alistair began to thrust again and when he did, another orgasm followed hard on the heels of the first. Alistair tumbled after her, his cock pulsing and throbbing as he shot his seed deep inside her.

They both lay as though stunned for a long moment afterward, and Elissa gave a small hiss at the sting when Alistair carefully withdrew and her muscles began to twitch and tighten again immediately. Without needing to be told, Alistair fetched a wet cloth and began to clean them both of the oil and traces of seed. And then he lay behind her again and drew her back against him.
Elissa wasn't certain what to say. The ghost of Duncan still hovered there in the tent with them, a nearly palpable presence. But was it a welcome one, once the sweat of passion cooled?

Alistair, however, seemed to be at peace as he held her drowsily, murmuring endearments in her hair. So tender and sweet, her bastard prince, with such a wealth of warped, dark, conflicting desires churning within him.

"I think I could have shared you with him," he said softly. "I think I could have done what your father did and watched you with him."

"I would have enjoyed that," she answered solemnly, kissing his arm that acted as her pillow more often than not these days.

There was more to say, but it didn't seem important, and suddenly she was too weary to remember why it had seemed important in the first place. They were still feeling their way along, after all. The rest would be answered in time.
Pain. Everything was *pain*.

Holding her straight-backed, open-footed posture hurt. Keeping her arms extended hurt. Drawing back her bowstring sent bolts of numbing electricity shooting down from her buttock almost to her knee. Her leg had buckled twice already this morning; a flash of pain running down her thigh and then suddenly her knee gave out. She was desperately afraid it was going to happen again, and that Jarvia and her thugs would gain the upper hand.

While she stood near the back wall with her bow and attempted to make less of a target of herself, Zevran worked frantically to disarm the traps the Carta had laid. Suddenly one of the dwarven miscreants charged Elissa, his dagger flashing toward her exposed abdomen, and she just barely managed to repel him with a jab to the throat with the end of her bow. One of Leliana's arrows pierced him and he was suddenly encased in ice from Morrigan's spell. A mighty swing of Sten's sword and the dwarf shattered.

The traps were disarmed, Alistair and Zevran and Shale advanced on Jarvia and her cadre of associates, and the dwarves were falling before them. When Jarvia was finally gurgling out her last breaths on the floor of the cavern, Elissa slumped back against the stone wall and dropped her bow. A second later, another bolt of lightning shot down her leg and it once again refused to bear any weight.

"Maker's breath!" she heard Leliana gasp, and looked up to see the bard running toward her. At first, she thought Leliana had noticed her nearly topple over until her leg would support her again, but instead, Leliana's eyes were wide and horrified and staring at Elissa's belly.

Elissa glanced down and wished she hadn't. Blood was running in rivulets down her swollen abdomen, nearly coating her bare skin in a cascading sheet of scarlet. A humming began in her ears, and her fingertips felt numb. A cold sweat prickled her skin, and then the room went dark.

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She roused with Alistair hovering over her and realized he'd pulled her into his lap. Leliana's pale, anxious face was beyond him, and Wynne was crouching at her side. She could feel the cool tingling of a rejuvenation spell still lingering, but Wynne's ministrations now were purely non-magical as she wiped Elissa's belly with a damp cloth.

She murmured, "It's hardly more than a scratch. It just looked frightening."
"Thank the Maker!" Alistair breathed in unison with Leliana. She thought she may have even heard some Antivan invocation being muttered from somewhere beyond her line of sight. Morrigan gave a derisive snort, Shale an impatient rumble, and Sten growled.

"That armor is useless as protection," he remarked, not for the first time.

"It's not, actually. I don't know how the Dalish managed it, but the leather is incredibly resilient to most slicing and piercing attacks and protects my heart rather nicely, but as for the rest of me... I wonder if pregnant Dalish women simply avoid combat?" Elissa sighed, trying to push herself up, but Wynne shoved at her shoulder and commanded Alistair to keep her still.

"I can't believe I passed out over a scratch," she muttered, her face burning.

"In fairness, it was an incredibly terrifying scratch," Alistair pointed out reassuringly. "I nearly passed out from the sight of it. It looked like you'd been eviscerated, not to mention the idea that something may have happened to the baby."

Elissa nodded, closing her eyes so the others didn't see the sudden tears that were burning. She was their leader. Maybe in the privacy of their bed some night she'd tell Alistair about that sickening surge of terror as the thought that her babe might have been injured, but she couldn't let the rest of their party see it.

"How are you feeling otherwise?" Wynne asked in that mild, clinical tone she used when healing their injuries. Elissa hissed as she began rubbing a salve on the cut.

"I think something is wrong with my back, or maybe my leg," Elissa said, describing the pain and weakness she had been feeling.

Wynne nodded. "A fairly common complaint for women in their late pregnancy," she said sagely. "Hopefully the babe will move soon and it will pass. I would advise you to rest, but...." the mage shrugged helplessly and Elissa shook her head.

"Is there anything you can do?" she asked plaintively. "I'm becoming a liability in combat."

"I'll brew a potion to help with the pain, but there's nothing I can do for the sudden weakness in your leg; that's going to keep happening until the babe moves," Wynne frowned. "Back massage may help as well with the discomfort."

"Thank you, Wynne. Help me up," she urged Alistair. "Let's go report back to Prince Bhelen."

"Tell me again why we're supporting that creep?" Alistair complained.

"Because Harrowmont's second dismissed me out of hand when he realized I couldn't fight for him in the Proving without undermining my own threat by assigning one of you to be my champion," Elissa replied, grimacing. "Not that I was particularly anxious to risk the safety of one of my people merely to gratify a mass of bored dwarves by participating in their bloodsport. You know I find such diversions abhorrent."

She wanted to lean on Alistair as they made their way out of the Carta's lair and back into Orzammar proper, but she couldn't bear to expose herself to more of Morrigan's sneers. For some reason, the witch had never warmed to her, despite Elissa's efforts to draw her out. She had thought she was making headway until Morrigan learned of her pregnancy, and then the witch withdrew and would not permit any overtures of friendship, even after Elissa diverted their company and dispatched Flemeth for her. The problem had only intensified once Elissa and Alistair began to grow closer.
She didn't stand on ceremony once she was in Bhelen's presence, but instead sank into a chair. She was one of the highest ranked nobles in Ferelden and she'd be damned if she'd stand before him like a servant while he lounged and listened to her report.

Besides, she'd much rather be accused of lese majesty than run the risk of her leg buckling under her and sending her toppling to the floor before him. Luckily as a fairly new father himself, Bhelen seemed quite interested in and considerate of her pregnancy, at least so long as it didn't hinder his ambition.

It was, possibly, his only redeeming virtue. Prince Bhelen was exactly the sort of noble she despised most, assuming his birthright guaranteed him authority rather than seeking to prove his worthiness to rule. In theory, the deshyrs should have counter-balanced that, much as the Fereldan Landsmeet did, but they seemed to be doing an ineffective job of it.

Though, if she was honest with herself, at least some of her discomfort with Bhelen was due to the fact that she was relying on much the same mindset on the part of the Landsmeet and hoping the Fereldan nobility would value Alistair's Theirin blood over Loghain's accomplishments.

Then there was also the fact that, ruthless as he was, she was reasonably certain Prince Bhelen would be the more effective ruler. She didn't like the fact that she recognized this, much less that she would use it to her advantage.

After she was seated, Alistair took up position behind her shoulder. She still did most of the talking, but he now attended these sorts of meetings, asserting his status as her equal and co-leader. Unfortunately, she could practically feel his disapproval radiating off him. He really was not happy with her choice to support Bhelen, no matter how valid her reasoning.

Over the course of the conversation, Elissa decided she quite despised Orzammar. Forget the bloodthirsty back-stabbing politics and convoluted social structure. The entire place was too warm and close, and though her nose had become accustomed to the constant undercurrent of brimstone in the air, she hadn't had a breath of fresh air in over a week. She'd never realized just how much she relied on clean air until she hadn't felt a breeze upon her skin in days.

She left the audience having given her promise to travel into the Deep Roads on what she was certain was a fool's errand. She wasn't looking forward to the task. Their previous foray into the Deep Roads while traveling to locate Lord Dace at Aeducan Thaig had been simple enough, but she would regret leaving her comfortable room at the inn for however long it would take.

The rest of their company was no happier over the prospect, and she could feel Wynne's concerned gaze upon her even though the mage chose not to say anything. Wynne feared Elissa was pushing herself too hard.

Secretly, Elissa agreed with her.

As they left the royal palace, she noticed Wynne falling into step with Zevran and murmuring to him. It wasn't until Zevran nodded and began to jog to catch up with she and Alistair that she understood just what the mage might have said.

"Ah, Wardens? Might I beg a moment of your time?" he began with cheerful deference.

"What's on your mind, Zevran?" Elissa asked without much real curiosity. The pain in her back and leg was excruciating, and all she really cared about was getting back to the inn and lying down.

"I could not help overhearing our mage's advice to you earlier, specifically that a massage might help
with your pain. With all respect, Alistair, I do not imagine that templar training places any emphasis on those particular skills. I, on the other hand, am very skilled with such things, yes?"

Elissa's lips twitched as Zevran tactfully refrained from mentioning that she already knew quite well just how skilled he was. Alistair didn't actually seem terribly jealous of Zevran, merely quietly resigned to Elissa's history with the assassin and the necessity of Zevran's continued presence, but it wouldn't do to flaunt reminders before him.

"I see how our fair Warden is suffering, yes? And so I would like to volunteer my services in this regard," Zevran announced. Ostensibly his offer was being made to both of them, but his eyes were on Alistair.

"A massage." Alistair repeated dubiously.

"Only a massage if that is your wish," Zevran hastened to assure him. "I have no desire to interfere where I am not welcome. Of course, should you desire more, well, that can also be arranged."

Elissa practically groaned, cursing Zevran's never-ending need to flirt. Alistair's posture immediately tightened, and his eyes became shuttered. He looked very deliberately at Elissa, but said nothing. He would not refuse on her behalf, but clearly the prospect made him uncomfortable.

"Thank you for your very kind offer, Zevran," Elissa said gently, giving his arm an affectionate squeeze. "But I think I would rather simply rest right now. Perhaps another time."

"Ah, as you desire," Zevran said with a bow of his head and walked away from them. Elissa darted a careful glance at Alistair, attempting to read his mood. Strangely, the relief she had expected to find on his face was absent. He didn't look particularly pleased that she had refused Zevran's offer.

Confused by his mood but too weary to pursue the topic, Elissa sighed and turned her attention to other matters.

"Leliana!" she called to the bard, "can I trouble you to run an errand for me before we venture back into the Deep Roads?"

"Of course," Leliana offered kindly. "What can I do for you?"

"I would like you to take some of the chainmail we gathered in the Carta's hideout, the stuff we were intending to sell. Seek out one of the finer dwarven armorsmiths to whom to offer it in trade; perhaps that lyrium-addled one, he seemed quite skilled and also politically neutral. See what they can cobble together for me in terms of protection for my entire torso. It will have to be quite large; I'm getting huger by the day. But it can't have so much excess that it drags or becomes cumbersome. Perhaps it could be cinched with a belt around the hips so that there's no slack after it drapes down past my belly? It wouldn't do to be wearing a chainmail gown, after all."

Elissa stamped her foot in frustration and immediately regretted the impulse when a bolt of pain shot down her leg. "Maker, I don't even know what will work. This is absurd! What I wouldn't give for Master Wade's skills right now; surely he'd be able to conceive of something."

"I will find something," Leliana assured her, stroking her shoulder comfortingly.

"Thank you," Elissa said gratefully. "Tell them we'd like to have it in three days' time, but that we'll delay our journey into the Deep Roads a while longer if they can promise something particularly useful and well-crafted. Spread the word to the others that I advise you to take advantage of the comfort of your rooms and enjoy them while you can. I don't know how long Prince Bhelen's errand is going to take us away from here."
"Of course," Leliana promised with a sweet smile, and once she had left and the rest of their companions had dispersed, Elissa allowed herself the luxury of leaning upon Alistair for the rest of the walk to the inn.

Once in the privacy of their room, she sank down upon the bed with a miserable groan, too tired and in too much pain even to remove her Dalish leather, much less bathe. The blood had dried and flaked, covering her entire belly, but she couldn't be moved to care about it. Alistair watched her with concern.

"It's that bad?"

"It hurts, Alistair," she moaned, rolling in an effort to find a position in which to lie that didn't hurt.

"How long has this been going on? Why haven't you said anything before?"

"Days," Elissa answered with a whimper. "And what could I have said that wouldn't undermine our people's confidence in my leadership?" She closed her eyes. "Maker's breath, I don't know if I can continue doing this. I'm not some pampered noblewoman who confines herself in a dark, airless room for months on end while she's pregnant. I've seen the peasants in the fields, sowing and picking crops with their great bellies before them and it seems to me they're far healthier than most of my contemporaries. I would happily emulate them. But what we're doing... the travel, the fighting... I just don't know anymore, Alistair."

"Maybe...." he ventured slowly, uncertainly, "maybe you should remain here in Orzammar and I can lead the others into the Deep Roads."

She gazed at him tiredly, unable even to muster a reassuring smile. "As much as I appreciate the offer, we can't do that. If the dwarves or any of our allies get the idea that I'm frail or less than capable, it could affect their willingness to aid us. If I don't go, it will send a message we don't want to send."

"We'll tell them I'm in charge," he said firmly.

"They're expecting us to be in charge; the Grey Wardens. If they lose confidence in that idea, if they take the notion that one of the two remaining Wardens in all of Ferelden is incapacitated, I honestly don't know what will happen. We can't take that risk, no matter how good you've become at taking the initiative and putting yourself forward as a leader. We've presented ourselves as a partnership; we can't change that perception now."

Alistair nodded unhappily and sat for a long moment watching her struggle to get comfortable. Lying on her side, she slid one pillow under her belly in an effort to lessen the strain on her back, and wedged another between her knees, seeking to alleviate the discomfort in her hips. She had just settled in when Alistair rose abruptly and left the room, the door closing somewhat harder than necessary behind him.

Dismayed, Elissa found she could not immediately drift off the sleep as she had intended to do. He returned only moments later, bearing a jug of ale and a vial, and behind him came Zevran, looking cautiously pleased with himself.

"Alistair, what are you doing?" she asked as he sat on the bed beside her. He tugged her up to sitting and handed her the vial, then began to unlace her blood-splattered Dalish leather.

"Taking the initiative," he murmured, then looked up. "That's Wynne's potion. You need to drink all of it. She said she'll brew some more for tomorrow. Will you bring the ewer and basin, Zevran?"
Perplexed, Elissa drank the potion and allowed him to strip her down to her smallclothes. Zevran placed the stoneware ewer and basin on the bedside table and climbed onto the bed behind her. He poured water into the basin and wet a cloth, then wrung the excess water from it and handed it to Alistair before wetting another cloth.

Alistair began to carefully wash the dried blood from her belly, delicately avoiding the healing wound there, while Zevran set to work on her shoulders and back. She sat, as obedient and compliant as a sick child, while they bathed her, but even her weariness and pain couldn't entirely dampen the small flare of arousal that tightened her body. This bore far too many similarities to some of her most cherished fantasies for her to be completely immune to the erotic potential even in such carefully chaste ministrations. She might be far too miserable to act upon it, but it didn't stop her from feeling it.

Zevran pushed her hair over her shoulder and his cool, wet cloth ran over the back of her neck while Alistair turned his attention to her legs, washing her from thigh to foot with long strokes of his cloth. She closed her eyes, allowing herself to enjoy the situation even while being aware that from his position, Alistair couldn't possibly miss noting her response. Even if he didn't detect the scent of her arousal—and from the flaring of his nostrils, he most assuredly did—he could doubtless see the damp patch on her smallclothes.

"What's the ale for?" she asked as Alistair laid aside his cloth and simply knelt in the floor between her legs. Zevran's strokes at her back had taken on the feel of caresses, rather than a purposeful effort at cleaning her skin.

"That," he sighed, "is for me. I'm not entirely sure I'm up for this without at least a little fortification."

"And what precisely might this be?" The question emerged carefully, cautiously.

"Alistair's request of me was that I give you the massage... and anything else necessary to see to your comfort," Zevran replied.

"That's a very generous offer," Elissa said, meeting Alistair's uncertain eyes. "Why?"

"Because I don't like seeing you suffer," he answered evasively, "and you're not going to be as effective leading us if you don't find some relief."

"Then why not merely stop with the massage? Why assume you'll need the 'fortification'?"

"Because I know you," he replied with a crooked grin, his finger lightly brushing the wet crotch of her smallclothes, more to draw her attention to it than to arouse. "It was considerate of you to turn down Zevran's offer for the sake of my sensibilities, but whatever happened to not changing?"

"I've grown up a bit since then," she answered somewhat sadly. "Besides, why should you be the only one whose boundaries are compromised to make this work?"

"Compromised? You make it sound like there's nothing in this that might appeal to me," Alistair snorted.

Arching a curious eyebrow, Elissa's foot slid up between his legs and tested the bulge hidden by a fold of cloth in his breeches. "Oh!" she said, surprised at just how appealing he was finding this prospect after all. "Oh, I see. But let's make certain to be clear, as ambiguity will serve none of us. What exactly do you envision happening tonight?"

Zevran responded first. "For myself, I would consider it a very great honor to give you the massage, and also see to your pleasure if you are of the mood, yes?"
"And you?" she asked Alistair.

His eyes darted toward Zevran and then back to her. "Let's... start with the massage, and see what my nerves will take beyond that."

Soon Elissa found herself in much the same position she'd been in when Alistair and Zevran had come into the room, lying on her side, but rolled forward as much as her belly would allow. Zevran arranged a pillow before her and she hooked her upper leg forward, letting the pillow support it.

It felt traitorous to think it, Elissa thought as she let him position her, but a part of her had missed Zevran's exquisitely talented touch. Alistair was turning out to be a much more fulfilling lover than she could ever have dreamed, and she wouldn't trade a moment with him. What he lacked in technique he made up for with sweetness and love, with sheer enthusiasm and a veritable treasure trove of hidden desires waiting to be discovered. But his hands possessed none of Zevran's nimble skill.

Unable to lie fully on her stomach, the position afforded Zevran the best possible access to her back and would have to do. She hugged another pillow to her chest and rested her cheek upon it as Zevran's hands began to knead her back.

Between Wynne's potion and Zevran's massage, she was soon without pain for the first time in days. She let herself drift, humming softly in pleasure when Zevran's deft fingers found a particularly achy spot and began to soothe it. When she happened to open her eyes and look at Alistair, he was watching, his golden eyes serious as he observed her relief.

Though she was aware of Zevran, there was very little by way of eroticism in the massage. He was minding his manners, quiet and focused upon his task. She felt a surge of gratitude and affection for him, that he should refrain from pushing Alistair's already strained boundaries even though surely he found this situation intriguing.

Eventually, soothed by Zevran's skillful touch, she dozed, resting more comfortably than she had since they had come to Orzammar. And when she awoke, Zevran had left the bed and was indulging in a tankard of ale at the small table with Alistair.

"Ah, ale! Vile stuff, no?" he commented, shuddering as he took a sip. "I should prefer a good wine or brandy, but there is none to be found in this filthy cavern that masquerades as a city."

"At the very least, it would be nice to have some real ale, brewed from real wheat, rather than... whatever this is," Alistair agreed.

Elissa's eyes widened at this display of camaraderie, and even moreso when she took in Alistair's posture. He had removed his boots and was sitting reclined in his chair, his legs stretched out before him, clearly at ease. His words were unslurred, and he didn't appear drunk, but it was obvious he'd had more than one tankard of ale and was feeling quite relaxed.

Sensing her eyes upon him, he glanced over. When he saw Elissa was awake, he smiled reflexively at her. She felt something tighten in her chest at the adoration she saw there, at the knowledge that his first reaction upon seeing her, no matter how briefly she may have slept, was to smile as though he hadn't seen her in days and had missed her desperately.

Zevran noticed Alistair's attention was no longer upon him and looked over his shoulder at Elissa. "Ah, our lovely Warden has awakened. You are feeling better, yes?"

"I am, Zevran, thank you," Elissa murmured, stretching cautiously. When no pain answered her
attempt to move, she grew more confident and began to push herself up, but Zevran quickly stopped her.

"Please, do not rise on my behalf! We were merely waiting to see how long you would rest before it was decided whether or not I should take my leave. Your fellow Warden and I have been... bonding... over the inferiority of dwarven beverages."

Elissa was amused by his perplexed tone. Zevran, never one for subtlety when it came to sex, cut straight to the heart of the matter. "Well then, my dear Wardens, what is your wish? Shall I return to my own room, or remain?"

"I..." Helplessly, she looked at Alistair, whose posture was now more alert, but she wouldn't call it wary or reluctant. In fact, she wasn't entirely certain what to call it. "How much ale have you had?" she asked finally.

"I'm not drunk, if that's what you're asking."

"Inebriated consent is no consent at all."

"I'm just... relaxed."

"And how has your relaxation informed your wishes?"

Alistair unfolded himself from the chair (crafted, inconveniently enough, for dwarven proportions) and returned to the side of the bed, kneeling before her. He took one of her hands in his and placed an ardent kiss upon it, his face mere inches from hers where she rested her cheek on the pillow.

"I haven't seen you smile since we came to this place," he murmured. "I want to see you smile again."

"You don't need Zevran to make me smile, my love," she said softly.

"Perhaps not, but he does take your pain away, and that helps. Honestly, right now I'm not sure how to touch you. I'm afraid of making things worse."

"I'm sure you would find a way."

"Maybe," Alistair said uncertainly. "Or maybe it would be better if I watched. Maybe I would learn something new. Or... maybe I would just enjoy myself."

There was a subtle leer in his voice that did indeed make her smile. "Is that your desire then?"

"Yes," he nodded resolutely. "I'll... watch. For now. We'll just see how it goes."

"Then kiss me," Elissa demanded, and Alistair replied with a tender enthusiasm that took her breath away. His hand cupped her breast, his calloused thumb skillfully plying the nipple to a hard peak, while his tongue plumbed her mouth deeply and possessively.

Somewhere during the kiss, she felt the bed move and realized that Zevran had climbed upon it. When he pressed himself against her back, embracing her from behind, she discovered he had stripped. His skin slid warm and bare against hers as his lips found the back of her neck. His hand covered Alistair's upon her breast, and slowly Alistair withdrew his own hand, leaving just Zevran delicately tweaking her nipple with his nimble fingers.

She felt Alistair's hand upon her hip. His fingers hooked inside her smallclothes and began to peel
them away. Carefully, she shifted her body, lifting her hips slightly for a moment to aid the endeavor, and then she was bare. She whimpered softly, thinking there was something deeply symbolic in the fact that it was Alistair who removed her last scrap of clothing and exposed her to Zevran's touch. It was an unequivocal statement of consent.

Zevran's kisses ran along her shoulders as she watched Alistair take up his chair and tankard of ale and move them both closer to the bed, almost close enough to touch. He would not watch from across the room, distant and detached. Instead, he would be near enough to intervene—or perhaps participate—if it met his desire.

But it was not fair to focus on Alistair so when it was Zevran's hand doing delightful things to her nipple, and so she turned her head, ripped her gaze away from Alistair's intent stare. She looked back as far as she could and Zevran obligingly pushed himself up to claim her lips. His tongue caressed and stroked and invaded carefully, as his fingers left her nipple and began to stroke down her side, along the strangely shiny skin of her belly.

Elissa gasped and tore her mouth from his when he hit a ticklish spot, and so he turned his attention to her ear instead, nibbling and sucking, his tongue stroking the rim, delving inside the shell. Elissa gave a low hum of pleasure, thinking she would very much like to lavish her own attention upon Zevran's beautiful, elegant, pointed ears if not for the fact that it was so pleasant simply to lie there and let him do all the work.

Which, if the pressure against her backside was any indication, he was more than happy to do.

She rolled backward slightly, not completely upon her back—a position which now made her legs go numb quite quickly—but enough so that Zevran had access to more of the front of her body. Zevran took the pillow upon which she had been lying and positioned it behind her, allowing her to lie partly on her back but rolled slightly up on her side without having to support her own weight.

The position allowed Zevran's hand to circumnavigate the mound of her belly and delve with familiar ease between her legs, which parted for him with almost greedy eagerness.

But it was Alistair's face her gaze returned to despite her best efforts to keep her attention upon Zevran. He'd unlaced the collar of his tunic, and his brow glistened. Admittedly, the room was quite warm, but the way his breath hitched as he avidly watched Zevran's fingers began to trace a delicate circle around her bud told another story entirely.

Maker's breath, she'd known that watching was a pleasure, but how had she never understood just how intensely erotic it could be to be watched by her lover? She bit her lip, mewling and pushing her cunt more firmly against Zevran's hand. In response, Alistair's own had dropped to the crotch of his breeches. His fingers curled gently as he stroked himself almost unthinkingly.

"Oh, Andraste's mercy," Elissa breathed, the knowledge of how deeply he was enjoying this almost too powerfully sensual to bear. When Zevran's fingers dipped inside her and curled, Elissa gave a needy moan, feeling herself almost teetering on the brink of rapture.

"Your fellow Warden," Zevran's voice purred in her ear, casually, as though his fingers weren't fucking her fast and hard, "he looks as though he may have a great deal to offer."

Her eyes quickly darted to Alistair's face, away from the bulge beneath his breeches he was rubbing, to read whether or not he was alarmed by Zevran's observation. He gave no indication he heard, except perhaps for the opening of his hand to cup himself. His gaze was transfixed on Zevran's fingers plunging in and out of her cunt.
"Yes," she finally managed to gasp, her hands gripping the bedding. "A very great deal to offer."

"Ah, indeed?" Zevran asked with a lascivious laugh. "You are a lucky girl, yes?"

"You have no idea," she sighed, bucking against his hand.

"And how does he taste, hmm?" Zevran pressed. Again, her eyes flew to Alistair's face, and this time he met her gaze.

"Quit looking at me as though you're worried that I'm not all right and just enjoy yourself," he practically growled. "Answer his question."

"He tastes divine," Elissa gasped, trembling as her impending climax gathered.

That got a reaction from Alistair. \textit{He licked his lips.}

At that same moment, Zevran's wet fingers returned to her clit and rubbed firmly, and Elissa was lost, crying out her pleasure, her eyes clenched shut as red light flared behind her eyelids.

Zevran extended his glistening fingers to Alistair. "Would you care for a taste, my friend?"

Elissa waited, breathless and gasping with the last trembling shocks of her orgasm, for Alistair to decide his boundaries had been breached. Instead, he grabbed Zevran's wrist roughly and licked the fluids from the assassin's fingers, drawing them into his mouth to claim the last drops.

She could feel the response of Zevran's body against her back, and that awoke a whole new wave of arousal that didn't seem to care that she had just been skillfully pleasured. She pressed back into Zevran as Alistair released his hand. Alistair loosened the laces on his breeches before returning to his chair.

Before Elissa could decide what she wished to do next, Zevran was sliding down the bed. He lifted her leg and guided it over his head so that with very little effort, he was positioned with his head between her legs.

"My dear Warden," he said, placing a kiss upon her thigh, "I do not want you to think any thoughts of exerting yourself or reciprocation. Tonight, my pleasure exists simply in pleasuring you, yes?"

Elissa couldn't do much beyond nod, and then his tongue and lips were upon her. She was overstimulated, but Zevran was gentle and soothing, not trying to arouse her further, but merely relaxing her. It was a massage of an entirely different sort, really, and she let herself drift with it.

Gradually, her oversensitivity faded and pleasure began to bloom again. Soft sighs gave way to longer moans and hums. When Zevran's tongue thrust deep inside and began to fuck her, her hips began to jerk, seeking more.

Still, she felt restless and discontented, no longer satisfied with passive pleasure. Gradually her hand curled in Zevran's hair and tugged him gently away.

"Inside me," she said told him when he lifted his head to meet her eyes. "That's where I want you."

"Ah, but that is not what we agreed to," he said, moving away from her.

"It is if that is what will please me," she answered with a bit more spirit than she'd been feeling lately. Alistair was still watching raptly and she realized that what she really wanted was to give him a show worth watching. Pushing herself up and delighted to discover it did not hurt to move, she rose to her
hands and knees sideways across the bed, facing Alistair. She gathered a pillow beneath her chest to clutch and rest upon if her arms wearied of supporting her weight.

"Fuck me, Zevran," she demanded shamelessly, caution discarded, wriggling her backside invitingly.

Zevran did not need to be told twice. He knelt between her legs and soon she felt him prodding at her entrance. Her eyes locked with Alistair's as he watched, his fingers slowly wriggling inside his breeches. Zevran guided himself between her folds, and when the first firm thrust that drove him home pushed her forward, Alistair's hips lifted from the chair in response. She saw motion beneath the fabric of his breeches as his hand clenched.

Careful of her comfort, Zevran moved slowly at first, but with her attention upon Alistair, Elissa was having none of it. She wanted him to see her getting fucked, wildly and unrestrained, and so she gasped, "Harder!"

Zevran was happy to oblige. His cock angled skillfully for that spot just inside her and each time it stroked she cried out, her mouth open and gasping. She sank down so that she rested on her elbows, hugging the pillow beneath her, letting her chest rest upon it so that her back arched and her hips tilted to make the angle of penetration even deeper and more exquisite.

Soon she forgot to watch Alistair's reactions. She closed her eyes and let herself be rocked and shaken by Zevran's thrusts, his hips slapping against hers, her moans of pleasure an almost constant chorus filling the room. But then she felt movement directly in front of her and opened her eyes to see that Alistair was kneeling by the bed. He'd stripped off his tunic. His skin was dappled with sweat, and his attention was on her face, watching as though he would memorize the sight of her in her passion.

She felt his eyes upon her like a physical touch as the pressure began to build within her, and when Zevran's hand reached beneath her to located her clit, she was screaming and growling, a feral, uncontrolled thing, beyond shame or fear or self-consciousness. All that mattered was the pleasure of Zevran fucking her, and the man she loved before her watching as she clenched and spasmed around Zevran's cock.

When awareness returned, Zevran had slowed his pace, waiting to ascertain that all was still well with the both of them. And there was Alistair's face before her, his eyes full of hunger and wonder. She reached for him, let him take the weight she had been bearing on her elbows upon his own body, and then he was kissing her.

Zevran gave an experimentally hard thrust and Elissa groaned into Alistair's mouth in response. She was weary, so weary she didn't think she would come again, but even without the possibility of another orgasm, it still felt marvelous to have Zevran moving inside her.

"Hold her, my friend," Zevran instructed, and Alistair moved closer, took her more fully into his arms. Elissa clung to him, let him support her as Zevran's hands tightened on her hips. "Are you still doing well, my sweet Warden?"

"Yes," she sighed against Alistair's shoulder. "Don't stop. It feels good."

"Do it, Zev," Alistair said, and somewhere in the back of her consciousness it occurred to her that she had never before heard Alistair address Zevran informally.

"Do what, my friend?" Zevran asked teasingly, giving another single thrust hard enough to jolt her and drive her against Alistair.
"Fuck her. Hard."

Elissa almost wailed in pleasure as Zevran obeyed, giving over the last of his caution and plunging into her with abandon. Her fingers scrabbled across Alistair's tautly muscled back, seeking purchase, scratching and gouging. She bit his shoulder and cried out, for it was too much. Too much sensation, too good to be borne. She hadn't thought she had another climax within her, but when she realized it was Alistair's fingers seeking her nub this time, Alistair rubbing her to completion while Zevran fucked her at such a demanding pace, she gave herself over to it and one last gentle ripple of pleasure chased through her.

Zevran followed soon thereafter, and she was weary enough that it was almost a relief. Zevran paused only a moment, slumped over her while he caught his breath, and then his hands and Alistair's were working together to ease Elissa back onto the bed and arrange her comfortably. She felt boneless and exhausted, and though her hand sought out the bulge in Alistair's breeches—aware that he had not found his release—there was no real strength in the gesture.

"Maker's breath, you smell like her," Alistair muttered, and Elissa looked up to see that their joint efforts to see to her comfort had brought him and Zevran in close proximity as they hovered above her. With her fluids dried all over his smooth face, Elissa had no doubt Zevran did indeed smell strongly of her.

Knowing quite well that she was possibly pushing things beyond the breaking point, but too exhausted to resist her own impulse, Elissa murmured, "He tastes of me, too."

Alistair's eyes dropped to her, uncertain, and Zevran's smooth, self-satisfied voice filled the waiting silence. "I think your lady would like you to have another taste, my friend. I will be more than pleased to share, yes?"

Alistair's breath quickened, but still he sat there frozen with indecision. His lap was close enough that Elissa could see just how urgent his need was, and that it wasn't even remotely diminished by the turn events had taken.

Waiting. Still waiting. The longer they waited, the more Elissa feared Alistair would back down, would retreat behind his boundaries. She shouldn't have said anything, shouldn't have pushed this, not when Alistair was finding his way to coming to terms with his desires so beautifully on his own.

Perhaps the hesitation meant this wasn't his desire at all. It was unfair of her to try to force her own desires upon him. It would be disastrous if he acted only because she and Zevran seemed to wish it. Still, it was done, and all she could do was wait to see how matters would play out.

Zevran, however, was apparently done with waiting for Alistair's ambivalence to resolve itself, and pushed himself across her toward Alistair, pressing his lips to Alistair's.

Alistair froze, and Elissa waited breathlessly for him to push Zevran away. He shuddered and his hands went to Zevran's shoulders... and then his tongue darted out to swipe at Zevran's lip and taste her there.

Another tension-filled moment passed, and then Alistair's hands snapped shut on Zevran's shoulders, jerking him in closer. Over Elissa's body, they grappled and pulled and strained against one another. It was primal and raw and unlike any kiss Elissa had ever witnessed, filled with masculine power and aggression.

It was magnificent.
Elissa whimpered when Alistair's mouth left Zevran's to close upon his chin, licking and sucking the essence of her off Zevran's smooth skin. Zevran carefully navigated his way over Elissa's body so that he knelt upon the bed before Alistair, directly in front of her. When Zevran's hand stroked down Alistair's body, heading for the erection straining within his partially-laced breeches, it was Elissa who stopped him, grabbing his wrist.

Zevran broke away from Alistair's mouth to ask, "Is there a problem, Warden?"

"We will not push him into anything he doesn't wish for," she said firmly. Alistair's eyes were glazed and desperate with desire as he watched the exchange.

"It's all right, Elissa," he panted, his voice rough.

"I would hear it from you," she murmured, reaching up to stroke his face. "If you allow something not because you wish it, but because I do, or even Zevran does, then it can only result in resentment and I could not bear that. Say the word and Zevran will leave now and we never need to speak of this again."

"You told me you wanted—"

Her fingers touched his lips, silencing him. "It doesn't matter what I want."

"But—"

"No. This must be your desire, not mine."

"I don't even know what this is," he said, unconsciously echoing her own question from earlier. His eyes traveled to Zevran when he said it.

"She has had her pleasure," Zevran explained, "and I have had mine. She is exhausted and needs to rest, but I should hate to leave you neglected."

"I don't need pity," Alistair said tightly. "If that's the issue, I'm able to take care of it well enough on my own."

"It is not pity, my friend. It sets a bad precedent, you see, to leave a bed with someone yet unsatisfied." Zevran grinned. "A man can get a reputation for that sort of thing, yes?"

Elissa groaned crossly. "Oh, honestly, Zevran!"

"Very well, then I shall be serious if you insist," Zevran sighed. "I am offering to pleasure you, nothing more. I make the offer because it would please me to taste you. I shall not be offended if you refuse, or if you agree and then decide at any point later that you do not wish to proceed."

Alistair closed his eyes, his hands clenching into fists on his thighs. His arousal had still not abated, but....

"I think perhaps you should go, Zevran," Elissa said gently, intent on sparing Alistair the ordeal of deciding.

"As you wish," Zevran acknowledged with a small bow of his head, and began to push himself off the bed. He and Elissa both jumped when Alistair's hand shot out and caught Zevran's arm.

"No." His eyes opened and he looked down at Elissa, his jaw tensed. "I decide what is best for me, right?"
"Of course," she nodded. "I'm sorry. I ought not have spoken for you."

"You know, I keep remembering something you said to me a while back, about how once you cross enough lines, the rest don't seem to matter anymore." He paused thoughtfully. "Should they matter?"

"I suppose that depends on you," she answered, caressing her hand down his arm. "My own philosophy has always been not to limit myself so long as I'm not harming anyone else. But yours may differ. Do the lines make you happy? Do they give you definition and help inform who you are? Or do they simply bind you and keep you away from what's on the other side, yearning but never having?"

"I don't know." Alistair shook his head in wonder. "But I'm curious to see what's on the other side. And I'm having a hard time remembering why it never seemed like a good idea to find out before."

"Then what is your desire?"

Alistair drew a shaky breath. "I... would like to accept your offer, Zevran," he said slowly. "But I'm not sure... what I can bring myself to do."

"Ah, you Wardens!" Zevran snapped, discarding his good-natured facade in what was clearly a fit of frustration. "You seem to have a great deal of trouble being passive. It makes it most difficult to offer you the gift of pleasure with no expectation of reciprocation, and that has been my desire this night."

Elissa drew in a breath, surprised. "I'm sorry, Zevran. I didn't understand what your wish was."

"You know very well how intoxicating it can be, simply to pleasure another, to have her—or him—at your mercy. Not for favors in return, but simply for its own sake. That, my dear Warden, was the game I wished to play tonight, but you were not playing by the rules."

"You're right," Elissa nodded. "I wasn't paying attention when you told me what you wanted."

"Well, then, now I have another chance, yes?" he said brightly, nodding to Alistair. "Let me be clear. You need not feel obliged to do anything. If I offer to pleasure you, it is because it would please me to do so, not because I have any other expectations. Aside from the occasional bit of playacting, I do not find forcing my attentions on another—or forcing another to give their attentions to me—to be particularly rewarding. Simply allow yourself to enjoy it. If," Zevran's grin turned decidedly wicked, "after I have my way with you, you decide at another date you wish to try something else, well, that may be discussed then."

"All right." Alistair nodded. "I can do that. I think."

"Then settle back and relax. You may stop me at any time you wish."

Elissa sat up and moved to the far side of the bed to make more room for Alistair. There she sat, trying to make herself as inconspicuous as possible, so that she would not influence Alistair's actions with her own desires. Alistair pulled his legs up onto the bed and sat indecisively for a moment before he finally made himself lean back, half-reclining against the headboard. His attention was on Zevran as the naked elf crawled up the bed toward him, all feline grace and smoldering sensuality.

He leaned over Alistair and murmured, "Now, I believe you were tasting your lady-love on my lips, no? Would you like to continue?"

This time it was Alistair who closed the distance between his own mouth and Zevran's, almost eagerly, as though Zevran's words gave him the excuse he needed to overcome his hesitation. His hands came up to rest on Zevran's ribs just above his waist and Zevran twined his arms about
Alistair's shoulders.

Elissa gasped softly, for the sight of their skin pressed together, one dark and one pale, one slender and sleek and one broad and bulging, was so much lovelier than she could ever have imagined. Slowly, Alistair relaxed beneath Zevran's kiss and when he did, Zevran moved down to nibble at his throat.

Alistair let his head fall back, his mouth open and panting, as Zevran explored his neck and moved down to his shoulders, licking and sucking. His teeth sank gently into Alistair's neck and drew a groan from him in response.

Alistair's face was beautiful as he surrendered himself to sensation, the anxiety and uncertainty melting away beneath Zevran's skillful fingers and lips. Strangely, however, beneath her own enjoyment of the spectacle Elissa felt a small tingle of discontent and realized with a start of surprise that it was jealousy. She had thought herself too licentious for the emotion, but the sight of Alistair being pleased by another awoke her possessive instincts. Until now, his body had only been hers, and after this, that would never be true again. All she had ever imagined from such a scenario was pleasure at seeing her love lost to rapture; she hadn't expected this tiny thread of conflict.

She pushed it aside; this was the fantasy she had cherished for far too long, and she would not spoil it with something as ugly as jealousy. Instead, she would cherish the beauty and wonder of seeing these two lovely men together—one her beloved and the other her friend—taking pleasure in one another. It was living art, and one did not get jealous over art.

Alistair gasped when Zevran's hand slid between his thighs to cup his erection, and Zevran murmured something soothing in Antivan as his lips closed over Alistair's nipple. It was a long moment until Alistair relaxed again, but then his back arched and with a push of his hips he ground himself more firmly into Zevran's stroking palm.

"Would you like more?" Zevran murmured.

"Sweet Andraste, yes," Alistair groaned in response, and Elissa saw Zevran's lips curve into a smile against Alistair's nipple.

Alistair did not resist when Zevran's nimble fingers made short work of the already half-undone laces of his breeches. Instead, he cooperatively lifted his hips and let Zevran slide them down his thighs, and his smallclothes as well.

Zevran licked his lips at the sight of Alistair's cock, thrusting forth and looking almost painfinitely engorged, but he did not touch it right away. Instead, he kissed Alistair again, stroking his hands soothingly up and down Alistair's ribs until the tension that had crept through Alistair's body again began to drain away, leaving him relaxed and pliant beneath Zevran's caresses.

That tension came back when Zevran's hand closed around Alistair's cock and stroked slowly upon and down, but once again Zevran soothed it away, not pushing any further until Alistair was relaxed once more. And then he worked his way down, kissing and licking across the rippling muscles of Alistair's chest and abdomen.

Maker, the sound Alistair made when finally, finally Zevran's lips closed around his cock! Low and needy, confused and yearning all at once. She'd taken Alistair into her mouth more times than she could count, but she didn't remember him ever sounding quite like that, except perhaps the first time. The noise drowned out Elissa's own longing sigh.

Unable to stop himself, Alistair gave a small upward thrust, but Zevran merely pulled back and
Elissa wasn't sure which she wanted to watch more, Alistair's face or the work of Zevran's mouth upon his cock, for they were each gorgeous in their own ways. She barely breathed as Zevran's head bobbed up and down, his lips and tongue working. When he plunged all the way down and took Alistair deep into his throat, her own throat tightened sympathetically. She forgot any hint of possessiveness she might have felt, lost in the sheer beauty of what she was seeing.

It did not last long; Alistair had been too aroused for too long while he watched Zevran pleasure Elissa, and no doubt the new and unfamiliar knowledge that it was Zevran's mouth on his cock wasn't helping his self-control any. Soon he was moaning desperately and his hips wriggled and pumped involuntarily. He had the presence of mind not to grab Zevran's head or try to force him, but his fingers did dig into Zevran's shoulders roughly.

Alistair licked his lips and muttered a soft curse, and his eyes opened and sought Elissa's. She had no idea what he found there upon her face, but whatever it was, it spelled the end for his control. His eyes snapped shut and his head fell back. His face contorted with pleasure.

"Dear Maker," he groaned, and thrust into Zevran's mouth, shuddering hard.

Afterward, he collapsed limply against the headboard and a moment later, Zevran lifted his head, licking his lips with a satisfied smirk.

"Ah, now that was what I wanted! Thank you, my friend."

Elissa was in motion before she even knew she intended to act, crawling to Zevran and claiming his lips demandingly, licking the last traces of Alistair's seed from the inside of his mouth. Zevran, ever generous, happily shared and they both moaned in contentment.

When the kiss broke, she looked over at Alistair who was still panting and slumped against the bed. His eyes were open, watching her. Smiling, she went to him, kissed him tenderly, sank into his arms. True to his word, Zevran didn't seem interested in pursuing the situation any further. He was casual and relaxed, his cock was only half-hard as he rose from the bed and sought out his clothing, dressing with a pleased smile on his face.

"Thank you, Zevran," Elissa murmured, and Alistair gave a hum of agreement, still dazed and replete.

"Ah, it was my very great pleasure, my sweet Warden. I thank you both for the enjoyable evening. Should you ever require my talents again—in massage or in any other way—they will be yours, yes?"

"I appreciate the offer," Alistair finally managed to speak. "Thank you. We'll have to see."

"As you say," Zevran nodded and let himself out of their room.

Weariness began to take hold once more now that the excitement was done, and Elissa was content merely to snuggle against Alistair. She turned her back to him, and soon he curled up behind her. As had become his habit, his hand came to rest on her belly to share in feeling the thumps and jolts of the babe moving within her.

It was a very peaceful moment, and she knew sleep would come quickly. Still, she felt compelled to ask, "Are you all right?"
"Yes, I think I am," Alistair sighed. "I don't think that's something I necessarily want often, but it was... pleasant."

"No regrets about crossing that line, then?" she asked.

"No, none." He sounded slightly surprised by the admission.

"Have I ever told you how brave you are?" she said, kissing his chest. "I feel like I've asked you to make so many changes, look at things in ways you never wanted to look at them. Perhaps it wasn't fair or right of me to ask that, but you've risen to every challenge."

"It's helped me to stop feeling so afraid and unsure all the time," he replied, his lips brushing her hair. "I'm not the same man I was when I met you, and that's a good thing."

"I'm glad you think so," Elissa felt tears burn her eyes and blinked them impatiently away. "Just... don't let me push you into changing into someone you don't want to be. Please?"

"I won't, if you'll promise the same."

"Happily," she whispered, closing her eyes and letting sleep begin to overtake her. "Happily."
Elissa did not expect that their journey into the Deep Roads would take weeks. Truthfully, she lost all track of time down there, but the farther they traveled, following the trail of vague clues left by the Paragon Branka, the more she began to fear they would need to turn back, lest she be forced to deliver her babe in those horrid, dark tunnels surrounded by darkspawn and filth. She wasn't sure how much time she had left—perhaps six weeks, possibly only a month—but she needed to get back to the surface, or at least to Orzammar and into the care of a midwife soon.

Sleeping on the hard stone of the tunnels was agony, and she got very little rest. There was no privacy for her frequent stops to relieve her bladder, and the embarrassment of that situation was not helped by their newest companion, who may very well have been the most odious and offensive person—human, elf, or dwarf—she'd ever encountered. It was an utterly wretched time.

As the days and nights became indistinguishable except by the weariness of her companions, it also became apparent that Elissa was not the only one having difficulty in the Deep Roads. In the torchlight, Zevran looked pale and strained.

"Even born in the city as I was," he explained with a weak attempt at a grin, "I am still an elf, yes? We are not meant to live underground away from the sun and air."

If anything, Wynne's rapidly deteriorating composure worried her more.

"There is a reason I left the Tower at every opportunity," Wynne said when they stopped to rest, her eyes hollow and her face tense and drawn. "I didn't tell you before how greatly I feared during those days in the barn before the templars came for me. The townspeople threw rocks at the walls while I was locked in there, and I was afraid that they would set the barn ablaze around me. I've never been very good with enclosed spaces, and it has been too long since I've seen the open sky."

When they doused the torches to conserve them, it became worse, and they could hear Wynne's panicked breathing in the dark. Zevran took to hovering near the mage, and the two seemed to find comfort in each other. During one stop to rest, as Elissa lay awake with her discomfort and the rest of her party slumbered, the frightened panting took on another tone: soft, decidedly erotic sighs and stifled moans drifted out of the darkness.

When they lit the torches again, Wynne was sleeping with her head on Zevran's lap. Zevran met Elissa's eyes calmly but offered no explanations, nor did she request any. For a time after that, both Wynne and Zevran seemed calmer and more able to cope with being trapped underground. Periodically, it would happen again, but if anyone other than Elissa noticed, it went unremarked.

Elissa wished the solution to her own misery were that easily accomplished. Once the babe had moved, the incidences of her leg collapsing beneath her stopped, but being on her feet and walking
for endless hours was torture, and sometimes as she attempted to rest in Alistair's arms she wept softly in pain and despair.

Their sighting of the archdemon and the darkspawn horde moving out for the surface was terrifying enough, but what they found beyond the Dead Trenches was even worse.

The Broodmother was the worst sort of perversion, taking the glorious ability to bring forth life that was the sole province of women and twisting it into something monstrous. She could see it on the faces of every female in their party, that soul-deep revulsion and horror that the men would never truly understand. And when the battle was joined....

It was a grueling fight, and there were times Elissa was certain they could not possibly win as they were flung around and pummeled by the grotesque tentacles. While trying to avoid the tentacles, she and Wynne became separated from Morrigan and Leliana as they all hung back at range, using spells and bows to combat the horrific beast.

Another wave of darkspawn came pouring into the chamber and then they had more than the tentacles to worry about. It was only by chance that Elissa heard Leliana scream and looked over to realize the darkspawn had closed in around she and Morrigan and were cornering them.

No, not cornering.

_Corralling_ them.

Elissa called out desperately to Alistair and Sten and they turned their attention to the darkspawn that were menacing Morrigan and Leliana and dealt with them. At long last, the Broodmother lay thrashing out her last monstrous breaths and Elissa sank wearily to the floor and buried her head in her hands and wept as she tried to bring her mind to bear on the ramifications of what she had just learned about the darkspawn menace.

They all hovered around the Broodmother's bloated, reeking corpse as they healed and bandaged and recovered from the battle. Finally, she drew Alistair aside, conferring with him softly.

Together, they gathered all their companions to make an announcement.

"We're sending Leliana and Morrigan back," Elissa said to them without preamble. "Not just to Orzammar. Not just to the surface. All the way back to Redcliffe. Dear Maker, I'd send you to Seheron if I could manage it! We cannot take the chance that the darkspawn will capture you and make more of those... things."

Morrigan nodded. "A sensible decision. Though I think you shall miss my skills, I confess to being relieved nonetheless."

Leliana looked as though she wanted to argue, but instead she nodded, her face pale.

Elissa drew a deep breath. "That's not the end of it," she said, closing her eyes for a moment. "Sten and Zevran will accompany you, and you need to know why they are going. If you become involved in an unwinnable battle, if it becomes apparent that the darkspawn are going to take you, they have orders to kill you or die trying." Elissa made no effort to check the tears that rolled down her face. "I pray that you'll understand, and that you'll forgive me."

Even Morrigan looked stunned at that, but after a moment she nodded grimly. Leliana sobbed openly. Elissa embraced her, and they clung to one another for a long moment.

"Sten, consult with Oghren and see if he knows of a more direct route back to Orzammar," she said,
resting her head on Leliana's shoulder and holding the bard tightly. "Since you don't need to search for Branka any longer, there's no reason to trace the same route she traveled. Zevran, gather the supplies you'll need. Wynne, I think you should go with them."

"Nonsense, child," Wynne said, still looking shaken. "You will need me now worse than ever, losing half our party this way. Whether its my age or the fact that I have this spirit inhabiting my body, those darkspawn were not interested in me."

"That's not why I think you should go."

"I know," Wynne sighed. "But I'll manage. I don't have a choice any more than you do."

Elissa hugged Leliana one last time and kissed her in farewell. Within hours, their party had been considerably reduced, and they were once more making their way along through the labyrinthine tunnels of the Deep Roads, and soon they found the way behind them blocked at Branka's doing. They had no choice but to move forward, attempting to solve the puzzles that would get them through to the Anvil of the Void. But as each day—or what Elissa presumed were days—passed, Wynne's composure began to deteriorate again.

As they made camp and prepared to sleep, Elissa drew Alistair aside once more.

"I'm going to sleep with Wynne until we're out of this wretched place," she informed him. "Now that Zevran's gone, she has no one to help allay her anxiety."

Alistair's jaw hung open a moment, then he gave a decisive nod. "Do what you need to do."

Elissa went to where Wynne lay trembling and crying softly on her bedroll and spread her own bedroll out alongside her. She maneuvered her ungainly body to the ground and reached for Wynne, and the mage went anxiously into her arms and clung to her desperately. Elissa could barely manage to get her arms around Wynne with her belly between them, but somehow she managed enough to calm the mage.

When Alistair's watch was over, he did not return to his own lonely bedroll, but instead came and took Wynne's sleeping form into his own arms, allowing Elissa the opportunity to roll over and find a more comfortable position in which to catch what sleep she could. Thus was the pattern set for every rest they took thereafter, but with each passing day it became less effective. Wynne took longer to calm and it took less to rouse her to anxiety once more.

Without Shale they would never have made it through the second trap, a room filled with toxic gas which required four levers to be pulled before it could be disarmed. The golem proved impervious to the gas, rushing through the chamber to pull the levers while larger, more dangerous golems awoke and began to pound on Shale. Shale was severely damaged by the time it was safe for the others to enter the chamber and deal with the other golems that had come to life. After that trap, they were required to rest for what seemed to be several days while they puzzled out the next challenge and Shale recuperated.

The later traps were equally grueling, and after the final one they were all in need of a rest before continuing on toward the Anvil. Unfortunately, the cavern in which they were forced to camp was particularly small and enclosed. And so it was during that downtime that Wynne moved from anxiety to panic. She clung to Elissa desperately, and Alistair embraced Wynne from behind, lending his solid bulk to the endeavor and sandwiching her between the two of them. Elissa kissed her forehead and stroked her hair, but still Wynne teetered ever closer to complete hysteria.

She was on the verge of screaming madness when Elissa kissed her lips firmly. There was not much
of titillation in the kiss, and yet it seemed to shock Wynne back to a calmer state. Her hands clutched at Elissa's shoulders as Elissa's lips gently and skillfully parted hers, nibbling and sucking.

It was when her breasts began to ache in response to Wynne's bosom pressing against her own that Elissa seized upon a flash of inspiration. She thought back to the servants and peasants she had seen throughout her childhood, whether with their own children or acting as wet-nurses to the children of the nobility. No matter how distraught a woman's mood, she seemed to calm whenever she brought her nursling to her breast and the child began to suckle.

Her fingers flew to the frogs on Wynne's robe and began to open it. Despite the coolness of the cavern, her shift was damp and reeked of old sweat. None of them had bathed in weeks and they were all rank. It didn't matter. She pushed the robe apart and lifted Wynne's shift and in the darkness, her lips closed around Wynne's nipple.

Wynne moaned, a low, needy sound as her arms clasped around Elissa and drew her closer. Though her fingers toyed at Wynne's other nipple, Elissa applied very little by way of erotic artistry and instead concentrated upon suckling, pressing the nipple to her palate with her tongue as she drew upon it firmly.

There was a shift, rustling and motion, and then Wynne was drawn away from her. She released Wynne's breast as the mage was pulled back so that she reclined against Alistair's chest as he sat behind her and held her. Elissa followed, seeking out Wynne's other nipple, and her hand began to push under the skirt of the mage's robes.

Without relinquishing her suction upon Wynne's breast, Elissa stroked her fingers along Wynne's smallclothes, finding them warm but not very damp. Her mother had been much the same at times, explaining that past the time when her menses cease, a woman might produce much less moisture. Armed with that knowledge, Elissa stroked her gently through the thin fabric of her smallclothes, not wishing to create an uncomfortable amount of friction.

Wynne whimpered, and her hips shifted, pushed against Elissa's fingers ever so slightly. Elissa switched nipples again and continued to lightly run her fingers over Wynne's cleft, increasing the pressure of her strokes as the fabric beneath her fingertips grew damper. All the while, Alistair continued to hold Wynne tightly but chastely, a comforting, solid presence between her and the darkness surrounding them, and Elissa never ceased the attentions of her mouth upon Wynne's nipples.

With time, there was nothing left of panic in the tension of Wynne's body or the soft, muffled sounds that rose up from her throat. She held Elissa close and writhed against her, lifting her hips, seeking more. Elissa's fingers slid underneath the wet fabric of Wynne's smallclothes and delicately slipped between her folds, delving within her sheath. Wynne made a low sound of approval and her leg parted more, allowing easier access.

In and out, Elissa slid her fingers as they became slicker, as Wynne's sheath became less tight, and tension of a different sort began to gather in her muscles. Wynne thrashed her head against Alistair's chest, biting her lips to stifle her pleasure, and when Elissa's thumb found her nub and began to stroke with increasing pressure, her entire body snapped taut, her hips thrusting off the cavern floor as her fingers closed with unbreakable strength upon Elissa's shoulders.

And then she sagged back against Alistair, limp and pliant. Elissa's mouth ceased its efforts at her nipples and drew away as she pulled her hand out from under Wynne's robes and solicitously smoothed the skirt of the garment back down over Wynne's legs. Fumbling in the dark, she refastened the frogs of Wynne's robe and then pressed a tender kiss upon Wynne's brow.
"Thank you, child," Wynne whispered in the darkness. Elissa merely bestowed another kiss upon her wrinkled cheek.

Alistair laid Wynne down upon her bedroll and for the first time in many nights, instead of holding the mage, he moved in behind Elissa and drew her to him instead, cuddling her from behind.

Wynne clutched Elissa's hand as she drifted off to sleep, her grip gradually loosening as the relaxation of slumber overtook her.

It was then that she felt Alistair's hand begin to push its way up under the pleated skirt of Dalish leather and pull at her smallclothes.

Whether he was aroused by her actions with Wynne, or by the long abstinence they'd kept these weeks in the Deep Roads when Elissa was so tired and uncomfortable that sex had been the farthest thing from her mind, Alistair was in no mood for a long build-up. With little preamble he pushed his breeches down and his lips began to suck at her neck as he prodded at her entrance.

With no preparation she was tight and not nearly as wet as she might have otherwise been, but Alistair was unrelenting as he pushed his way in and she gradually loosened and yielded to him. The discomfort of being taken with so little consideration was its own delicious thrill. She loved that he could be so desperate for her that he would abandon the niceties of lovemaking and seek his own pleasure so frankly.

He began to move, drawing her moisture out of her cunt to ease his passage. The angle of penetration was far from optimal, allowing neither depth nor the ability for his cock to stroke the spot inside where it was most pleasurable.

It didn't matter.

With his mouth on her neck he could undoubtedly taste the grit and sweat of weeks of travel.

That didn't matter either.

All that mattered was that he was within her, completing her in a way that went far beyond physical togetherness. All that mattered was that even though she was huge and ungainly and filthy and miserable most of the time, he needed her.

His hand rode on her belly as he stroked in and out, and that created another surge of arousal within her, that his amazing fixation on her enormous belly still drove him to passion. Only when he was shaking and clearly nearing his own precipice did his hand plunge downward from that roundness to insinuate itself between her thighs and begin to stroke her clit.

He worked her toward her climax with the same rough urgency with which he had initiated their lovemaking. No slow teasing, just pressure and friction and then she was coming on the filthy floor of that cavern, biting her lip to avoid waking Oghren and having to endure his leers and lewd remarks.

She mourned that she could not keep his seed within her, savor the feel of it seeping out of her, but it would make her smallclothes unbearable to wear. And so she fumbled in their packs for a scrap of leftover bandage and wiped herself, bearing down to force as much of his seed out as she could, and discarded the rag in the shadows of the cavern, where it would molder amidst the darkspawn filth.

The next day, Wynne was clear-eyed and calmer than she had been since Zevran had left their company. Elissa was not required to calm her again, for that was the day they found the Anvil and were finally able to turn back to Orzammar with the crown Caridin fashioned in-hand.
Elissa and Alistair find that heat and politics are a volatile combination.

Pairings: Elissa/Alistair

The sweltering heat of summer was hard upon them as they began yet another journey across Ferelden, traveling from Redcliffe to Denerim en route to the Landsmeet.

It should have been a blessing that this time they could make the passage in Arl Eamon's luxuriously appointed carriage in a fraction of the time it would have taken to walk the distance, but it wasn't. The carriage was close and felt airless even with the leather shades open, and sitting for endless hours was every bit as agonizing as days upon days of walking would have been.

The rocking of the carriage made her feel queasy. There simply wasn't enough breeze to cool the sweat that trickled an itchy path down her back. It pooled underneath her aching breasts and chafed the skin of her back and stomach where the belts that cinched her hastily-made chainmail girdle rode, until she finally removed the blasted thing to seek some relief.

She cursed Eamon for being such a snob that he unthinkingly assigned her other companions to separate carriages, not considering that the mages might have useful spells to combat the heat. She wondered if maybe she couldn't inveigle a way to complete the journey in one of the other carriages, preferably one with Wynne and some sort of frost aura.

All that she might have borne with equanimity, for if her voyage into the Deep Roads had taught Elissa aught, it was the meaning of true misery.

But what was grating on her most significantly was Eamon himself and his endless kingmaking. Oh, he was subtle and pleasant about it, hinting rather than demanding. But whenever Alistair raised the point that he did not, in fact, want to be king, Eamon had the gall to dismiss his opinions out of hand, until Elissa had to grit her teeth to avoid snarling at the ambitious old goat. After all Alistair had accomplished, to see him dismissed as though his wishes counted for nothing was infuriating.

Never mind that Elissa herself fully intended to encourage him to accept the crown. At least she wouldn't ignore his misgivings but would instead attempt to reconcile him.

Teagan did what he could to lighten the palpable tension simmering inside the carriage, but Elissa's physical discomfort was doing nothing for her temper. Nor was Teagan's unexpected awkwardness in her presence now that there was no longer sex between them. In other circumstances, his newfound infatuation with Leliana might have been amusing. Instead, it was simply annoying, because it distracted him and made him useless as a buffer between her burgeoning rage and Eamon's oblivious scheming.

Nor was her temper aided by the fact that one facet of Eamon's plan was choosing prospective queens, a post for which he clearly considered Elissa—pregnant with a child whose father she neglected to name—unqualified, despite her noble birth. That she and Alistair had made no secret of
their relationship and shared a room at every inn they stopped at didn't seem to factor into the equation.

Again, it didn't matter that Elissa knew full well that it was unlikely she'd be able to wed Alistair if he took the throne. It was the nerve of the man to write her off so callously that offended.

Two days out from Denerim, their train was beset by a band of darkspawn and in the resulting battle, a carriage wheel was broken. While the coachman attempted to repair it, Eamon had the audacity to approach Alistair and suggest he take Anora as his queen.

"Are you entirely mad?" Elissa snapped before she could even think to stop herself. "How long has it been since you've been to court, my lord Arl, that you are unaware of what a treacherous viper that woman is? We haven't even the vaguest idea whether or not she's been complicit in Loghain's usurpation."

"You'll forgive me, Lady Cousland," Eamon said patronizingly, "but it's possible that between your youth and your delicate condition, and ah, the other personal considerations, that you are unable to view this matter rationally."

Elissa's eyes blazed and her mouth gaped open on a host of caustic retorts, none of which she dared give voice to. She could not formulate a response that wouldn't completely estrange Eamon from their cause, at least not without validating every assumption he'd just made. So instead she turned her back to the smug nobleman and stormed away across the sprawling fields beside the road.

Alistair—her Alistair—who had so recently come to understand and explore his desires, wed to a woman so passionless that, despite her beauty, lusty, good-natured Cailan had come to dread performing his duty in her bed. The very notion was indecent! If Alistair must wed, at least let it be to some kind-hearted, eager virgin who could be taught to match his appetites.

That prospect hurt far more than she cared to admit, but it was better than the alternative.

She heard Alistair's voice shouting her name and turned to see she'd walked much farther than she had intended; the carriages in which they were traveling were out of sight on the other side of a gentle rise, as were all their companions.

Alistair had removed his armor and was striding toward her in the new linen tunic and breeches they'd purchased in Redcliffe to replace his patched woolens at Eamon's insistence. The sight of him in his new clothing only served to heighten her irritation. Apparently, it was time for him to begin dressing the part of the king. He had several fine sets of silk doublets and breeches for court wear as well as the linen for under his armor.

His lines also served to remind her of another point of frustration, namely Eamon's high-handedness, which had had infuriated her when he "suggested" she see Isolde's dressmaker and stop gallivanting about half-naked in her Dalish leather. Apparently he found it indecent for her to display her belly so flagrantly. She wondered if he imagined she ought to have had gathered their army in court gowns.

She braced herself for Alistair's attempts at comforting reassurance. Until she got a look at his face.

He looked furious.

"Have you gone insane?" he demanded, snatching her by the shoulders and yelling into her face. His tunic clung wetly to his chest, nearly transparent with sweat, and rivulets ran down his brow, forcing him to wipe them impatiently from his eyes. "We've just been attacked by darkspawn and now you're running off out of sight of the caravan without even your bow!"
"I'll walk the rest of the way to Denerim unarmed and nude before I spend another fucking minute in a carriage with that man!" Elissa snarled, wiping a hand across her own forehead. Andraste's tits, it was hot! She couldn't decide which was worse: the airless confines of the carriage, or the scorching intensity of the direct sunlight.

"Absolutely not!" Alistair said flatly. "If I have to sit there and listen to him harp at me about my duty you're damn well going to sit beside me and share the misery!"

"I will not be dismissed or patronized this way!" she shouted. "I saved that insufferable man's life and have somehow managed to gather an army against all probability, and now I'm brushed off as merely an hysterical, lovesick child who knows nothing about political realities! Eamon's head is so far up his own arse he'd need a map of the Deep Roads to locate it and a team of oxen to extract it, but I'm the one who gets the condescending pat on the head!"

"You think it's any easier for me?" he demanded. "You think I don't have to bite my tongue every time he speaks as though he's still got the authority to make my decisions for me? I'm half-expecting him to attempt to send me back to the monastery!"

"Nonsense!" she snapped. "If he sent you to the monastery he'd lose his puppet-king. I tell you, I'm not going to do it anymore! I'll ride in one of the other carriages. Even Oghren's odious presence would be preferable to this."

"Oh, no you don't! You're the one who knows all about politics, so you're going to get in that carriage and smile and charm him and do whatever is necessary to hold him at bay until we can decide what we're going to do once we actually get to the Landsmeet."

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly at my charming best!"

"Oh, I've noticed!" Alistair said emphatically, spinning her around and pulling at the laces closing her leather chest-piece.

"And just what do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"When we go back to that carriage, you will be smiling," he informed her. His teeth clamped down firmly on the side of her sweat-covered neck at the same moment his hands plunged inside the loosened leather to cup her breasts through the damp and clinging cloth bindings.

It occurred to her for just an instant to snidely question why this seemed like a perfectly good idea to him when her walking off on her own had been so dangerous, but she already knew the answer. His reaction hadn't been fear for her safety so much as it had been the need to vent his own frustration. Desire, every bit as hot as the anger still raging through her veins, flooded her, and now she understood the outlet her rage needed. She turned in his arms and her hands plunged under his saturated tunic as her lips sought his. He released the knot on her breast bindings and the fabric fell away as his tongue thrust into her mouth.

His upper lip and chin were wet and his stubble chafed her damp skin but it didn't matter. All that mattered was the salty flavor of his lips and his hardness pressing against her and his slick skin under her fingers.

Skin. She needed more skin.

Jerking from his arms, she frantically pulled the leather off her chest and down her arms and tossed it aside. At the same time, Alistair peeled off his tunic and then the shining expanse of his rippling chest was before her. Without pause he toed off his boots and pushed his breeches down, kicking
them disdainfully away. His erection jutted forth and in the mood of the moment it appeared almost angry as well, red and swollen and demanding to vent its own rage.

Without being asked, Alistair knelt and began unbuckling her own leather boots, for she could not bend to reach them. She gripped his damp shoulders for balance as he pulled them from her feet. Her pleated leather kilt followed soon thereafter, and her smalleclothes clung to her wet skin as he rolled them down her legs. And then his mouth was upon her cunt, his tongue delving between her folds to find her nub and she was gripping him for an entirely different reason.

It didn't take long for him to work her into a moaning, jerking frenzy. She ground her curls shamelessly against his face, grabbing fistfuls of his hair to hold him closer. Beads of sweat evaporated on her skin as soon as they were formed in the merciless sunlight, while still others slid down her back and buttocks to trickle around his fingers where they held her backside. The air was still and hotter than an oven as she yelled out her pleasure.

He was back on his feet in an instant, then, and his hands were upon her shoulders, pushing her to her knees in a demanding manner he rarely used with her. In their inn room each night, he was gentle and solicitous of her comfort, making love to her cautiously when she wasn't so weary from the day's travel that she opted to forego it entirely.

There was little tenderness now as he forced her down--barely allowing her time to lick the droplets of sweat from his chest--and nothing of solicitude. There was only need and hunger and the maddening, oppressive heat of the day as she took him into her mouth.

She thought he might thrust, but instead he shuddered and grew still as she licked and sucked, his skin baking in the sun. He groaned and let his head fall back, turning his face to the sky. She could practically smell him burning under the sweat and musk. His hips and thighs were slick beneath her palms as she caressed him; there was no place she could grab that wasn't, nowhere to find purchase for her scrabbling fingers as they clenched and groped at the hard, flexing muscles of his backside.

She didn't tease him, she *devoured* him, sucking hard on the head of his cock, drawing him into her mouth before sliding back with a careful yet purposeful scrape of her teeth. She licked the salty droplet that formed at his slit with relish before plunging down again, until finally Alistair had to wrench himself away, panting and shuddering as he grappled for control.

He pushed her down again, this time to her hands and knees. She spread her thighs wide and the tall grasses brushed her breasts and prickled her sweat-covered belly, but still she wriggled her ass for him and demanded with no flowery prose that he fuck her.

The droning of the bees and insects was drowned out by her moan as he thrust home with a single, unrelenting lunge. He barely gave her time to adjust before he set a mind-bending, urgent pace that soon had her cries echoing over the waving grasses.

The ground was rough and gritty beneath her palms and knees. Her skin itched where the grass rubbed against it. Elissa could feel the skin of her back growing hot in the sunlight and knew she was burning, but all that mattered was the fire inside, the growing tension and heat yearning to be extinguished. His hips were wet and slippery as they slapped against her ass and she drove herself back against him. Where his hands rested and dug into her backside was the only place that didn't feel as though her skin were burning.

The pressure of his cock passing across that spot inside her, over and over, soon had her flying apart, howling like the animal she must surely resemble rutting here in the grass and sunlight. When the wave of pleasure had passed, her anger seemed to have evaporated as well, and now there was simply joy. For joy it was to be young and alive and in the sunlight with the man she loved,
 unrestrained in their passion, unashamed of their need.

She didn't know how much longer they would have this sort of freedom.

She needed to see him, to see it on his face, in case she never got the chance again to have him to herself this completely.

She pulled away, though Alistair grabbed for her. She turned and pushed him down, onto his back, crushing the prickly yellow grasses beneath him. She mounted him and guided him inside and dear Maker, it was almost too much, too good, to feel him butting up against her womb at this angle, to feel their sweat-slicked skins sliding against one another, gritty with dust and pollen and broken bits of grass.

Elissa tossed her head back and rode him, with all the strength and force she could muster. Unfortunately, her agility wasn't what it had once been, but Alistair's hands were there on her hips to aid her, lifting her up and plunging her down as she engulfed him. When she glanced down at his sweat-dappled face, a strain showed there that had nothing to do with anger and frustration and everything to do with the precipice he was careening toward.

"Unh! Yes! Fuck me!" she grunted, her blunt fingernails digging into the flat slabs of muscle on his chest. One of his hands left her hip to try to wedge under her belly and find her clit, but Elissa grabbed his wrist. "Nevermind that now! I want to watch you come."

"Pretty sure... that's going to be soon...." Alistair panted, his chest heaving with effort.

"Then let go. Do it."

She interlaced her fingers with those of the hand she had grasped. His other hand came up and she did the same with it. He braced his elbows on the ground and she locked her arms and used him for leverage to push herself up. Alistair lifted his hips, thrusting in counterpoint to her rolling movements, and they both moaned with each surge.

She watched his face raptly, watched the way passion transformed his usually kind and amused countenance into something feral and desperate. She watched the way his jaw hardened and clenched, the way his eyes squeezed shut as the first tremors began to wrack him, the way his mouth went slack as the pulsing inside her began to slow, the way his chest moved as he gasped and shuddered with his release.

Her limbs were trembling from exertion, her back aching with the strain, as she eased off him. Flopping naked onto the grass wasn't all that much more comfortable, but then, little was these days.

Her mouth was parched and her skin turning red; they would need to get out of the sunshine soon. But all she could do was lie there and look up at the sky and wonder once more whether or not they would ever again be this free. Perhaps that impending loss was what was fueling her rage at Arl Eamon. Come the Landsmeet, he would take Alistair from her.

Picking up on an echo of her melancholy, perhaps, Alistair finally spoke. "I'll tell Eamon we're absolutely not discussing the issue of marriage until well after the Landsmeet. Hopefully that will put an end to at least a little of his harping."

"You've got to think about it sometime," she said softly, before she could stop herself. She rose with difficulty to seek out her underclothes and armor, unable to have this discussion in his arms.

"What?" Alistair asked disbelievingly. "You... you agree with him?"
"If you become king, you're going to need a queen, sooner or later." Elissa sighed. "And you need to realize it's not likely to be me."

"Of all the bloody—Maker's breath, why not? You're a noblewoman!"

"I'm a noblewoman with a tarnished family reputation and a bastard child whose father she can't name," Elissa explained, bowing her head as she began to dress.

"You said your family had always been discreet about their affairs," Alistair protested.

"They attempted to be, but apparently at least some gossip exists, as Loghain made very clear to me at Ostagar when he accused me of seducing the king at Duncan's bidding," she said. "Besides, I haven't been terribly discreet. Had I imagined there was a chance of this situation arising, I would never had done some of the things I have. Andraste's blood, I fucked a tavern full of men before an entire town! It's only the apparent hero-worship with which Redcliffe Village esteems me that has prevented more gossip from spreading, but we can't count on that forever."

"All right, so your reputation isn't golden. But still—it's the king's child you're carrying!"

"The Landsmeet would only have my word on that," she replied, unable to meet his eyes. She couldn't—wouldn't—say more than that on the subject. "Loghain could assert it's Duncan's child, and I couldn't prove otherwise."

"Then tell them it's my child!" Alistair said desperately, snatching for his own clothes as though they would serve as stronger armor for this conversation.

"That's a demonstrable lie. Too many people know there was nothing between us until well after the time you could have fathered my babe. You'll need a bride with unimpeachable credentials, especially because the legitimacy of your claim to the throne is so tenuous. Don't you see, Alistair?" Her eyes were burning with tears as she looked at him helplessly. "I'm not suitable."

"Then I'll refuse the damn crown! Let Anora have the bloody thing!"

"You can't!" Elissa cried. "Ferelden must have a ruler whose loyalty to the Grey Wardens is unshakable, who will do whatever it takes to stop the Blight. If we can somehow assure Anora's full cooperation in defeating the Blight, then yes, perhaps you'll have the luxury of refusing, but that's not guaranteed."

"Why is this all coming up now?" Alistair demanded. "Why now, just days before the Landsmeet? Why haven't you told me this before?"

"I tried, Alistair," she said, tears spilling down her cheeks. "When we went back to Ostagar. I tried to warn you that you would need to consider what would happen if you became king. You didn't listen. And I—I was too much in love to push the subject. I simply wanted whatever moments we could have together before it all came apart."

He stared at her, astonishment and betrayal raw on his face. "You knew. You went into this knowing it would end?"

"No, not really," she confessed, her shoulders sagging in defeat. "I'd always imagined I would try to find a way to remain by your side as your mistress."

"And that's your idea of an optimal outcome here?" he shouted, his voice rising as he gaped in disbelief. "You, one of the highest-ranked noblewomen in Ferelden, who could have been the king's wife, settling instead for being the next king's mistress? That's all you think you're worthy of?"
Elissa's breath hitched on a sob. "I think that's all I can have if I want to keep your love," she said, turning from him.

Alistair ran his hand through his hair, making it stand up in sweat-soaked spikes. "We can't discuss this here," he muttered. "We have to be getting back to the others."

"You're right. We should go," she agreed with a sigh.

"I'm not done with this," he announced. "I refuse to accept that that's the best we can hope for."

Before she could answer, he turned and stalked away from her, leaving her to lumber unassisted in his wake back to the carriage. If Teagan or Eamon noticed that Alistair was silently furious or that Elissa's face was red and blotchy, they tactfully declined to comment. Still from Eamon's subsequent comments, it became apparent that he thought the cause for their moods was that Elissa had pushed Alistair to wed her and that Alistair had refused.

Finally, Alistair snapped at him to drop the marriage discussion. It did nothing to relieve Elissa's sorrow.

As they approached the village where they would seek accommodations for the night, clouds rolled in and thunder began to rumble in the distance. Despite her deathly fear of storms, she was too miserable to care. They were just disembarking from the carriages when the sky opened up and heavy drops of rain began to drive a rich, dusty smell up from the parched dirt at their feet.

Elissa hung her head in silent acceptance when Alistair demanded his own room, and retired alone to weep herself to sleep. But in the middle of the night as lightning streaked across the sky and rain pounded on the roof of the inn, he came rapping impatiently at her door.

She welcomed him with a glad cry, wrapping her arms around him, but he pushed her back, propelled her toward the bed, his mouth hard and frantic upon hers. He spread her across the bed and used his mouth, his fingers, his cock to bring her to a shattering climax. Her screams mingled with the crashing thunder and when she looked over her shoulder at him, the lightning illuminated his face, and there was a wild, desperate look in his eyes as he drove into her from behind. When he came, he gripped her hard enough to bruise and groaned a curse into her hair.

Elissa immediately curled up against him, content and exhausted. Sleep beckoned and she was just about to drift off when Alistair pushed himself off the bed and began dressing.

"What—?" she asked, muzzy and confused.

"Isn't this the way it's supposed to be with a mistress?" Alistair asked bitterly, and the slamming of the door behind him was lost in another clash of thunder.

Alone and wretched, she cried until her head ached and the storm had passed. Sleep did not return until the rays of another scorching sun were starting to lighten the sky.
The Oath

Chapter Summary

As Elissa and Alistair continue their estrangement, they undertake a rescue mission to the Arl of Denerim's estate and find an unexpected prisoner in Howe's dungeons.

Chapter Pairings: Rendon Howe/Fergus (implied)

Content Warning: Implied rape

As luck had it, the same gambit which had kept her out of the king's presence during the years it had taken her to blossom into womanhood had also kept her out of the company of most of the nobility except on a very infrequent basis. As a result, she'd never had the opportunity to attend any functions hosted by Arl Urien, whom gossip had it was desperately seeking a bride for his wild son, Bann Vaughn.

Which meant that Elissa was unfamiliar with the Arl of Denerim's estate. However, her lack of familiarity with the estate didn't seem to matter as they made their way through the corridors. It was almost as though she could feel Howe's venomous presence drawing her toward him like a lodestone. She carried what seemed to be a large sack of laundry, but within were her bow and daggers, and also the Cousland family sword. Ostensibly they were here to rescue Anora, but she would not leave without fulfilling her oath to her father.

Before this day was over, either Rendon Howe would be dead, or she would.

Shale, Sten, Oghren and Wynne had been left behind at Arl Eamon's estate, for there had simply been no way to disguise the first three, and there hadn't been enough disguises for Wynne to come along as well.

The rest of her companions wore Howe's livery. Unfortunately there had been no possible way Elissa could disguise herself in such a manner, and so instead she was dressed in peasant garb.

Zevran pawed at her, keeping up the illusion that their off-duty company of Howe's hired guards was looking for a secluded spot to sport with a pregnant laundry maid. Morrigan and Leliana kept their faceguards down to maintain the illusion. Alistair gritted his teeth and kept his silence, and Elissa feared that his attitude would raise questions with anyone who decided to pay attention. Under her breath she snapped at him to play along, and he responded by grabbing her backside crudely and pushing her along ahead of him.

"Better," she muttered, rubbing her bruised buttock.

He rarely said anything to her since that night he had come to her inn room and then left her so cruelly. Eamon seemed only too satisfied with their falling out, which only made it harder to bear. Still, Elissa forced herself to think upon the political equation with cold detachment, and it made Eamon's plotting easier to bear, for on most matters she actually agreed with him. And so she nodded and pretended it wasn't destroying her to talk about marrying Alistair off to another woman.

They nearly made it to the dungeons before their deception was discovered. Once they were done
dispatching the guardsman who had seen through their disguises, Elissa dropped her laundry sack and stripped off her rough peasant's gown. She wore her Dalish leather beneath and extracted from the sack the improved chainmail girdle she'd had Master Wade fashion for her once she had reached Denerim. Zevran and Leliana helped her belt it beneath her bosom and belly, and to secure the buckles that secured it across her back.

While the others stripped off the Howe armor, Elissa sheathed her daggers at her shoulders and slung the unfamiliar weight of the longsword over her back. Her bow she carried on her shoulder, and by the time she was armed, Alistair and the others were ready. She let out a piercing whistle and her mabari, who had been mingling with the other hounds in the kennels, came at a bound.

They set out in search of Howe.

Something about the knowledge that it was now Howe they sought, rather than Anora, wrought a change in Alistair. Of all their party, he understood best her need to avenge herself on Rendon Howe. He'd vowed to be by her side when she took that vengeance, and clearly he wasn't going to let their quarrel stand in the way of fulfilling that promise.

The knowledge that he was still sincere in holding to that oath sent a surge of love so exquisitely painful through her that Elissa thought she might weep. With the Landsmeet looming so near, she desperately wished she could call back what she said that day in the meadow, if only to claim for herself a few more days of happiness with Alistair before duty and necessity took him away from her.

She couldn't think about that now. Not with Howe so close.

Of all the things she might have expected to find in Howe's dungeon, a fellow Grey Warden was not on the list.

Nor, for that matter, was her brother.

She located him after she freed Bann Sighard's son. She didn't recognize him at first, a bloody, huddled, naked mass of a man in a filthy cell. She approached the curled-up form, certain from the odor that the man must already be dead, but then he turned his swollen face toward her and her scream echoed through the dungeon.

Beneath the bedraggled beard and bruises, it was unmistakably Fergus.

"Oh, sweet Andraste! Fergus!" she gasped, weeping as she clutched him to her.

"Elissa!" he sobbed, his arms weakly attempting to encircle her. "Dear Maker, I thought you were dead!"

She gave an hysterical laugh, wiping away her tears. "I could say the same!" she cried, her voice catching. "Can you walk? We need to get you out of here."

"Precisely how do you plan to do that with Howe's guards still all around the estate?" Morrigan asked calmly.

"Maker's ass, that's a good point. We can't very well go traipsing out of here with an abused prisoner without raising eyebrows, and we still have to deal with Howe and his mages and get the queen out." Elissa sighed. "We can't leave him here. Who knows if we'll be able to make it back to retrieve him? We have to get him on his feet, take him with us. Do what you can for him, Morrigan."

"Very well." The witch knelt beside Fergus. "Twill not be much. I've learned a great deal observing
Wynne, but my talents do not lie with healing."

"Understood," Elissa said grimly.

The worst of Fergus's wounds began to knit as Morrigan channelled healing energy into his body. His broken bones straightened, and the bruises and swelling began to diminish. Soon he was on his feet again, weak and unsteady, but mobile and able to hold a sword.

Morrigan appeared drained by the time she had finished, but they had little time to wait for her to recover her energy. Elissa retrieved a lyrium potion from her pack and Morrigan uncorked it and drank it. After a moment, some of Morrigan's color returned and she gave a brusque nod that they should proceed.

"Here," Elissa said, passing the Cousland sword to Fergus. He stared at it in wonder. "I retrieved it from the treasury before I fled Highever. I swore an oath to Mother and Father that Howe would die upon it."

"I'll be more than happy to help you keep that oath," Fergus said, grabbing a shield from the corpse of a dead guard. "Howe told me you had died the night Highever fell; I didn't know until just now that he had lied. Is it too much to hope that Oriana and Oren made it out as well?"

"I'm sorry, Fergus," Elissa said, blinking away tears. "Howe's men got to them first. Mother and Father made it as far as the servant's exit in the larder, but Father was wounded and despite my protests, Mother remained behind to delay pursuit and cover my retreat. How did you come to be here? I thought you were lost at Ostagar!"

A guardsman spotted them and let out a cry of alarm, but he was quickly and permanently silenced, and when it was done, Fergus responded, "I was injured, and spent some months among the Chasind recovering. But they were forced to migrate north ahead of the Darkspawn invasion, and as they traveled, I began hearing more rumors about what had happened at Highever. When I was well enough, I left the Chasind and returned to Highever to investigate, and Howe's men took me there."

"And now I have the other Cousland brat here in my dungeon as well," a self-satisfied voice sneered from behind them, and they whirled to see Howe come around a corner. Two mages flanked him, and behind them were two more guards. "The little spitfire. I'd accuse you of still playing the man, but well," he gave an unpleasant laugh, gesturing at her belly, "clearly you found time to act like a woman at some point. But then, I know better than anyone that a Cousland's best skill is spreading her legs. With your whore of a mother, how could there be any doubt?"

"Oh, come, Howe," Elissa said, affecting a bored tone. "Your petty jealousies are showing. Just because Mother wanted nothing to do with you...."

"You think you father was the only nobleman who frequented the brothel where he found that bitch?" Howe snarled. "That he took her out of there and raised her up to be Teyrna of Highever should have made the Couslands a laughingstock. But instead, he pimped her out so skillfully that he and his mongrel brood prospered beyond all belief, while I sank in obscurity. But now look at where we are. The Couslands are known across the realm as traitors, Orlesian-sympathizing conspirators. And now I have everything I ever dreamed. Even both of Bryce Cousland's whoring children for my stable."

"As I understand it, you couldn't get much use from a whore even if you had your hands on one," Elissa scoffed.

"Ask your brother how true that is," Howe retorted. "Mages, slut, are capable of wondrous feats.
Especially those not restricted by the mandates of the Circle. I've had your brave, strong brother on his hands and knees, bleeding and sobbing for mercy, just like my men had his bitch of a wife before she died. Just like I'll have you."

"You think you can remind me of the way your men brutalized Oriana and just walk away unscathed?" Elissa asked incredulously. "Tell me, was she raped with a sword because your pathetic thugs can't stand to attention any better than you can without a mage's help?"

Fergus gasped in horror, and Elissa glanced over to see him grip the Cousland sword in rage. More for his benefit than Howe's, she continued recklessly, "I swore to my father that the last thing you'd feel was the Cousland sword raping you, but I think I'll let my brother have the honor of fulfilling that vow."

"Oh, is this where I'm supposed to mourn the monster I've created?" Howe jeered. "Or shall I show you how it's done? Shall I tell you about your mother's last moments? How she groveled at my feet, how I slit her throat while she sucked my prick? The last thing your father ever saw was my spunk on her bloody face."

"Oh, Howe," Elissa sighed with a bitter smile. "Your wit truly is as limp as your cock, if you think that would convince me. Whatever her origins, my mother never groveled a day in her life and it would take a far better man that you to change that. And I'm no monster. Merely a woman of my word. You will die here, today."

"And there it is," Howe said softly, almost lovingly. "That look with which every Cousland has ever denied me the glory and respect that is my due. Bryce would be proud. But it only fuels my hunger to see you broken and at my mercy before you die."

Howe charged them with a scream of rage and his guards quickly joined the fray. It was easy to forget, wizened and corrupt as he was, that Howe was a veteran of the Orlesian occupation and a skilled fighter. But he was old, and her company much more skilled than his cheaply-trained guards. Elissa's arrow took one of the mages in the chest and he went down with a scream. Morrigan froze the other while Zevran spun a whirling dance of death in the midst of the guards and Leliana's bowstring twanged.

The second mage shattered when Alistair's shield slammed against him. One of the guards fell with blood fountaining from his throat, coating her mabari. Leliana's arrow blossomed from the throat of the other guard, and then there was only Howe, falling back before Fergus and Alistair's combined rage, until they had him on his knees beside one of the blood-streaked tables where his torturers had worked.

"Bend him over the table," she instructed Zevran and Alistair. Zevran looked maliciously gleeful and Alistair grim and determined.

"Are you sure this is the way you want to take your revenge?" he asked, pinning Howe by the shoulders to the table.

"What are you saying?" she asked, her voice cold and distant. She heard Howe's yells and struggles as though as though across a great chasm, rather than a mere foot away.

"You told him you're no monster. Don't become one for his sake."

"She doesn't need to," Fergus stated hollowly, "because I already have."

Howe's scream was inhuman as Fergus thrust the Cousland sword into him. Elissa had thought he
would die quickly, but instead he shrieked and thrashed and retched. Nauseated, Elissa shuddered and drew her dagger quickly across his throat mid-wail. Howe gurgled a final time and then he was still.

The stunned silence that followed was punctuated by Fergus's soft sobs. Elissa drew him into her arms and held him as she would a child, sinking to her knees with him, rocking him with his head upon her breast as she murmured comforting words of love and assurance.

"This is all very touching," Morrigan said impatiently, "but we must move on."

"It would behoove you someday to develop something resembling a feeling," Elissa snapped at her, but Fergus cut her off.

"No, pup, she's right," he said, wiping his eyes. "We need to get out of here."

This time it was he who aided Elissa to her feet, and as she rose, his hands touched her belly. "You'll need to tell me how all this came about," he said with the first twinkle of humor she'd seen in his eyes since they'd discovered him. Somewhere beneath the pain and bitterness, her gregarious brother still lingered. "You look like you could whelp any day, pup!"

"I've a few weeks more," Elissa answered dryly, "though only a few. I shall tell you all about it when we get back to Arl Eamon's estate. And once you're well again and the Landsmeet has been dealt with, we'll turn our attention to clearing Howe's scum out of the our estate here in Denerim and go home."

She would never know what drew her eyes to Alistair at that moment, but when her gaze locked with his, he looked stricken. He didn't need to speak to tell her that her home could be with him in the palace if only she dared to fight for it.

Fergus saw the silent exchange and looked questioningly at Elissa for a moment before extending his hand to Alistair. "Fergus Cousland," he introduced himself. "And you are—?


"A Grey Warden?" Fergus asked wonderingly. "Really, pup?"

"A very great deal has happened, Fergus," she said softly. "But this is Alistair Theirin, King Maric's illegitimate son. We're going to topple 'Regent' Loghain."

"Thank the Maker," Fergus muttered. "Howe bragged enough to give me the distinct impression that Loghain was behind his assault on Highever."

Elissa nodded. "I had assumed as much. All that talk about the Couslands being Orlesian conspirators was straight out of Loghain's paranoid delusions. Father was the only nobleman in Ferelden equal to Loghain's rank and thus a threat to his schemes. Howe didn't care about the politics, he just needed the excuse and someone more powerful than he to shield him from the repercussions."

"So if you don't mind my asking," Alistair inquired as they began to make their way out of the dungeons, setting free the remaining prisoners as they went, "what exactly were your parents doing on those trips to Orlais?"

Fergus and Elissa shared a glance, and Elissa's lips twitched into a smile. "Being the connoisseurs of pleasure that they were, Father and Mother had an extensive collection of exotic objets d'amour crafted by some of the finest artisans in Orlais. It was one of their few extravagances. They
occasionally traveled to commission new pieces from Orlesian goldsmiths and jewelers, as well as to serve as diplomatic envoys on behalf of the king."

Alistair blushed. "I might have known," he murmured, shaking his head.

Since she had deliberately kept away from the royal court, Elissa had never come to be very familiar with the queen. She had expected her first glimpse of Anora in years to be fraught with hostility and antagonism. This was, after all, the woman whose husband and crown Elissa had plotted to steal. But unless her father had told her his suspicions about Elissa, Anora was unaware of all that, and so she was merely grateful for their efforts to rescue her. At least, Elissa assumed there lurked gratitude under that cold, condescending exterior.

"You're the Warden everyone is talking about?" she asked in some astonishment, taking in Elissa's belly.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Elissa, unable to curtsy, gave her a deferential bow. After all, it wouldn't do to antagonize someone upon whose goodwill they might end up relying.

Something bitter crossed Anora's face as she beheld Elissa's obvious good health. "I simply must have a word with my midwives about this," she muttered.

Anora had disguised herself in armor to pass Howe's guards unmolested, but no sooner had they retrieved her and begun to make their way out of the estate then they found themselves confronted by a large company of troops in armor bearing Loghain's device. When Elissa attempted to explain they were rescuing the queen, Anora and her maidservant were nowhere to be found. She cursed Eamon for a fool for believing this had not been a trap from the very beginning.

The knight who lead the company was a woman Elissa recognized from Ostagar, Ser Cauthrien. Elissa attempted to reason with her, but there was no hope. There were simply too many of them; well-armed and well-trained, unlike Howe's hired goons. Fergus was still injured and needed Wynne's care. They could accomplish nothing by fighting other than to die now.

Bleakly, Elissa and Alistair surrendered.
Elissa attempted to find some comfort on the filthy blanket on the floor of her cell, but her skin was crawling. Maker only knew what sort of vermin were infesting the blanket and the straw beneath. The more she thought about it, the more she was certain she could feel them crawling upon her, and she knew if she didn't find something else to focus her attention upon, she'd soon be scratching her skin off.

Luckily it was summertime, or the dungeon cell would certainly have been freezing. As it was, she and Alistair were mourning the loss of their weapons far more than the armor the prison guards had stripped from them. The blazing heat of summer--just days ago such an unbearable burden--had become an unexpected blessing, however; tempered by the damp, cool air of the dungeon, they could be nude in relative comfort.

Her eyes traveled to Alistair, who was pacing the cell anxiously, magnificent in his nudity even now. Elissa thought with a wry twitch of amusement that this particular scenario was certain to fuel her more perverse fantasies for some time to come.

"You really ought to rest while you can," she said, forcing her voice to remain calm.

"Rest?" Alistair looked at her incredulously. "You've got to be joking. Do you hear what's going on out there? Those are screams. Someone is being tortured."

"Yes, that's often what happens in prisons," Elissa said patiently.

"This is the royal prison!" he protested. "Do you think Cailan would have sanctioned such treatment of prisoners?"

"I sincerely doubt Cailan ever troubled himself to consider what might be done with prisoners in this or any other prison in his realm," she replied dryly. "This is where his master of spies—whom, I might add, answered to Loghain as general of the royal army—has brought political prisoners for decades. The people incarcerated here are accused of spying, conspiracy, and treason. Of course they're tortured."

"Are we next?" he asked tightly.

She nodded with a composure she didn't feel. "It's possible. We may be handled slightly differently. Our capture was not without witnesses. By now, Arl Eamon knows Loghain has us. He'll have a great deal of explaining to do to the Landsmeet if Eamon and Fergus demand he produce us and he fails to do so with both of us in relatively good health."

"Then what are we going to do?" Alistair asked, turning a desperate circle in the middle of the cell as
though searching for some weakness or route of escape he hadn't seen before.

"Well, I could attempt to seduce the guard into freeing us," she answered, irony heavy in her voice as she rubbed her abdomen where it felt her child was doing his level best to turn a cartwheel, making her wince in discomfort. "But I'm afraid my appeal isn't what it once was. I suppose we could hope he shares your predilection for pregnant bellies. Or perhaps you could try to seduce him."

Alistair gave her a look and she shrugged nonchalantly. "It was just a suggestion."

"Any other suggestions?"

"I'm in no shape to fight our way out," she said regretfully. "The assault on Howe's estate was more taxing than I had assumed it would be. So we must wait. Sooner or later, either our people are going to rescue us, or Eamon is going to demand our release. We simply need to hold out until that happens."

"Right," Alistair dropped onto his pallet of straw with a heavy sigh. "I can do that."

"The point of torture is to get the subject to yield something they don't wish to give up. The name of a contact, a bit of intelligence, a confession of wrongdoing. Knowing Loghain, he's likely going to want us to confess to being in league with the Orlesians. We've done nothing wrong, so we have nothing to confess. Unfortunately, that could make things worse for us, since protestations of innocence rarely do anything but convince one's tormentors to try harder, which is why torture is a singularly ineffective means of acquiring reliable intelligence."

Elissa drew a deep breath. "We need to make sure to avoid saying anything that could be used to incriminate us before the Landsmeet. Beyond that, we simply tell the truth and keep telling it as long as we have breath in our bodies. Don't let them force you to lie and incriminate yourself falsely."

"Very wise words," Loghain's deep, strangely sensual voice echoed through the damp stone chamber as a heavy steel door with a grill for a window clanged upon and he entered, his bulk nearly filling the entire portal. "Though based on idiotic suppositions. I don't need a confession of collusion with the Orlesians. After Ostagar, people will believe just about anything of the Grey Wardens, especially when I tell them how you murdered the Arl of Denerim in his own estate and kidnapped my daughter."

Kidnapped? Elissa stared at Loghain where he stood with his knight—Ser Cauthrien, she remembered—positioning herself near the door behind him.

Anora hadn't returned to him. It hadn't been a trap after all.

Interesting.

"No, what I'm after is somewhat different," he announced with a self-satisfied smile, gesturing his guards forward. "Take her. Leave him."

The door opened and Alistair charged the guards as they entered, only to be knocked back by one gauntleted fist to the gut, leaving him without even sufficient breath to protest as they advanced on Elissa. "Don't injure him!" Loghain snapped.

Elissa did not struggle as they grabbed her arms and dragged her forward. She would do nothing that would force them to be any more brutal than they were already set on being and endanger her child. Their steel-covered hands bruised and pinched her arms, but still she did not struggle.

"Look how Maric's bastard bristles. So very protective," Loghain observed. "And we haven't even
Something cold settled in her chest. He intended to use her suffering against Alistair. Andraste's mercy, Loghain could not possibly have chosen his tactic better, for Elissa knew without a doubt that even estranged as they were, Alistair would not sit by if he could stop her from being tormented.

"It's not surprising to see yet another of Maric's sons dancing to your tune after your performance at Ostagar," Loghain smirked. "But does he realize just what a depraved whore you truly are? I wonder, does he think it's his bastard you carry? Did you manage to convince him of that? You've already spread your legs for Cailan and Duncan and Maker only knows who else. So, why not me as well?"

He gave her a calculating look. "I'll make you a very simple offer. Beg me to fuck you, so that Maric's whelp can see just how eager a slut you are. You'll enjoy having an actual man between your thighs for once; I'll make sure of it. Beg me to fuck you, and you both may walk out of here today."

Elissa felt ill as she realized just how neatly Loghain had laid his trap. After his appearance at Arl Eamon's estate, Loghain knew quite well that Alistair despised him. There was no one Alistair hated more. If he saw Elissa fuck the man who had killed Duncan—worse, if he saw her take pleasure in it—Alistair would never forgive her. He'd never love her again, but moreover he'd never again be led by her advice, never again cooperate with her leadership. Their united efforts to save Ferelden from the Blight would be shattered.

Elissa closed her eyes, trying to hide her despair. Such an easy concession to make, if only she wanted to sacrifice everything that meant anything to her.

She said nothing.

"No?" Loghain's smooth voice raised in amused disbelief. "It's a bit late to play the virgin, don't you think?" The steel of his gauntlet scraped painfully as his finger thrust roughly into her cunt, and when he withdrew it, it was wet and shining with evidence of her arousal.

"Interesting," he sneered, holding it out to display it for Alistair before sucking it clean. "Well, perhaps some old acquaintances might help convince you," he said casually.

The guards who were not holding her removed their helmets, and Elissa winced as she recognized their faces. They were the men from Lothering, all but the commander she had slain in the Pearl.

"I see you recognize my men," Loghain said, sounding pleased. "I hear you gave quite the performance in Lothering. Maybe Maric's bastard would like to see the encore. Your friends here think they have a score to settle; I wouldn't want to disappoint them."

He turned his back and strode from the chamber. "Do nothing that will injure her, and do not rape her," he barked the command over his shoulder as Ser Cauthrien followed him out. "Other than that, she's yours."

Loghain's soldiers were only too eager to display their appreciation for the way she had humiliated them in Lothering. Particularly brutish was the one with the small cock who had beaten her for laughing at him. He had to be pulled off of her by his fellows when it looked as if he might step beyond Loghain's mandate and begin to beat her in earnest rather than just handling her roughly.

The lieutenant, who had never spoken a word as he raped her jointly with his commander, turned out to actually be an intelligent and well-spoken man. He possessed the subtlety and quickness of wit to grasp Loghain's aims. He leaned casually against the wall just outside of Alistair's reach and regaled Alistair with lurid tales of what had passed in that inn room in Lothering.
"I've never seen a slut as eager for cock as that one," he narrated conversationally while the one with the small prick grabbed her by the hair and ground his cock against her face. The lieutenant paused in his tale to bark at him to mind Loghain's orders not to rape her.

"That includes her mouth!" he snapped before continuing his tale with an ugly laugh. "So there Barty and I were, fucking her front and back. She's got spunk pouring out of every hole and she's still coming like it's the best lay she's had in her life."

Fingers insinuated themselves rudely between her buttocks, in the cleft of her cunt. There was nothing of pleasure in it; the ecstasy of rage and despair that had fueled her perverse responses that day in Lothering was nowhere to be found. She could find no way to gain the upper hand, seize control, turn their brutality to her favor. Worse, she could not help but feel the jolt when they accidentally brushed her clitoris and the fear that Alistair would see it and mistake it for pleasure only heightened her mortification.

When their fingers came away slick with moisture her body insisted on producing despite her horror and outrage, they declared her wetter than Andraste's tears for Alistair's benefit. They placed wagers on which one of them had planted the babe in her belly. They postulated that she was hot for a repeat performance, and wondered if she would hold out long enough for Loghain to lift his mandate against raping her.

"Maybe we should show the bastard prince how it's done," one of the soldiers jeered. He grabbed Elissa by the hips and began mimicking fucking her in the ass with rough thrusts of his cock against the cleft of her buttocks. The meagerly-endowed one who had been grinding himself against her face began to masturbate furiously, and soon his seed sprayed hot and foul against her face.

When his lieutenant would have scolded him, he protested, "The regent didn't say we couldn't wank on her!" The others agreed and soon that became the game, egged on by Alistair's shouts of protest. They took turns holding her there on her knees, and soon she had their seed blurring her vision, caught in her hair, dripping down her breasts. Elissa made no effort to check her tears of humiliation; they could not be detected in the mess on her face anyway, so what was the use?

The lieutenant approached with a malicious smile, his fist pumping vigorously. Just as he appeared to be ready to reach his climax, one of his hands shot out and grabbed Elissa's nose, cutting off her air until she was forced to open her mouth to gasp for breath. His seed was bitter as it sprayed on her tongue, and he clamped his hand over her mouth and continued to hold her nose until she was forced to swallow.

Sickened with humiliation, Elissa sank to the floor when they released her. She curled into a miserable ball on the bare stone, making no effort to fend off the cruel pinches and groping of their hands. Only when the vicious one with the small cock began to piss on her did she attempt to shield her face. Her hands were wrenched behind her back, then, and soon she was drenched and reeking of their urine.

Declaring her too filthy for their sport, they tossed her roughly back into the cell, where she immediately curled upon her pallet of straw, never looking at Alistair.

"Thanks for the good time, my lady," the lieutenant mocked, and the soldiers left, the heavy metal door clanging shut behind them.

"Elissa...." Alistair crawled to her, reaching for her, his voice choked with tears.

"Don't touch me," she whimpered, shrinking from his outstretched hand. With her next words, her voice hitched on a sob. "Please, just... leave me alone."
Alistair resumed his pacing while she lay there, aching from the uncomfortable position but unable to unfurl her body enough to seek something that would hurt less. She wanted to make herself small and invisible, wanted to hide the filth that covered her from Alistair's eyes.

Not after Lothering, not even after the abominations in the Circle Tower, had she ever felt so humiliated and violated and utterly depraved. The lieutenant had not said a single untrue word to Alistair. She had found pleasure in their abuse that day, had reveled in her agony and degradation. And now Alistair had seen and heard all that was done to her and knew she had enjoyed it.

How could he ever bear to look at her again?

For the first time in her life, she had no defense against shame. It ripped at her, flogged her with indictments of her own depravity and perversion. Of course she was unfit to be Alistair's wife, much less his queen. Now he would see that as well.

Somehow, miraculously, she slept, with Alistair sitting watchfully nearby, within reach but honoring her request not to be touched. When the metal door opened again, she awoke with a start and the first thing she saw was Alistair's face, before she remembered not to look at him. She had expected to see disgust in his gaze, but instead there was just a haggard concern that made his eyes seem hollow and his cheeks gaunt.

"Are you all right?" he asked tenderly before she could look away. That loving solicitude almost undid her.

"No," Elissa muttered, ripping her gaze away from his and pushing herself to her feet to face Ser Cauthrien as she came through the door. As she moved, she became aware of just how foul she smelled, just how filthy she was covered with dried spunk and piss.

She looked squarely at the other woman, lifting her chin, trying not to let her shame show. "Please," she asked calmly, "may I have some water to bathe?"

The knight raised a hand to her face to ward off the odor before she could check her reaction. Her jaw tightened and her eyes hardened. She glanced at Elissa's swollen belly at the very moment the babe within moved, the visible bulge of an elbow or a foot rising and sliding under her skin. Cauthrien shuddered, though whether in sympathy or revulsion Elissa couldn't be certain.

The knight seemed torn with indecision for a moment, and then she snapped at one of the guards who had accompanied her, "Bring a bucket of water and a bar of soap. Now."

The bucket was produced forthwith, and Elissa rubbed the harsh lye soap vigorously over her face and skin, ignoring the way it burned where she had been scraped by the stone floor, trying to stifle her sobs as she did so. She splashed enough water in her hair to damp it and scrubbed the soap into it, then dumped the bucket over her head and let the water sluice down her bare body, rinsing away the soap and the filth it carried with it.

When she was as clean as she was going to be under the circumstances, Ser Cauthrien gestured the guards into the cell. "Take her. Put her in the manacles like the regent instructed."

Elissa was again roughly manhandled out of the cell while one of the guards held Alistair at swordpoint to prevent him from interfering. Her arms were hauled up over her head and her wrists secured in heavy steel cuffs suspended by a chain from the ceiling. The chain was winched upward until she was stretched almost as far as she could go without actually being lifted off her feet.

The guards left them, and after a moment of staring at Elissa with an unreadable expression,
Cauthrien followed.

The strain on her back was immediate and agonizing, as she could no longer shift her weight to relieve the addition burden the bulk of her belly placed upon her spine. The torment in her shoulders took a bit longer to blossom, but soon enough her back and shoulders were hurting unbearably.

Even more alarmingly, she could feel a periodic tightening in her belly that concerned her greatly. Nothing strong enough to be called labor, but a ripple of tension that hinted at what might come with contractions. Fear clutched at her heart, for she knew she absolutely could not have her child in this place. If the waves of tension became stronger, she would give in to Loghain's demands rather than take the risk.

Her shoulders burned as her muscles screamed in protest, but it was the agony in her back that soon had her biting her lip to stifle her whimpers. Soon that proved insufficient and she moaned, beyond possibility of suppressing the sound. Her entire body quaked with the unending strain. Tears flowed down her face as she whimpered and tried in vain to shift her weight, tried to find some relief.

She didn't know how long she was bound there; certainly it seemed like an eternity but she lost all perception of time in her suffering. Minutes felt like hours. Once she began weeping and moaning softly, Alistair began yelling for the guards, cursing them and screaming for someone to come release her. His voice grew distant and indistinct as she began to drift, as her mind relinquished its hold on her body and sought someplace less fraught with misery.

It was another voice altogether that drew her back into herself.

"Quit your whining, boy," Loghain's smooth voice filled the room as the heavy iron door opened. He was still in his armor, but he had removed his gauntlets. As before, Ser Cauthrien entered at his heels and took up station by the portal. "I can hear your complaining all the way over at the palace. Of course, perhaps the nobles of Ferelden should hear just what a sniveling whelp Maric's bastard is."

"Let her down, you Maker-forsaken whoreson," Alistair spat. "You want me, come and get me! Don't use her to do it."

"Don't make me come in there and teach you manners, boy," Loghain growled. "You're the only whoreson here. Well, you and this bastard brat."

Loghain's rough hand stroked over Elissa's belly in a gentle, sensual caress. Alistair made the mistake of snarling a jealous protest and, spying weakness, Loghain seized his opportunity. He pressed his veridium-clad form close to Elissa's back and embraced her from behind, running his hands over the mound of her abdomen as though laying claim to it, his huge hands nearly covering it entirely.

Alistair practically howled in rage.

"Get your hands off her!"

"Oh, I'll have far more than my hands on her before I'm done, boy," Loghain boasted. "And she'll love every minute of it. Won't you, little whore?"

One of Loghain's hands cupped her breast while the other drove down between her legs, caressing her skillfully. Not even the misery in her back and shoulders could completely dampen the unwilling pleasure of that touch. Elissa whimpered in protest.

Her moan of denial, of both the pleasure and his question, was lost in Alistair's shouts and curses.
"No?" Loghain asked in disbelief. "Shall I show you how easy it will be?"

Loghain dragged his hands across Elissa's skin as he stepped around her and knelt before her. His fingers gripped her hips and pulled her cunt toward him, and his tongue unerringly parted her folds and found her nub.

Elissa bit her lip to stifle moans of an entirely different sort as the pain in her back began to be overridden by the sensation of his tongue stroking her with consummate skill toward climax. She wouldn't give him that, wouldn't let herself prove him right. She wouldn't allow Alistair—shouting like a madman—see her receive pleasure at this man's hands.

He had her trembling on the brink of release, on the verge of losing her ability to suppress her response, when Loghain pulled away, his face shining with her fluids.

"Beg me to fuck you, little whore," he taunted enticingly. "Beg me, and this will all be over."

Elissa shook her head violently. "I won't!" she sobbed, the ache of unfulfilled arousal nearly as painful as the agony in her back.

"You will," Loghain said with complete assurance, rising. He was calm and casual as he released her wrists from the manacles. Elissa staggered against him before she could gain her balance and he caught her, pulled her in close, seized upon the opportunity to grope her backside. "You see? Such an eager slut! Why not spare us all this pretense and admit you'll gladly take any cock? Beg me. It will spare you much."

She shook her head again, struggling weakly to push herself away from the cold metal of his armor. Her only refuge now was silence. If she didn't open her mouth, the chances that the words he was demanding from her would spill forth were considerably diminished. If she could keep silent, perhaps she could hold out until they were rescued or freed.

Loghain snorted in disgust at her obstinacy. He summoned his guards and they seized Elissa by her arms and dragged her toward a low-backed wooden chair. It looked alarmingly like a birthing stool, a comparison that raised no small amount of alarm in her heart, tempting her to cry out in protest despite her determination to remain silent. It had no seat to speak of except for planks upon which her thighs rested, spread wide apart. Leather cuffs immobilized her arms and straps buckled around her thighs, spreading her obscenely and trapping her there.

Loghain's fingers expertly found her nub and slid over it, again and again. She was slick with the desire his mouth had evoked, and once more she found herself biting her lip to resist surrendering to pleasure she desperately didn't want. Her lip split open and began to bleed, and still he caressed her, bringing her ever closer to unwilling fulfillment and once again abandoning her as she hovered on the edge of release.

"Beg me, and you can come right now. You needn't suffer any more."

A tear squeezed from her eye and blood trickled down her chin as she shook her head in emphatic refusal.

"Idiot slut," he sighed and snapped his fingers.

One of the guards handed Loghain a small bundle rolled in black silk, and Loghain spread it open upon the table nearby to reveal several tiny leather sheaths. He lifted one and withdrew from it a gleaming silver spike, pointed at both ends. It was perhaps two or three times the bore of a sewing needle, or half as thick as a nail; thin but still substantial enough to appear menacing.
Loghain knelt between her thighs with a clanging of his armor. He caught her breast up in his hand and bent his head, drawing her nipple into his mouth and working it to a hard peak with expert suction and strokes of his tongue. The act raised a new chorus of shouts and protestations from Alistair.

When he drew back, her nipple shone with his saliva. "Beg me to fuck you," he murmured, scraping his teeth gently along the erect peak.

Staring down, knowing she should close her eyes but transfixed in spite of herself, Elissa said nothing. Her mouth opened in a wordless scream and her eyes squeezed shut in pain as he put the spike to her flesh and very slowly began to push it through the base of her nipple, just before it widened into her areola.

The searing pain grew until she felt the spike pass through her flesh, becoming unendurable as it began to push out the other side of her nipple. Once it was clear, however, there was relief, the agony replaced by a hot, throbbing ache. Unable to resist the impulse, she looked down to see the gleaming pointed ends of the spike standing out from either side of her nipple, the wound nearly bloodless. The sight made her feel ill.

She was shaking and sweating from the shock of the initial pain, but now that the spike had passed through, it was bearable. It hurt, but if she could bear nipple clamps, she could bear this.

Without repeating his entreaty that she could end this by begging him, Loghain roughly pinched her other nipple into a hard peak and repeated the process, and Andraste's mercy, it seemed to take even longer for the pointed end to emerge out the other side, and then both nipples throbbed and ached and burned in unison, the silver shining against her abnormally dark areolas.

Almost playfully, Loghain hooked his fingers behind a spike, on either side of her nipple, and gave it a gentle tug. Pain blossomed and spread through her breast and Elissa moaned and thrashed against the leather straps binding her to the chair. The fingers of his opposite hand thrust with no ceremony whatsoever into her cunt. She was mortified to see them come away again absolutely dripping with her arousal. In other circumstances, this might have been a marvelous game, but now it was simply humiliating to see her body's uncontrollable preferences used to shame her.

"Why bother denying it, slut?" Loghain purred, smearing her fluids across her belly. "This is what you do, isn't it? Howe told me all about your family long before you murdered him. How your father found your mother in a whorehouse and pimped her out for political favors and profitable trade contracts. How he raised his children to do the same, a new generation of Cousland whores, selling themselves for an advantageous land deal or alliance. You'll suck anyone's cock, bend over and let yourself be fucked in the ass no matter how repulsive the man is, if the price is right. You'd even spread your thighs to convince your king to betray your nation to the Orlesians."

As he spoke, calmly, seductively, he tugged on the spikes, harder and harder, until the whole weight of her breasts was suspended by those needles through her nipples. She cried out in pain. It hurt. Maker, it hurt! But in this, at least, Elissa thought she might be able to defeat him, for she was no stranger to this variety of pain. She knew she could endure it, could overcome it.

She couldn't quite manage it, however. Her attempts to find that floating place, that place where she stopped fighting the pain and rode it instead, were disrupted by Loghain's shaming taunts and the shouted imprecations Alistair heaped on Loghain's head.

"Why not simply admit what you are?" Loghain asked, his voice almost tender. "Surely you've sucked far more repulsive cocks than mine, many times over. So, simply beg me to fuck you like the whore you are, and all this will be finished. You'll be back at Eamon's estate with your ridiculous
band of mongrels and misfits before supper."

Though she cried out in pain at the burning ache in her pierced and abused nipples, she did not give him the words he demanded, and so he stood and moved away from her. "Summon the mage," he snapped at his guards.

Soon a man in Tevinter-style robes appeared, and Elissa's heart sank, for it was clear this was no Circle mage, bound by the Chantry's rules regulating the use of magic. Elissa feared he might be another of Loghain's blood mages, intent on seizing control of her mind and forcing her to give Loghain the consent he required. Instead, he simply knelt before her. She still did not grasp his purpose until she heard the crackle of electricity. She barely had time to draw in her breath in alarm before his fingers grasped both ends of one of the silver spikes, and then she screamed.

The pain that sizzled through her nipple was like nothing she could have imagined; it felt as though her breast was being burned to cinders. Alistair's shouting renewed and redoubled as it continued, and her own wails were a shrill, constant chorus, punctuated only by sobs and pleas to the Maker. The mage paused only long enough to change sides, and then the other nipple received the same torment.

Elissa arched and writhed, struggled and screamed in breathless agony. When it finally ended, she sagged against her bonds, unable even to hold herself upright. She would have fallen off the stool had she not been strapped to it. Her nipples sang a fiery chant of lingering pain, which was not aided by Loghain, reaching down over her shoulders to lift her breasts and squeeze them.

"Do you know why he grabs both ends of the spike, little whore?" he said softly. "Because if he didn't, the power he's channeling would travel through your body seeking another outlet. It would pass through the bastard in your belly on its way to the ground beneath your feet, stopping its heart. Who knows? It might even be a merciful fate for the brat. As for you, if the mage were to channel through both spikes at once, with one in each hand, the power would pass directly through your own heart, killing you instantly."

Alistair's pleas and curses were a distant din in the pain and fear humming through her body. She licked lips that were dry and cracked and bleeding, and whispered, "Please...."

"Please what? Make it good, little whore. Tell me what I want to hear."

"...Please don't harm my babe," she sobbed.

"Those were the wrong words," Loghain said tightly, as though annoyed by her refusal to capitulate.

Power sizzled from the mage's fingertips and again he grabbed one of the spikes in the fingers of both hands. Elissa's wails echoed off the stone of the walls. First one breast, then the other, then back again. On it went, with little reprieve between, until Elissa barely had breath left to scream.

The mage was looking drained, even though she knew the power he was channeling was minor, by the time Loghain finally commanded him to stop. The regent stood there staring at Elissa impassively, his arms crossed forbiddingly before him, as she whimpered and shuddered with the echoes of pain still throbbing through her nipples. Still, there was something in his eyes as he watched her, a glow of something she might have called respect, or admiration, had she been able to conceive of anything other than her own suffering.

As the pain began to recede, ever so slightly, she became aware of pressure in her bladder and knew she needed a pot. But she could not bring herself to ask for such a thing, not before all these people. If she opened her mouth to speak, to make any request, ask for any concession, no matter how
insignificant, she was afraid of what might come spilling out. She felt like she was on the edge of a
 treacherous cliff; the smallest misstep would have her tumbling over and gratefully yielding to
 Loghain anything he demanded.

When she continued her silence, Loghain sighed and took up another leather-encased spike from the
 table and approached, kneeling between her thighs once more and slowly drew the spike from its
 sheath.

"Do you want to guess where this one will go?" he asked tauntingly. At the far edge of her
 consciousness she heard Alistair growl and rattle the bars of his cell, apparently having given up on
 his futile shouting, but it no longer seemed to matter. She was fighting to remember why it seemed
 important not to give in to Loghain's demands, but the reason eluded her and only sheer stubbornness
 kept her silent.

Loghain ducked down and his tongue slid slowly, sensually up her dripping cleft and as she seized in
 pleasure, her head snapping back on her neck, the reason came back to her. She felt Alistair's
 hopeless eyes on her and knew he recognized her response, for he had wrung it from her many times
 of the last months, taking her to that knife's-edge where pleasure was so intense it was nearly pain. A
 tear spilled down her cheek as she realized she had failed to check her reaction before he could see it.

She wanted to beg his forgiveness, plead for his understanding, but she dared not speak, even now.

She was slipping, losing her resolve, and she knew with agonizing certainty that sooner or later,
 Loghain was going to win. He would win because he was correct in all he had said. She was a
 whore, and Alistair would know her for one before it was all over.

Loghain's fingers seized her, just above her clitoris, pulling out the thin, fragile skin there, and she
 felt the sharp poke of the spike on that skin. He didn't even give her an opportunity to yield, not that
 she could have found the words in the surge of terror that choked her. Instead, he simply drove the
 spike through her skin, and her eyes widened in amazement when the excruciating pain she'd barely
 had a chance to brace herself for did not materialize. A vicious pinch, quickly gone, and then only a
 lingering, stinging heat. Nothing more.

She nearly wept with relief, but when Loghain wriggled the spike, she felt the diabolical design of its
 placement, for the smooth side of it rested directly upon her nub. Any movement sent jabs of
 pleasure so intense they were nearly unbearable through her. Elissa groaned, for it was too much, the
 stimulation painfully acute, and the tension of arousal throughout her lower body was not helping the
 throbbing of her bladder.

"Say it." Loghain's voice was a sensual purr, like velvet stroking across her frayed nerves. "Tell me
 what a whore you are. Tell me how badly you want me to fuck you. Beg for it."

She thrashed her head desperately in denial, her face locked in a rictus of agonized pleasure. Loghain
 quickly pushed himself away from her and she barely heard the sizzle of power before the mage had
 seized the ends of this new spike and suddenly the world around her exploded in blinding light and a
 cacophony of sound and she was coming, coming, wave after wave of terrible, excruciating pleasure
 dragging her under, wrenching screams from her abused throat.

The pleasure ended almost as abruptly as it had begun, leaving her limp and shaking violently,
 sobbing with relief. The mage stepped away from her quickly, disgust on his face as he looked down
 at his wet robes, and only then was Elissa aware that somewhere along the way she had lost control
 of her bladder.

The humiliation burned, setting her face aflame, and Loghain, Maker curse him, looked like he was
on the verge of laughter, his hand covering his mouth while his eyes twinkled.

Elissa prayed for death to carry her off to the Fade, away from her mortification.

"Clean her up," Loghain ordered the guards, striding from the room.

A bucket of water was produced and splashed unceremoniously upon her obscenely displayed sex. She half-thought they might release her and dump her back in the cell with Alistair, but she was left bound to the strange chair. It was uncomfortable, but not the agony that having her arms shackled above her head had been.

"Are you all right?" Alistair asked wretchedly when they were alone once more.

"I'm fine," she sighed tiredly, too relieved at the reprieve to really feel the intense shame with which she knew she must face him. She didn't have the endurance for an emotional scene. She simply wanted to rest.

"It doesn't matter what they do," she mustered the energy to say. "Don't give them anything."

"Why are you doing this?" Alistair demanded, sounding angry and forlorn all at once.

Elissa looked at him in disbelief, and blast him, the pain on his face made her want to weep and she didn't have the tears left for his suffering as well.

She closed her eyes and looked away. "Could you ever bring yourself to look at me again, touch me again, listen to me again, if you saw me fuck Loghain?" she asked, her voice hollow and uninterested.

"I—" Alistair's voice trailed away, and he didn't attempt to answer. Thank the Maker for that, at least. He wouldn't tell her a comforting lie to tempt her into yielding.

"He's trying to break us," Alistair said at last. "Weaken us before the Landsmeet."

"Yes," she agreed, and in that word there was a spark of pride. How far he had come, to be able to grasp that concept, however belatedly.

Maker, she loved him.

Vaguely she wondered if he wasn't aroused by his own jealousy, as he had been in the past, but she decided it didn't matter. If he found pleasure in watching her give in to Loghain, it would only make him hate her more. She knew a moment of despair; it was hopeless. Sooner or later, she would submit, and thereafter she and Alistair would be irreparably broken.

Loghain would win.

She felt herself growing heavy and drowsy, almost asleep, when a sudden slam jerked her awake. "Damn you, Loghain!" Alistair screamed, banging his fists on the bars of his cell. His voice echoed off the stone walls, but no response from outside the cell came. Alistair sank miserably to the stone floor, laying his head upon his knees, and Elissa closed her eyes again.

She dozed, though she wasn't certain for how long. Long enough for the throbbing of the spikes through her nipples to settle into a low, almost pleasant burning. Now that it was not moving, she could hardly feel the lower spike at all, except for perhaps a bit more pressure in the area than she was accustomed to.
She couldn't say what woke her. Alistair was curled into a ball on his straw pallet, snoring softly, his face slack and almost child-like in his slumber. Perhaps it was merely the discomfort of the stool, or perhaps it was some prescience that told her her ordeal was about to begin anew, for not long after she awoke, Loghain appeared again, Ser Cauthrien a ubiquitous presence behind him.

He had removed his armor, and stood in the simple yet well-made tunic and breeches worn beneath. Everything in his demeanor clearly said he was done waiting and would have her submission.

Elissa feared he was right.

If it was to be, then she would make him fight for it, she thought in resignation. If for no other reason than as a final, desperate attempt to convince Alistair of her unwillingness.

"Have you decided to be reasonable, little whore?" he asked coldly.

Strangely, with the knowledge that the battle would eventually be lost, she found new reserves of determination to draw upon. She would make it a good fight.

She shook her head, slowly, a strange calm coming over her.

It wasn't to last.

A man dressed in black and hooded, like an executioner, stepped into sight. He had a coiled whip secured at one side of his belt and a sheathed dagger at the other side.

"Over my years directing Maric's—and later Cailan's—intelligence operations, I managed to acquire quite a few exotic and skillful torturers," Loghain said conversationally. "After all, a dead spy yields very little information, and so it's best to inflict as much suffering with as little permanent damage as possible. Observe."

The hooded man produced a narrow yam from a sack he had placed upon the table, and drew his dagger. Displaying both for her, he silently made a thin, nearly invisible scratch in the skin of the yam and handed it to Loghain. With a malicious gleam in his eye, Loghain stood and held the yam ostentatiously high before his face.

A sharp crack rent the air, painfully loud, leaving her ears ringing as the hooded man snapped the whip once. Then he stood before Loghain, drew a deep breath, and swung the whip again. Another deafening crack sounded, and when Loghain lowered the yam, a deep gouge had been carved into it, precisely where the fine line had been etched into the skin.

Loghain, however, had not a scratch upon him, despite having held the yam mere inches from his face.

"Observe the whip, little whore," Loghain said softly, and obligingly the hooded man displayed it for her. Though long and heavy at the base, it was astonishingly thin, tapering down to barely more than the width of a piece of yam. "No crude instrument, this, unlike those wielded by Howe's ham-handed sadists. It is not wide, nor unduly heavy. It will not rend your flesh and tear it from your bones, leaving great bloody gashes until you take an infection or bleed to death. No, skillfully wielded, it will slice like the finest, sharpest dagger. Look what it did to the yam, and imagine what it will do to your skin."

"NO!" Alistair shrieked, grabbing the heavy steel bars of the cell as rattling them as though he would jerk them free of their moorings by brute force. "Elissa! Just do it! Give him what he wants!"

Her entire body quaked with fear and hysterical sobs were building within her chest. Her despair
warred with fear for her child, and she sat there paralyzed, unable even to nod or shake her head. Her eyes rolled wildly as she looked about the room, seeking salvation where none could be found as she saw Alistair, helpless and enraged, behind his bars. Her eyes traveled past him to the knight, Ser Cauthrien, who stood stiffly at attention beside the door. She did not look at Elissa, but her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

Loghain stared at her for a long moment, and his face gradually suffused with anger, as though unable to believe that she had not capitulated immediately. He muttered a vile curse, and Elissa felt a surge of triumph amidst her terror as she realized that that this was going far beyond what he had intended. He was not as in control as he imagined himself to be. He had thought to frighten her into submission with the theatrics and had not meant to carry through.

What would happen, if she could find the courage to refuse just one more time? Would he be the one to yield? she wondered.

A look of cold resolution came over his face, and her heart sank.

"I don't bluff, whore. I'll give you one hour to decide. If you do not speak the words I want to hear, you'll learn first-hand what the whip feels like upon your flesh."

His movements sharp with anger, Loghain unstrapped her from the stool and hauled her up. Her wrists were bound once more in the manacles above her head, and then he took the yam and set it deliberately on the floor before her, where she could not help but to see the vicious gash cut into it each time she glanced down.

He ordered the guards and the hooded man from the room, and then he left with Ser Cauthrien behind him as always. She and Alistair were alone.

When the clanging echo of the door closing had faded and her own rushing blood stopped pounding deafeningly in her ears, she became aware of Alistair whispering. It took Elissa a long moment to realize he was reciting from the Chant of Light.

...seas shall rise and devour them,
The wind shall tear their nations
From the face of the earth,
Lightning shall rain down from the sky,
They shall cry out to their false gods,
And find silence.

She found her voice, and whispered the next verse along with him.

Let the blade pass through the flesh,
Let my blood touch the ground,
Let my cries touch their hearts.
Let mine be the last sacrifice.

Alistair's voice broke on a sob, his face wet as he looked through the bars of his cell at her. The ache in her back and shoulders was beginning to bloom again, and she knew soon she would be insensible to all but the pain.

But it was his tears that broke her.

"Please, Elissa. Please give him what he wants. Don't do this. Not to prove a point to me."

"It's Loghain, Alistair," she said, as though he didn't already know. Her voice was as dead and
empty as she herself felt. "Will you ever be able to love me again if I do?"

"I don't know," he said mournfully. "But I know beyond a doubt I'll go mad if I have to watch him
do what he's threatened. Please, my love. I'm begging you."

Elissa nodded mutely, and they both fell into a wretched silence. She hadn't even the energy to moan
when her back began to hurt unbearably, and she could find no relief by shifting her stance. Distantly
she wondering if she looked as horrific as she felt, nude and bedraggled, her hair matted and snarled,
silver spikes gleaming against her nipples and cunt, her body stretched out so that her enormous belly
was on prominent display.

Once again, time ceased to have meaning as the agony in her back and shoulders took hold. Her
head hung limply, her chin to her chest, and she tried to focus on her breathing, focus on the warm
ache of the spikes through her nipples, focus on Alistair's quiet, broken crying. Anything but the pain
in her lower back where the weight of her child pulled on her spine.

Strangely, when Loghain came back, she felt almost calm, peaceful. Calm enough to notice he
looked considerably more cautious than he had the last time he had entered.

He feared what she would do next, she realized. She had driven him beyond the point to which he'd
wanted to carry his game, forced him to take measures he had not intended to take. She wondered
again, briefly, if he might be the first to give in, if only she refused him one last time.

Then she wondered what the price would be if he didn't, and realized it was too high to pay.

"Yield to me," he commanded. No teasing, no taunting, no boasting. Just that command, nothing
more.

"I yield, my lord regent," Elissa whispered, hanging her head.

He took her down from her restraints immediately, lifting her in his arms like he would a child and
laying her upon the high table. Again, she was struck by the enormity of the man, his sheer,
overwhelming size. Maker help her, she felt safe when he'd cradled her in his arms like that.

She wondered if she was going mad.

The mage was summoned again, and Elissa felt the warm energy of a healing spell wash over her,
felt the weals on her wrists rubbed by the manacles begin to knit shut. Loghain gently pulled the
spikes from her nipples and her hood of skin covering her clitoris, and those wounds, too, began to
heal. There would be no tell-tale signs of her torture to display as proof of his iniquity.

Then the cool energy of a rejuvenation spell began to tingle across her skin, and Elissa realized that
once again, she had misjudged his intent. He had no qualms about owning up to his handiwork; he
simply didn't want her to have the excuse of injury or exhaustion to prevent her from taking pleasure
when he fucked her.

A cup of fresh water was delivered, and Elissa drank it greedily, wetting her parched lips and throat.
Thanks to the rejuvenation spell, she felt clear-headed and energized, despite her dread of the
mortification she knew was to come. She briefly considered demanding food and water for Alistair,
but she knew he would not accept them. He was pacing his cell in agitation, torn between relief at
seeing her ordeal come to an end and fury over what he knew was to follow. Solicitude from her at
this point would only drive the dagger in deeper.

Loghain was patient until she was healed and composed, watching impassively until the mage left,
and then he ordered the guards, all except for Ser Cauthrien, grim and silent, from the room. Elissa
sat on the table, feeling more exposed now that she was invigorated once more than she had when she was weak and weary. But she had nowhere else to go, other than to move down onto the floor, and there didn't seem to be much point to that.

"Now," Loghain said calmly. "Beg."

Elissa closed her eyes, unwilling to let him see the defeated tears so dangerously close to falling. "I beg you to fuck me, my lord regent," she said perfunctorily.

Loghain snorted, and she knew he wasn't going to make this easy upon her. "You'll have to do better than that, little whore. Tell me what a slut you are. Tell me how badly you want me. Make it good."

"You're right, my lord regent," she forced herself to say, tears leaking out from under her eyelids despite her best efforts to check them. "I am a slut. I've fucked dozens of men from one end of Ferelden to the other, nobleman and peasant alike, soldier or common brigand. I've taken pleasure in every single one of them, no matter how vile or disgusting I found them to be. I've seduced virgins and templars and mercenary thugs and even abominations. And now I want you."

"When did you know you wanted me?"

"From the moment I saw you, my lord regent, and I realized you recognized me for the whore I am. I desired you because you were disgusted by me," she confessed in a trembling sigh.

"Go on," he said, nodding in satisfaction. "Tell me what you want me to do with you. Be explicit."

"I want your cock inside me," Elissa breathed, trying not to glance at Alistair. She couldn't bear him seeing this, especially knowing that every word she spoke had been the truth since that day in Ostagar when Loghain first confronted her. "I want you to bend me over this table and take me, and if I'm too tight, I want you to force me. Shove your cock deep in my ass; rip me open. Hurt me; I don't mind. I deserve it for being such a filthy whore. I want to lick your balls, your ass. I want to take you deep in my throat and taste your seed as you come in my mouth."

"I notice you don't ask for your own pleasure," Loghain taunted with a smug smile.

"No," she whispered, not adding that it was pleasure that she dreaded beyond all else. "I don't."

"Well, that would hardly be gallant of me, to ignore such a thing," he asked, drawing near as he lifted his tunic over his head. Elissa flinched when she heard Alistair growl in his cell. "Rest assured, little whore, I'll show you more pleasure than you dared imagine."

"Just because you've coerced her consent doesn't make you any less of a rapist," Alistair spat as Loghain ran his hands up Elissa's thighs, grabbing her ass and dragging her to the edge of the table.

"Shut up, boy," he snapped impatiently. Something about his mouth and eyes tightened; somehow, Alistair's words had cut him. He didn't like being called a rapist. "Or I'll have my guards in here to gag you and bind you to the bars so that you'll be forced to watch. Be thankful I haven't done it already. Go ahead and try to ignore us, if you think you can."

"Now, little whore," he said, standing between her thighs, "wrap those pretty legs around me and kiss me like you mean to seduce me."

Trying to shut thoughts of Alistair from her mind, Elissa did as she was bidden, hooking her ankles around the backs of his thighs, which immediately brought the large bulge beneath his breeches flush against her belly. He bent to her, and she had no choice but to lift her face, to close the distance between them, pouring all her skill into kissing him as she had been commanded to do. It was an
impossible thing to do without feeling some passion and she felt her body responding, growing warm and pliant. She teased him with her tongue, let it slide across his lips, slowly pushing between.

Suddenly his mouth opened and slanted across hers, and she was the one being devoured, his hand hard on the back of her head, pulling her unrelentingly into the kiss. Maker, she hated herself for finding it pleasant, for enjoying the taste of him, or the feel of his tongue frankly fucking her mouth. He was as skillful and experienced a kisser as he was a warrior. No amount of understanding that he was doing this to torment Alistair, or that it was he who had unleashed Howe upon her family, could stop her hands from sliding up his chest to grip his shoulders, or the low whimper of wretched pleasure that rose from her throat.

She could feel her cunt twinging, flooding with slick heat. She felt sickened at her own depravity, that she should desire this man despite the hatred she felt for him, despite all he had done to her, despite the fact that she knew it would destroy the love Alistair had for her to see her respond to him.

It only made her draw him closer, clung to him more desperately.

She drew a deep, gasping breath when his mouth finally relinquished hers, practically a sob, as his hands found her breasts and lifted their heavy, aching weight. Despite the healing spell, her nipples were still tender and throbbing, and Loghain drew his body away to bend over further and take one into his mouth, suckling expertly. Elissa was no more able to prevent herself from arching and mewling than she had been to keep herself from responding to his kiss.

When he switched nipples, her hips shifted in a wanton thrust, and before she knew it, he had her upon her back on the table, lavishing kisses and soft, tantalizing bites upon her breasts, nibbling upon her nipples until she writhed with pleasure. It was uncomfortable to lay upon her back, but the discomfort eased if she drew her legs up to wrap them around him once more, so that was what she did, knowing with agonized shame how eager it made her seem.

She thought she heard a low, desperate sound from Alistair, but she couldn't be certain, because awareness of their surroundings retreated into the haze of mounting pleasure.

Her fingers were threading through his soft hair without her having any knowledge of how they got there, clutching him to her breasts. His large fingers plucked one nipple roughly while his tongue soothed and stroked the other. His other hand thrust between her legs, two fingers, hard and fast, slamming into her cunt, ripping a startled cry from her lips that was imbued with far more pleasure than she wished to admit to.

His lips moved down to her belly, and that drew a definite reaction from Alistair, a filthy oath that only egged Loghain on. He ran his tongue across her belly, slowly, sensually, teasing her distended navel while his fingers sucked her without pause. The pleasure built, and she knew it seemed like her moans were in response to his attentions to her belly, but she was helpless to stop them.

"Whose brat is this, anyway?" Loghain asked softly, almost tenderly, his fingers slamming rapidly into her sopping wet cunt.

Elissa had to slam her eyes shut and grit her teeth to keep from blurting out the answer as he worked her toward climax. She would not give him that. "I can't say, my lord regent!" she gasped, bucking her hips in time to the thrusts of his fingers. She prayed frantically that he would interpret the answer as an admission of ignorance, rather than a refusal to answer.

He seemed to accept it, adding a third finger to those pumping quickly in and out of her. She was shaking, so close to the pinnacle that even a little more stimulation would push her over. When his mouth closed over her sex, gently sucking on her clit, she melted, falling, flying, her head thrashing
back and forth as she bucked and humped and cried out her pleasure.

Loghain didn't relent, barely gave her time to catch her breath. He guided her knees over his shoulders and made far more noise eating her cunt than was necessary, growling and slurping. More theatre, she imagined.

Two of the fingers he had moistened in her cunt worked their way into her ass, not taking any particular care to be gentle. She stretched and burned but he was relentless, his mouth lapping eagerly at her cunt, licking and sucking her clit, his tongue fucking her hard and deep. When his fingers were buried in her ass as far as they would go, his thumb thrust roughly into her cunt and he seized the flesh between his fingers like a vise, holding her by it as though it were a handle, using it to anchor her to the table when she would have tried to push away.

His mouth worked vigorously at her clitoris, and the pleasure so hard on the heels of her last climax was too much, too intense, too great a sensation. She could feel everything tightening again and she knew that when her orgasm stuck her, it would be its own brand of exquisite torment, and she didn't want it, but he wasn't giving her a choice.

She screamed when she came, long and loud, sobbing in pleasure so intense it was agony, sweating and panting and shaking violently. When Loghain lifted his head, he looked despicably pleased with himself, and she wondered just what words she may have spoken in her rapture.

She feared she may have screamed his name.

"Very good, little whore," he said smugly, pulling her off the table and setting her onto her feet. It was a relief to no longer be lying on her back, but her legs would scarcely support her and she had to cling to his arms for balance.

"Now, you were saying something about sucking my cock and licking my ass?" he taunted, pushing his breeches off his hips. His cock came into view and Elissa closed her eyes with dismay. It had been too much to hope that he wouldn't be well-endowed, but she had been praying nonetheless for just that.

Loghain's fingers gripped her hair brutally and jerked her head back. "If you even think of biting, I'll kill Maric's bastard and defy the Landsmeet to do their worst."

It was horrifying to realize she hadn't considered biting, even for an instant. Damn him.

He sat upon the table and lay back, and it was high enough that she did not have to kneel to pleasure him. She wanted to look over at Alistair, but she didn't dare, didn't dare take her concentration off what she was doing. She would get through this. He was a man, like any other. It was a cock, like any other. Nothing she hadn't done a hundred times before, to any number of men. Lover or foe or even her own father.

How was it possible that such a simple thing could make her feel so utterly wretched, even as it made her weak with desire?

She half expected him to grab her head and fuck her mouth, but he didn't. No, he wouldn't make it that simple on her, taking forcefully rather than coercing her to give. She did not dare shirk or make a half-hearted job of it; Loghain would know and call her upon it. And so she used the skills her mother had taught her, used her lips and tongue adroitly, used the judicious, careful scrape of her teeth to bring him to that edge between pain and pleasure as he gave small thrusts of his hips and narrated—for Alistair's edification, no doubt—exactly how much pleasure she was giving him.
"Oh, you are good at this. Possibly the best I've ever experienced; there's no finer cocksucker in any brothel in Ferelden, I'd wager. That little twirl of your tongue, is that an Orlesian grace, or something your whore of a mother imparted before Howe killed her?"

Elissa dipped her head down low to hide the tears his mention of her mother evoked and drew his balls into her mouth carefully. He lifted his long, well-muscled legs without prompting, exposing the cleft of his ass to her tongue, and she complied with the unspoken command, tonguing his knotted entrance, probing and pushing gradually inside as her senses of taste and smell were overwhelmed with his musk. She heard the squeak of Alistair's sweating hands sliding down the bars of his cell as he sank to the floor.

As Loghain's sounds of pleasure grew louder, she returned her mouth to his cock, drawing him deep inside, sucking and bobbing her head frantically. If she could bring him to release with her mouth, perhaps it would be over and she might be spared the need to make any more of an exhibition of herself. She caught upon her finger some of the saliva she allowed to trail down his cock, wetting the digit, and then carefully pushed it inside his ass, seeking the hard lump within....

Loghain's sat up abruptly. His hand shot out, snatching her hair and jerking her away from him just as she managed to rub gently across it once.

"I should have known you'd try to employ a cheap harlot's trick," he sneered, giving her a shake by her hair at the back of her neck, like one would shake a dog by the scruff. "Every strumpet on the docks does the same when she takes her tricks to the sewage-filled alleys, to make a few more coppers before the sun comes up. You betray your nature, little whore."

She said nothing, but glared up at him, even as tears of misery and shame burned her eyes.

He drew her near and kissed her until she was breathless, until warm desire once again tightened her body, leaving no room for defiance. Effortlessly he pulled her up onto the table, into his lap, and continued kissing her. Teasing kisses, exploratory kisses, deep, demanding kisses. He kissed her the way new lovers kiss when they are still just learning each other, unwilling to go farther yet. He kissed her for the pleasure of kissing her. Not as a segue to more, but as its own end.

And sweet Andraste, forgive her, Elissa yielded to those kisses, softening in his arms, her clenched fists unfurling, her fingers unconsciously caressing.

She despised him, but she could not remain passive beneath the coaxing of his mouth.

When he drew away and smiled, she knew she was utterly defeated.

"When you leave here, little whore, you will leave with my seed dripping down your thighs as a reminder of me," he said softly, laying himself out on the table. "Mount me and ride my cock, and I will consider our bargain met. Pretend I'm a paying customer, if it makes it easier for you."

She had no more will to resist, no wherewithal to make her reluctance apparent and drag this out any further. She simply wanted it over with, so that she could collect the shattered remnants of her dignity and attempt to piece them back together.

And so she obeyed, making no effort to repress the groan of pleasure as she sank onto his cock, felt it stretching her, filling her so completely she thought surely she could not bear it. She closed her eyes, refusing to look at Alistair as he slumped helplessly against the bars of the cell. She knew it was by no accident that Loghain had positioned himself so that she would be facing Alistair as he fucked her, so that Alistair would see her face when she came and know her pleasure was genuine.
He was altogether abhorrent. That didn't stop her from rolling her hips to get a better angle once he was seated fully within her. She silently willed Alistair to turn around, not to watch as the first ripple of pleasure shuddered through her as Loghain thrust up and pulled her down simultaneously.

"So tight for a whore! I would have thought you'd be loose and sloppy after all the men you've fucked," Loghain mocked.

She moaned, a wanton, shameful sound, as humiliation only gave a keener edge to her pleasure. Loghain began to guide her hips, adding his strength to that of her thighs to move her up and down upon his cock.

"Touch yourself, little whore. Make yourself come with my cock buried deep inside you."

Maker help her, she obeyed, wedging her hand under the bulge of her belly to seek out her clit. She was defeated. Let him have her pleasure as well as her capitulation.

She came sobbing, screaming, loathing and despair and rage and ecstasy combining in a mad tumult that wrenched one broken cry after another from her throat as Loghain slammed up into her, butting against her womb. The discomfort only brought her to completion again, with deeper, greater intensity.

His huge hands gripped her hips in a crushing grip and drove her up and down, and all she could do was let herself ride the motion, let a new wave of spasms tear through her with each plunge, let her voice surrender desperate, bestial wails at each surge of pleasure.

Loghain was done forcing her cooperation, and took over entirely, using her brutishly until he finally grunted and cursed her for a whore one last time as his cock throbbed and twitched within her, spending his seed deep inside her.

She thought she heard a soft groan from Alistair, but she couldn't be certain.

When it was over, she could not even find the energy to climb off him. All she could do was kneel there, her head bowed in shame as rippling aftershocks of pleasure made her tremble. It was Loghain who pushed her disdainfully aside and climbed off the table first. As he dressed, she began to weep silently.

Her eyes yearned to seek out Alistair, to find some reassurance, but she didn't dare. She wasn't sure reassurance was what she would find if she looked at him.

"Bring them their armor and weapons, and have a guard escort them out," he commanded Ser Cauthrien. "They are free to leave."

It was the knight whose gaze Elissa caught. She looked sickened, but after a moment she gave a brusque nod and obeyed.

Their effects were delivered forthwith, and Elissa and Alistair dressed in silence. Only once did he attempt to inquire after her well-being, his voice ragged. She didn't bother to answer, and she refused to look at him.

She felt Loghain's seed seeping from within her, coating her smallclothes, and it nearly made her ill as Alistair followed her out of the prison. They were nearly out when they encountered Zevran and Leliana attempting to bluff their way in to stage a rescue. Zevran began to complain good-naturedly about the wasted effort, but Leliana, taking one look at Alistair and Elissa's faces, snapped at him to shut up.

Their friends accompanied them back to Arl Eamon's estate in silence.
Fractures

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of Fort Drakon, Elissa struggles to cope and carry on.

Content Warnings: discussion of past rape

When she returned to Arl Eamon's estate, Elissa wanted nothing more than a bath and to curl up in her chamber alone and lay there in the dark, preferably forever.

Instead, she was assaulted the moment she returned by Arl Eamon wanting to discuss politics. Elissa stared at him for a moment, responding to but not truly comprehending what he was saying as he spoke about Anora wanting their help in wresting control from her father. There was a humming in her ears that seemed to drown out his words, and yet she heard herself mechanically giving him all the proper answers.

She forced herself to do it, forced herself to attend him, because the alternative was to reveal to Eamon some hint of what had gone on at Fort Drakon that day (and how in Andraste's name could it be possible that only a day had passed since they were taken?) and she would die before she did that, before she let him know what she had done. So instead, she discussed politics.

And all the while, she hated.

She hated.

Hideous, bilious hatred churned and writhed inside her gut with no outlet, until she felt like one of the fiery mountains in far-off lands she'd read about, so often placid on the outside until they began to rumble and finally erupted, spending their fury on anyone hapless enough to be in the vicinity.

She hated Leliana and Zevran for realizing something was amiss and for having the tact not to ask when she so clearly didn't want to speak of it. She hated them for the concerned gazes she felt upon her back as she walked away, following Eamon to his conference with the queen. She even hated her mabari for his concerned whine and hurt eyes when she neglected to pet him on her way to Eamon's study.

She hated Eamon for not having the consideration to think that perhaps she might need a rest. She hated him for his scheming and maneuvering. She hated him for the high-handed way he treated Alistair. She hated him for bringing her to Denerim and making her a party to his ploys.

She hated Anora so violently she thought she might be ill. She hated the queen for her cool, composed demeanor. She hated her for being regal and sure of her authority, for being the calculating, rational, collected presence Elissa simply could not be at that moment. She hated her for being Loghain Mac Tir's daughter. It was the Maker's own mercy that the queen looked nothing like her father, or Elissa thought she might have flown into a murderous rage and committed regicide there in Eamon's study.

She hated Alistair for not finding a way to intervene and extricate her from the conference. She hated him for having witnessed her surrender to Loghain, for knowing what had transpired. She hated him
for seeing her weakness, her degradation. She hated him for making her feel ashamed. He said and did nothing to condemn her, but his very presence was enough.

She hated him because it was easier to hate him than to love him while he hated her.

She hated her parents for teaching her about pleasure and turning her loose upon the world. She hated them for making her a creature of the senses, capable of finding ecstasy even in depravity. She hated them for not raising her to be a chaste, retiring virgin, fearful of the desires of the flesh, the sort of terrified child Loghain could never have forced to feel pleasure. She hated them for making her the whore he had accused her of being.

Beyond all else, she hated herself. Hated that she could smell Loghain upon her skin and in her hair. Hated that her body still felt that delicious ache that came with the pleasure of being expertly fucked. Hated that her smallclothes were damp and sticky with his seed. Hated that all these sensations were once things that she had taken pleasure in, and now they simply made her feel defiled.

She wanted Fergus. He had been her bastion against frustration and despair for so many years, and she thought if she could just be held by him she'd be safe again, as she had been when she was just a girl. If she could hide in his arms, perhaps she could calm enough to avoid erupting and spewing her venomous rage upon everyone she cared about. But Fergus was under Wynne's care, resting and recovering. She could not find her refuge with him as she had so many times before.

Instead, as though from a great distance, she heard her own voice asking questions and responding to suggestions about some sort of difficulty in the Alienage. Surely that could not be her, speaking so calmly! Were Eamon and Anora blind that they could not see the filth and ugliness upon her? How was it possible that her humiliation was not written plainly for all to see?

She agreed to go to the Alienage and investigate the trouble there, to see what hand Loghain had in it. Anora left satisfied, and Elissa would have followed, intent on seeking someplace private, but Eamon stopped her.

He wanted to discuss the succession, and Elissa realized all his aid to Anora was just a diversion, to keep the queen from realizing that he intended to attempt to overthrow her. Elissa quivered with fury, her eyes wide and mad as Eamon prattled obliviously on about keeping Anora close and tricking her into giving them her support. He'd dragged her into this conference when she wanted to be anywhere else but in the same room as Alistair and Loghain Mac Tir's daughter, all to further his own ambition. He had the gall to recommend she go speak with Anora, and Elissa found her hands curling into rigid claws, certain she would launch herself upon the old man and throttle him at any second.

"I'll go," Alistair said, speaking for the first time since the conference had begun. His voice was tight, but Elissa did not look at him to see if he looked as miserable as he sounded. "I'll talk to Anora, find out what she wants from us in exchange for her support."

"That's an excellent idea," Eamon said approvingly. "Your fellow Warden here does look a bit fatigued. Perhaps you would like to rest, Lady Cousland?" He turned from her without waiting for a response. "While you speak with Anora, Alistair, it might be a good opportunity to try to introduce the idea of an alliance through marriage to her...."

She was going to kill the arl. It was that simple, that inevitable. She would murder him, for ignoring her distress when he required her presence and then using it as an excuse to dismiss her like a child when it was more convenient to have her out of the way.

She was coiling, ready to spring, when she felt Alistair's hand on her shoulder. She flinched,
unwilling to be touched by him.

She looked up at him without meaning to. She didn't want to see him, didn't want to look in his eyes and see the revulsion and contempt written there, but her gaze locked with his before she could stop herself.

He looked... lost. Grief and confusion and uncertainty clouded his eyes, such a contradiction to the confidence she'd seen take root and blossom within him over the last months. The disgust and hatred she had expected to see were not there. He was trying to find his way to accepting what had happened, and in some ways that was worse. Far better that he should despise her out of hand than for him to try to continue to love her and fail.

"You're right, my lord arl," she muttered, no longer caring whether or not she gratified Eamon's wishes. "I need to rest."

She fled Eamon's study before he or Alistair could respond. Fled past Leliana and Zevran who were milling about the corridors looking ill-at-ease with their inactivity, past Morrigan and her ready scathing remarks about the estate and the servants. She fled to her large, comfortable chamber where she rang for the chambermaid and ordered a bath with far less courtesy than she normally attempted to exercise with servants.

Buckets of hot water were carried in and the basin filled. More buckets of cold water were delivered as well, and left beside the basin to temper the bath to her comfort. Elissa disdained them, stepping into the steaming water, unmindful of the way her skin prickled and reddened after only seconds within the water. She fumbled for a linen cloth and the lavender-scented soap the maid had laid out and began to scrub.

She scrubbed until her skin was raw, until the soap began to burn. She plunged her head under the water and washed her hair until it squeaked when she ran her fingers through it to make sure the soap had been completely rinsed. She thrust the cloth between her legs and scoured until every trace of Loghain was gone, until her sex was sore from the rough texture of the cloth. Her head began to ache from the heat of the water long before it had cooled sufficiently for comfort. It didn't matter.

She soaped the cloth and began the process again.

Filthy. She felt so damned filthy.

She wondered if she would ever be clean again.

As she bathed, began to sob, great wracking spasms of despair that made her already sore muscles ache. She wept in her rage and powerlessness. She wept for Alistair and for the death and defilement of that bright, joyful love that they had shared for too short a time. She wept for the loss of that last bit of innocence he had held, that had allowed him to see something pure in her where no purity existed. She wept for the destruction of the woman she had thought she was, the carefree, sensual creature who knew nothing of shame.

The sobbing made the ache in her head even worse, and tightened her gut until she felt she might vomit. Eventually, she did, scrambling frantically from the basin for the chamber stool, bringing up nothing but foam and bile because she hadn't eaten since they had left for Howe's Denerim estate nearly two days ago.

She heard concerned voices in the hallway outside her chamber. Servants, she thought, wondering if they ought to do anything about the noise she was making. She had to do something else, something other than huddle there nude before the chamber stool sobbing, or else sooner or later someone
would come to investigate.

Elissa pushed herself to her feet, pacing the chamber agitatedly. She wanted to vent her rage and frustration and helplessness upon something, smash and break things until they were as wrecked as she felt, but there was nothing here that belonged to her.

Nothing. She had nothing.

She sank to the floor by the foot of the bed, weeping with desperate, keening cries. She stroked her belly, feeling her babe move within, and tried to find some solace there, but even that was tainted by the cruel, mocking words Loghain had spoken about her babe.

A bastard brat with a whore for a mother.

She had no idea what lay ahead for her, once they stopped the Blight, but a fallen noblewoman with a bastard child had few prospects, Grey Warden or not. Likely the best of her options would be to retire in shame to Highever with Fergus, where she would spend the rest of her days politely shunned by society.

Her child would share in that disgrace; it would be harder to squire her or him to a noble household of the appropriate rank, harder to make an eligible marriage. It would take the Cousland name several generations to recover. It was no fitting fate for the child of a king, but it was all she had left to offer her babe.

She thought of all the times Alistair had lain his head upon her belly, marveling at the movements of the child. He'd always known the babe was not his, and yet somehow over those months they'd been lovers, it had become *theirs*. She had never given a thought to the future she and her child would face if she didn't remain by his side, never thought of what it would mean to raise her child without him.

She'd always thought herself so sensible and pragmatic, so able to shield her feelings and find the advantage to every situation. How had she ever allowed herself to come to this hopeless point?

She never heard the door of her chamber open. Her mabari suddenly was there beside her, nudging her with his muzzle before laying down with a thud and pressing close to her. On the other side, soft, feminine arms encircled her, drew her head down to a leather-clad bosom and rocked her gently while a sweet, lilting voice sang softly in her ear.

"Please go, Leliana," she sobbed hopelessly, even as her arms clutched desperately at the bard's waist.

"Why would I want to do that?" Leliana asked, crooning in Elissa's damp hair.

"Maker, Leliana, just go!" Elissa cried, hiccupping. "I want to destroy something and I don't want it to be you."

"Ah, then it is good *I* am here, yes?" Zevran's voice answered, and the door shut firmly behind him. "Come, Warden, on your feet. Let us spar."

"Zevran!" Leliana said firmly. "That isn't funny."

"I am not trying to be funny, bard," he said, an unyielding edge to his voice. He pulled Elissa implacably from Leliana's arms, tugging her to her feet. "Fight me, Warden."

Elissa shook her head, sagging against him. "No. Please, Zevran, just hold me."
"That I will gladly do as well," he murmured, embracing her.

She stood there, encircled by his arms, unmindful of her nudity. But despite the warmth of the chamber, her trembling only increased, until she was shaking violently. Again, she was reminded of the tales of fiery mountains, and how they would rumble and quake, often for months or even years, before they exploded in fury. She had to do something with this feeling inside her, this rage and hopelessness, had to find a release for it somehow.

Blindly, unthinkingly, Elissa's arms slid around Zevran's neck and began pulling on him, trying to draw his lips to hers.

Zevran resisted, and when she would not relent in her attempts, caught her wrists in his hands. "No, Warden. This is not what you want."

"Then you're useless to me," Elissa snarled, her rage beginning to bubble over. She jerked her wrists from his grasp, pushed him away so hard they both stumbled. "Get out!"

"That I will not do," he said, his voice hard, catching her wrists once more as she attempted to shove him again and holding them just long enough to infuriate her further. "If you want me to leave you must make me, yes?"

She struck the blow before she knew she intended to do so, catching him on the cheek with her fist. Zevran, possessed of the fastest reflexes of any of their party, did nothing to ward off or duck the blow. He let it land, let it snap his head to the side, and then quickly looked back at her, his arms spread wide. "Again!"

"No!" Elissa cried, cradling her aching fist against her breast as she stared in horror at the darkening bruise on his lovely face. "I don't want this, Zevran!"

"No one here will make you do that which you do not wish to do," Zevran said, and Elissa's eyes widened in horror. He couldn't possibly know. Please, dear Maker, don't let them know! she thought frantically. Surely it was only coincidence that he had chosen those words.

"You need only speak your wish, and we will see it done," Zevran assured her calmly. "You are our leader. Command us."

Suddenly unspeakably drained and weary, Elissa found herself spiraling back down into despair. She sank down to sit upon the edge of the bed, as though she not longer had the strength to support herself. Leliana rose to sit next to her and drew Elissa into her arms again, and Elissa went willingly, laying her head upon Leliana's shoulder.

"I'm so very tired," she moaned softly. "But if I lay down, I just... may never get up again. I don't know what to do with all of this. I think it's going to tear me apart."

Leliana murmured something soft and sweet in Orlesian in her hair, but it was Zevran's words which caught her attention.

"You said you wish to destroy something, yes? Well, where are our enemies? Come, let us find them."

Elissa opened her eyes. "The Alienage," she said slowly. "The queen says Loghain is up to something in the Alienage."

"Ah! If we wish to destroy this Loghain then that is where we need to be!"
It was the first flicker of hope Elissa had felt since the moment she had yielded to him, and she seized upon it as though it were a piece of driftwood in a raging flood, floating her out of the torrent to safety. That, there, plotting to bring down Loghain, gave her something to focus her hatred upon. Hopefully it would be enough to prevent it from spilling over upon those whose only fault was being near her. She'd known she intended to stop him, but perhaps if she could kill him, she could win back whatever it was he had taken from her to leave her feeling so wretched.

The thought quickly burgeoned into a full-blown obsession. After Ostagar, she had vowed to kill Loghain for destroying all her carefully laid plans and schemes. But not even the gradual realization that it had been Loghain who had sanctioned Howe's attack on Highever had lent to that determination the sort of single-minded, implacable drive that she now felt. Her vendetta against Howe had never had this sort of talismanic quality in her mind.

If Loghain was dead, perhaps Alistair might be able to look at her.

If Loghain was dead, perhaps this powerless, defeated feeling would go away.

If Loghain was dead, it would all be better. Surely it must.

"Yes," she whispered, lifting her head. "We'll go to the Alienage," she announced with desperate determination.

"After you eat and rest," Leliana said firmly. "It's nearly nightfall. We can do nothing until the morning. Zevran, ring for the chambermaid and have a tray brought."

Zevran complied as Leliana rose and left, returning a moment later with a heavy satin dressing gown. "I borrowed this from Lady Isolde while I was in Redcliffe and forgot to return it," she explained, with a wink that indicated she had no intention of rectifying that mistake. "Come, dear, let's get you dressed. I will comb your hair while we wait for your tray. And perhaps you'll feel ready to talk, yes?"

Talking was the last thing Elissa wanted to do, she thought as she let Leliana pull her to her feet and wrap the dressing gown around her body, belting it over the enormous mound of her belly. Zevran removed his boots and made himself comfortable on the bed, leaning against the headboard. He stretched his legs out before him as Leliana guided Elissa to the stool before the vanity.

Surely, surely if she didn't speak of it, she might somehow find a way to make the events of Fort Drakon less real. But as Leliana gently pulled the comb through her snarled hair, lulled by the gentle, almost hypnotic scraping against her scalp and the warm, soothing tea the maid had brought, Elissa found the words spilling forth of their own volition.

The only part she withheld was that moment when she had looked into Loghain's eyes and seen his fear and concern. Would he have yielded, had she had the courage to refuse him just one last time? She would never know, and she felt craven and ashamed for not having had the fortitude to test him.

"Perhaps it wouldn't have been so bad if he'd merely raped me," she sighed as her narrative concluded, a single tear sliding down her cheek. "If it had just been a matter of taking my body, I think I could endure it. Even coercing my consent as he did might not have been so bad. But to force my pleasure, that's what I cannot bear. That has always been mine and mine alone to give or withhold as I choose. And for Alistair to see me respond to him.... Bad enough he robbed me of my pride, but he's also destroyed any chance Alistair and I may have had for happiness together."
"But surely Alistair understands!" Leliana protested, pausing to look at Elissa in the mirror of the vanity. "He must know you were unwilling, however you may have responded."

"Yes, I think he does," Elissa murmured, looking down at her hands where they cradled her teacup. A slice of buttered bread lay half-eaten upon the tray, the wedge of cheese that had been brought untouched. The food had turned her stomach. "But I think this time, understanding may not be enough. Had it been anyone else, perhaps. But not Loghain."

When Leliana had finished with her hair, Elissa crawled warily onto the bed and curled up with her head in Zevran's lap. It felt good to be near him, good to have his arm draped casually over her, shielding her. Safe. She was close enough to his groin to notice he wasn't responding to her nearness, and that was even better. Safer still.

What sort of insane world was it that she lived in, that the assassin who had been contracted to kill her should turn out to be the person with the least power to hurt her?

"Would you like me to go? Or would you rest better if I were to stay?" Leliana asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Elissa lifted her head, inquiring, "I would like you to stay, but what about Teagan? I should imagine he'd be expecting you at some point."

Leliana blushed, but answered evenly, "I have told him that this is where I will be until you no longer need me. He is concerned as well. We all are. You have many people who care about you, dear. I thought Sten would begin tearing through walls when he found out you had been captured. Even Shale and Oghren were fretting, in their own ways."

Elissa looked over her shoulder at the bard in amazement and Leliana laughed softly, laying down behind her and snuggling close. "You never even considered that did you, you goose? You think because you've not had sex with them they could not possibly care for you. Has it never occurred to you that your worth lies as much in drawing people to you and making them love you as it does in sex?"

Elissa's eyes widened at that. No, such a thing had not occurred to her. Her mother came to mind, then. Her mother who had taught her about sex and sensuality and how to use it to her advantage. But never after leaving the brothel had her mother fucked random people for no purpose. Only with a very select number of trusted friends did Eleanor and Bryce carry out their debaucheries with no greater aim than pleasure.

Beyond that, for all that her father had joked crudely about the matter within the family and amongst their confidantes, when her mother and father decided upon a goal that would involve a seduction, it was carried out subtly and discreetly. Eleanor Cousland didn't simply seduce a man or woman into her bed, she made them feel friendship and compassion for her. Whether it was a torrid, clandestine affair of passion that the object of the seduction thought they were getting involved in, or something more romantic, the feat was in making them care for her, for all the Couslands, for bringing them to share the same goal as the Couslands. After that, the concessions they made in negotiations, the alliances they formed with the Couslands were made out of affection and goodwill, not merely due to the mad and often destructive drive of lust.

How had she never grasped that lesson before? Elissa wondered. Was it simply her youthful libido that had made everything about sex, that she hadn't seen the greater purpose in the art her mother and father practiced?

And then Leliana drove her point home with a painful precision Zevran's daggers could never hope
to manage. Kissing Elissa softly on the cheek, she murmured, "And that, dear, is a strength no one can take from you."

Elissa began crying again, great, deep, gasping sobs that were somehow cleaner than the tears she had shed earlier. The helpless fury and despair that had driven her earlier rage and shame were washed away, and she was simply able to let herself grieve. She clung to Zevran's legs, and Leliana held her tightly from behind while she wept.

When her tears subsided, she felt somewhat refreshed, calmer. But her sobbing had agitated her babe and the child turned restlessly until Elissa grunted in discomfort and Leliana's hand drew back in shocked surprise.

"Maker's breath!" she gasped, seeing a bulge slide bizarrely beneath Elissa's skin where the dressing gown failed to close over her belly. "She's very active, isn't she?"

"Oh, yes," Elissa sighed. "As evidenced by the fact that I get very little rest these days. Would you like to feel?"

"Yes, please!" Leliana nodded eagerly, and Elissa caught her hand and brought it to her belly, smiling--however minutely--for the first time in days at the bard's delight when the babe moved again.

Elissa slept somehow, pressed chastely between Leliana and Zevran. The candles had all but guttered out when all three of them suddenly woke, tense and alert. Zevran reached for his daggers, but Leliana had left her weapons in her room and quickly slid from the bed to grab Elissa's bow.

The shuffling of footsteps out in the hallway stopped before Elissa's door and it slowly opened. Alistair's silhouette filled the doorway, somehow less tall and proud than he usually stood.

"You're awake," he said, glancing at Leliana and Zevran as they set down their weapons. His voice was slurred, as though he'd had a great deal of wine that evening. "I just... I wanted to make sure you were all right. One of the servants told me you were upset. But... I see you're being taken care of. So I... I guess I'll go. Good night."

Elissa wasn't sure she could bear the ache in her heart as he turned and closed the door behind him. Whatever she had thought seeing him again might entail, the sight of him so broken and unsure hadn't been a part of it.

Why couldn't she bring herself to call out to him, to call him back?

Leliana apparently felt no such hesitation, running out into the hallway after Alistair. Elissa rested her head on Zevran's thigh again, too aggrieved even for tears, and listened as their voices carried through the open door.

"It is not Zevran and I who should be in there with her!" Leliana argued when Alistair refused her initial entreaty to return with her. "You are the one she needs now."

"I'm not sure about that," Alistair said. He sounded tired. "I just... I wanted to make sure you were all right. One of the servants told me you were upset. But... I see you're being taken care of. So I... I guess I'll go. Good night."

"I don't know what? What it is to be imprisoned and tortured and raped?"

"You don't know what I did! She gave in because of me. She was so brave, Leliana. I thought she was going to let him take a whip to her, and I begged her not to. And then I watched while he.... I should have turned away," Alistair moaned. "I knew she didn't want me to see, but I couldn't stop and I...."
The full weight of the cause of Alistair's horror and guilt struck her, then, and Elissa's breath caught in a sob as Zevran stroked her shoulders soothingly.

She had not been the only one violated that day. She had not been the only one whose darkest desires had been turned against her.

Alistair didn't despise her for her response to Loghain. He despised himself for responding as well.

"What kind of man does that?" Alistair asked, his voice choked. "What kind of man get aroused watching the woman he loves being forced by a man he hates?"

"It was not your fault, Alistair!" she heard Leliana protest. "No more than her response was. If you do not blame her, how can you blame yourself? You must know we cannot control these things!"

She had done this to him, Elissa thought in despair, weeping silently into Zevran's thigh. She had opened Alistair up to more exotic indulgences, unleashed within him a taste for debauchery. She had thought she was freeing him from his restraints, but she was simply making him vulnerable to an attack of a different sort.

Her depravity was destroying him, as Loghain had surely known it must.

She rose from the bed, wiping the tears from her face as she crossed the room to the doorway.

"Let him go, Leliana," she said softly as she stepped into the torch-lit hallway.

"Non!" the bard argued. "This is not right. You need one another, now more than ever!"

"No," Elissa shook her head, leaning wearily against the door frame. Her belly was once again tightening in irregular, uncomfortable waves, stronger now than they had been in the dungeon, and she rubbed it absently as she spoke. "This is my fault, Alistair. You mustn't blame yourself. I taught you these things. If it were not for me, you would not have.... Maker, I'm sorry. More sorry than I can possibly say. I'm... not good for you. I want you to go. Go get some rest. Go pay court to the queen. Do anything! Just... don't let me drag you down any further. Please. Just go."

Alistair's expression was stricken as she turned from him. She had thought she might dissolve into tears again when the door shut safely behind her, but she felt empty, wrung out. The tight ache in her belly was getting stronger, strong enough that she had to pause as she made her way back to the bed, grunting in discomfort.

Elissa massaged her belly again, thoughtfully, as the surge of tension passed. Surely she could not be going into labor now, could she? It was weeks too soon. But perhaps after all that had happened....

"Would one of you get Wynne for me?" she asked softly, crawling back upon the bed to lie on her side.

"I will go," Zevran volunteered, rising. Leliana sat by Elissa's head, stroking her hair until he returned with the healer in tow.

Elissa described what she had been experiencing to Wynne, and the mage--who had often served as a midwife to young women in the tower--felt her belly, pressing in firmly with her fingers as she felt for the position of the babe within.

"It seemed to stop after I laid down," Elissa explained. "But it's happened a few times, coming and going. Nothing painful, but definitely a tightness, sometimes rather uncomfortable."
Wynne nodded. "Your babe is still high and active, so I don't think you're in any danger of going into labor right away," she said after a moment. "But what you're feeling is your body's way of preparing for labor. Call it practice, if you will. It could be weeks still, or merely a matter of days."

"It can't be that soon!" Elissa protested. "We've still the Landsmeet to deal with, and now this business in the Alienage...."

"I'm sorry, child," the mage said sympathetically, "but we have no control over these things. They will happen in their own time. It could be all the demands you have placed upon yourself are hastening the matter along. Perhaps if you were to rest, it may delay things a while, but there is no guarantee. I think it's safe to say your fighting days are behind you for the time being."

"Oh, Maker's balls!" Elissa groaned in dismay. "Very well. Let's just... all get some rest. In the morning, will you please ask Alistair to come see me?"

The recurring waves of tightness did not resume again that night. Elissa sent Zevran and Leliana to their own rooms and found she was able to rest alone with her mabari beside her bed. Often when she awoke, she would reach down and touch him, feeling safer with him there.

Something about the knowledge that her babe could come any day had calmed and refocused her. The tumult was still there within her, and yet it now seemed of secondary importance as she considered all that there was still left to do.

She slept through daybreak and did not wake until a servant knocked and asked if she would like a breakfast tray and tea brought to her, an offer she gratefully accepted. She found her appetite vastly improved and devoured the salted ham, poached eggs and fresh, crusty bread with butter as though it were the best meal she'd ever had. When Alistair knocked upon her door, she sat on the bed sipping her tea calmly, marveling at her newfound composure.

"Wynne said you wanted to see me?" he asked cautiously. His eyes bore dark rings beneath them, as though he had not rested well.

"Yes," she said softly. "You will need to be the one to lead our people into the Alienage today and investigate the trouble there. I can't go. Wynne says the babe could come any day now. It would be best if I could at least hold off until after the Landsmeet, and so I'm going to attempt to engage in less demanding activities and see if I might delay things a while."

"All right," he said, straightening his shoulders and nodding. "I can do that. Eamon wanted me to go into the city today and try to talk some of the nobles into voting in our favor at the Landsmeet, which I was really dreading."

"Perhaps I could do that instead," Elissa offered, humming thoughtfully. "That's really a task better suited for my skills, anyway, and it shouldn't prove too strenuous. Yes, I'll do it. It's better than lying here, at any rate."

"Sounds like a good plan." Alistair nodded again. "So we're... we're still together in this, at least?"

"Of course," she agreed with a bittersweet smile. "We're Grey Wardens, Alistair. We have to stop the Blight, and to do that we need to bring Loghain down. Anything else... can sort itself out as time allows."

Alistair sat musing on that for a long moment, and then nodded yet again. "I think I can handle that."

"Good," she said, closing her eyes and trying not to think about the ache of longing in her chest, how desperately she wanted to be held by him. Instead, she drew a breath and forced herself to ask the
question she dreaded most.

"Have you discussed an alliance by marriage with the queen yet?"

"What?" Alistair looked at her in astonishment. "No! I— Maker's breath, no."

"You need to at least consider it." Elissa forced herself to sound rational, dispassionate. "If she's willing to throw us her unstinting support, it could be the best option. A king whose loyalty lies firmly with the Grey Wardens and a queen whose proven experience running the nation to placate those for whom you are an unknown quantity."

"No," he said again, his jaw set. "I'm not going to do it, so there's no use discussing it. I decide what's right for me. You taught me that."

"Yes. I suppose I did," she murmured, unable to repress her sigh of relief.

"In fact," Alistair said slowly, "I've... sort of promised we would support her claim to the throne. She seems sincere in her desire to stop Loghain and willing to guarantee us her complete support against the Blight if we'll help her do that. I've never wanted the throne anyway, so it seemed like the best choice."

"I see," Elissa breathed. "Well, that's certainly a strong option as well, if we can trust her. If we decide we can't, we can always withdraw our support and take our chances without her."

"That's what I figured," Alistair agreed. "So... I guess I'd better get our people together and go find out what is happening in the Alienage then."

"Yes. Only—" Elissa paused, choosing her words carefully. "Come see me and discuss what you've found first, before you go to Eamon or Anora. Then we will decide together what they need to know."

"I'll do that," he said, turning and striding purposefully toward the door. That defeated hunch of his shoulders was gone, and Elissa was glad to see it. Perhaps... perhaps he would find his way back to himself again, at least, even if they never found their way back to one another.

"You were wrong, you know," Alistair announced, interrupting her reverie as he paused with his hand upon the doorknob. "Those things you say you taught me... they were always there. I just didn't understand what they were. What I felt... it's not your fault. It was always inside me."

He left before she had a chance to respond, and when he was gone, she set aside her teacup with hands that trembled. She wanted to take time to ponder his words, ascertain just what they might mean for the two of them, but she couldn't. Any more introspection might very well cripple her at this point, and she couldn't do that.

Zevran was right. She needed to act.

Rising from the bed, she rang for a servant, then sat at the secretary and began penning a short note. When the elf appeared, Elissa was pacing, innervated by her new determination.

"I wish to send your fastest messenger to the modiste my mother and I used to patronize here in Denerim with this missive. Tell her my need is urgent and she must come this very morning, and that I will pay twice her normal fee if she can bring with her at least one gown already fashioned for a woman with child."
Chapter Summary

Elissa and Fergus take on the role of diplomats while Alistair and the rest of the company investigate the Alienage.

Content Warning: discussion of past rape

As she waited for the modiste to arrive, Elissa ventured out of her rooms in her Dalish armor to check on her brother. She found him up and getting dressed himself, though in an ill-fitting breeches and doublet that Elissa recognized as being Teagan's. With Wynne in the Alienage with Alistair, there was no impediment to her visiting Fergus, nor anyone keeping him abed. Before she knew it, Elissa had flung herself into her brother's arms.

"Are you all right, pup?" he asked, pulling back to look at her in concern. "That blasted healer of yours wouldn't allow me to join the rescue party that went to Fort Drakon after you."

"I'm fine, Fergus. I don't really want to talk about all that right now. How are you?"

The smile he gave her was a shadow of the rakish grin she was so used to seeing from him. "Far better than the last time you saw me. There were a few scars that were too old for your healer to fix, but it will only add to my mystique, right?"

"You'll have all the ladies of the court clamoring over you in no time, and quite a few of the men as well," Elissa assured him with a wan attempt to return his smile.

Fergus abandoned his attempt at humor and she dropped hers as well, cupping his face between her hands. He bent and pressed his forehead to hers, holding her face as she did his, and Elissa closed her eyes and just allowed herself to feel his nearness, the warmth and familiarity and safety of him. This was her brother, her shelter and solace for as long as she could remember. They breathed together, silently offering and receiving comfort, sharing their unspoken grief for all they had lost.

After a long moment Fergus sighed and drew back, caressing his thumbs once over her cheekbones before he released her. "Will we have time to discuss all that has happened today, or are you running off to slay an archdemon or something?"

"Oh no, something much more terrifying and potentially deadly," Elissa answered glibly. "I'm waiting for Madame Lucille to arrive to fit me with a complete wardrobe so that I can go out and wrangle votes for the Landsmeet."

"You've summoned that old dragon?" Fergus asked incredulously. "After the way she used to make you cry at each fitting?"

Elissa sighed. "Yes, yes, I know, I'm too short and have too much hip to ever cut a fashionable figure. I'm sure after she's done scolding me for demanding she bring something suitable to wear today, I'll be wishing for that archdemon after all. However, since the nobles are never going to accept me as a general in my present state, I might as well play the part they will accept."

"Who do you intend to go see?" Fergus asked, sitting in an overstuffed chair before the cool hearth
as Elissa took a seat opposite him.

"I assume you arranged to send messages to Bann Alfstanna and Bann Sighard as I requested before Ser Cauthrien took me into custody?" At Fergus's nod, Elissa hummed thoughtfully. "Very well then, that's where I'll start. I'll pay a visit to each of them, to check on Alfstanna's brother and Sighard's son, naturally. While I'm there, I'll try to emphasize that it was at Loghain's behest that Howe had Oswyn and Irminric in his dungeon. I'm afraid I may have to trade in rather cynically on your own injuries sustained at Howe's hands, Fergus. It may help establish a bond of common interest."

"You may as well bring the living proof if you're going to take that tack. I'll come with you," Fergus said decisively. "You were kept away from court, they don't know you as well as they do me. Oswyn and I often went carousing together, and as for Alfstanna, well...."

Elissa's eyebrows lifted in interest. "She was a lover of yours?"

Fergus nodded. "My first. Father wanted her vote in the Landsmeet in favor of the first trade delegation he wished to lead to Orlais and I was only too happy to pave the way."

"Well, if she has fond memories, that should help us immensely," she said approvingly. "Thank you. If you feel up to it, I'll happily have you along. Of course, this means we'll need to get you some better fitting clothes as well. Best you resign yourself to Madame Lucille's tender mercies now, brother."

Fergus made a long show of groaning dismay. When he had finished, he proposed another call they could make. "I'd also recommend paying a visit to Arl Bryland. You resemble Mother closely enough that he'll be very disposed to like you. They carried on an affair for some months when you were quite young, and he was extremely fond of her. It resulted in Bryland siding against Howe and allying himself with Father during some rather contentious negotiations, and that was really the root of the schism that divided the two of them from Howe after they had all three fought together during the Orlesian occupation. If I recall correctly, Bryland's got a daughter a bit younger than you whom I once heard was giving him quite a bit of trouble. You may offer to take her under your wing once you have a chance to remain at court for a while."

"All right," Elissa agreed with a decisive nod. "Though I suppose I ought to make it clear to you now that I have no intention of carrying out any seductions. For one thing, it would be absurd with me being the size of a bronto—"

"But a lovely bronto, still," he offered gallantly.

She rolled her eyes at him. "—moreover, it would only serve to confirm whatever gossip Howe had been spreading about the Couslands. Right now we'd be best served presenting a very chaste and proper image. But beyond that... honestly, I just couldn't bear it right now."

Fergus sighed, looking as lost and confused as Elissa felt. "Me either, pup."

"Do you think it will get better, brother?" she asked softly after a long moment.

"I hope so. It has to," he said fervently, closing his eyes. "It did after that first time Howe brutalized me when I was seventeen, when Father was trying to patch up relations with him. It took time, though. And an experience with someone who wasn't a brute. Speaking of whom, I suppose if Duncan had made it he'd be here with you now?"

"He helped me to escape Highever at Mother and Father's request, but he was lost at Ostagar."
Fergus nodded in resignation. "I figured as much. So what about this Alistair fellow? I take it he's not the father of your babe."

"No. It turns out Grey Wardens are notoriously infertile. But," she favored him with a meaningful stare, "I dare not say more on the subject with the queen under the same roof."

Fergus started to speak, and then his eyes widened in amazement. "Really, pup?"

"Oh, yes," she said with a deep sigh. "I came very close to achieving everything I'd plotted and schemed for all those years in Highever, only to be thwarted by Loghain's madness."

"Cai—he took you to bed and then failed to leave any sort of assurance for you if he fell in battle before the matter could be formalized?" Fergus scowled. "Very negligent of him, not to mention unchivalrous. It wasn't a dairy maid he was tumbling, after all, but a Cousland! He was always a bit of a popinjay, but I didn't think he was that big a fool. He used to be more conscientious than that, at least where matters of gallantry were concerned."

"It doesn't matter, Fergus." Elissa shook her head dismissively. "None of it matters now."

"Because now you've taken Maric's other son as your lover."

"No! Maker's breath, no. It's not like that."

"Then what is it like?"

"Assuming Alistair and I can ever bring ourselves to be any more than awkwardly civil toward one another again—and that appears to be a rather far-fetched assumption at this point—Alistair doesn't want to be king and I... even if he becomes king I cannot be his queen," she explained.

"You reputation is damaged because you can't verify the father of your babe," Fergus concluded.

"Precisely."

"It's not like you to give up so easily, pup," her brother observed, glancing at her shrewdly. "You've always looked after your interests better than this."

"Leave it, Fergus," Elissa said shortly. "It's done with."

"But—"

Whatever Fergus was about to say was interrupted by the nervous rapping of a servant upon his door. Scarcely had he called out permission to enter than the door burst open, admitting the extremely over-painted couturier Elissa had summoned. Madame Lucille took one look at Elissa's abbreviated leather armor and bare, bulging belly, and then gave a horrified glance at Fergus's ill-fitting garments. Anything else they might have said to one another was then drowned out in a torrent of loudly-spoken Orlesian as the dressmaker began yelling orders at her assistants.

Eamon was happy to loan them his carriage for the day so that Elissa would not have to walk the streets of Denerim in her condition. It was then that Elissa began to understand how useful projecting the illusion of fragility could be. The sight of her in a gown brought out a gallant solicitude in the arl that her armor had not.

Very well, then, she thought with a hint of amusement. If they would not accept her as a general, then let them believe her a delicate flower, so long as either way they did her bidding.
The gown she wore wasn’t much different from those she had worn before Highever fell. There had been little time or money for embellishments, as Madame Lucille would only advance her so much on credit until Highever and the Cousland properties were definitively restored to her family by the Landsmeet. As a result, the familiar velvet yoke across her shoulders—dyed a sapphire shade that emphasized the blue of her eyes and embroidered with red silk and gold thread—was decorated with simple gold studs across her chest and back rather than jewels. Elissa liked the effect; it made her look more somber and competent, a woman intent on a purpose rather than simply another preening court swan.

The overgown itself was a lustrous shade of ecru satin over a voluminous light blue shirt. Instead of the customary intricate lattice-work of laces across the bosom and high-necked shirt below, the neckline was cut lower and fastened with golden buttons, and the shirt beneath laced down the front. She was informed that this adaptation would come in handy after the babe was born, should she choose not to utilize a wet nurse.

The accustomed strip of cloth binding her breasts was discarded. Madame Lucille had taken one horrified look at its sweat-stained and frayed state and ordered a fire built on the hearth to destroy it. Instead, she wore a long, fine-woven linen shift under her gown that tightened with a drawstring beneath her breasts to offer some support, which could be lowered to nurse a babe (as Madame Lucille demonstrated, handling Elissa's breasts into and out of the shift with brusque efficiency and absolutely no tolerance for modesty.) The couturier also promised that when the rest of Elissa's gowns were completed, she would send with them an ample supply of absorbent pads that could be tucked inside the chemise to prevent the inevitable leaking milk from staining her gowns.

Gone was the wide, belted stomacher cinched tightly about the waist, replaced by a simple sash in the same shade of sapphire as the yoke, with the same intricate red and gold embroidery. It tied in back and fell in streamers past her backside, drawing in the bodice beneath her breasts and above the swell of her belly. After the babe was born and her figure restored, she could return to more fashionable stomacher, while still keeping the practical conveniences built into the upper bodice. The skirt was actually cut longer in the front than in the back, but after it draped over the mound of her belly, the hem turned out to be even. That would have to be adjusted after the babe was born, but all told it was a remarkably versatile gown.

Madame Lucille argued vociferously and threw up her hands in frustration when Elissa insisted upon soft yet practical calfskin boots to wear beneath, rather than the flimsy cloth slippers common to court wear, but Elissa would not yield upon the point. Eventually the dressmaker sent one of her assistants to the cobbler's shop to retrieve a pair of boots in something approaching the correct size until a custom-made pair could be crafted. The ensemble might be entirely unsuitable for fighting, Elissa thought in satisfaction as she observed herself in the glass, but at least she wouldn't have to endure the agony of beautiful but useless shoes on her aching feet. Unfortunately, if her feet swelled up any more, the boots were going to present their own set of difficulties.

Fergus, the dressmaker sent off into the Market District under the escort of another of her assistants, to the tailor with whom she worked in tandem. He returned in a somber brick-red satin doublet and brown leather breeches that suited his coloring well and also fit him much better than Teagan's clothing had. He also had placed an order for several more custom-made sets to be delivered before the Landsmeet convened, also using the Cousland name and the restoration of Highever as his surety.

His convalescent state was made apparent when he returned from his excursion limping slightly and wincing with each step. It was his own suggestion that he affect a walking stick for their visits, to add credence to his claims of Howe's brutality. Elissa approved of the plan; Fergus understood the importance of making an impression every bit as much as she did.
Their visit to Bann Alfstanna's estate proved abortive, as the butler informed them the bann had gone to the Gnawed Noble tavern to congregate with the other banns who were trickling into Denerim in preparation for the Landsmeet. Seizing upon this an as opportunity to pay as many of their calls as possible with the least amount of effort, they returned to the carriage and directed the coachman back to the Market District.

The Gnawed Noble was considerably quieter than it had been the last time Elissa had visited the inn, and she blushed to remember that day when Zevran had sold her to the mercenaries for their pleasure. Thankfully, the Crimson Oars had not returned to the tavern and none of the other patrons seemed to recognize her as the woman who had visited the tavern so many months before. Again, she found herself appalled at just how indiscreet her behavior had been in those days. What sort of mad recklessness had been driving her then?

Conveniently, they found Bann Alfstanna in conference with Arl Bryland. She was elated to see Fergus and generous in her gratitude toward Elissa for finding her brother, Irminric. When Elissa politely inquired after Irminric's well-being, she was assured that he was in the care of the Chantry once more and recovering.

"I'm quite relieved," Fergus said, giving Alfstanna an affectionate pat on the hand. Elissa wondered just how much attachment had existed between them when they'd had their affair. The bann was known as a very competent and independent woman, disinclined to marry as she had nieces and nephews to stand as her heirs, but she seemed quite fond of Fergus. "Having experienced Howe's hospitality first-hand, I can say it's only by Andraste's own grace and the fact that my very resourceful sister, the Grey Warden, has managed to acquire the services of an extremely skillful healer that I am doing as well as I am today."

"I'm surprised Bryce and Eleanor let their daughter become a Grey Warden," Arl Bryland said, giving Elissa—or specifically, her belly—a disapproving glower. Elissa reminded herself that he was the father of a girl not much younger than she was. No doubt he was envisioning his daughter in such a scandalous condition. "The way they sheltered and cloistered you, I was sure they intended you for some Orlesian or Antivan prince, at the very least. Perhaps it might have been better if they had," he concluded gruffly. "Shame for Eleanor's daughter come to this."

"I assume you're referring to my rather disgraceful state," Elissa said softly, caressing her belly with subtle deliberation. "No, ser. It was no Orlesian or Antivan prince for whom Mother and Father intended me, but a Fereldan nobleman. When Howe carried out his sneak attack on Highever, they sent me away to join the Grey Wardens to keep me safe from Howe's men, knowing that when I reached Ostagar, I could find the man whom they intended me to marry and secure the alliance. That was their wish, so that I would have protection and aid in reclaiming our lands.

"Alas, he and I reached our agreement but before it could be formalized, my intended was lost in the battle thanks to Loghain's treachery, and I barely survived. If not for the so-called regent, I'd be respectably wed to my betrothed even now and gleefully anticipating the arrival of our firstborn with him by my side. So you're quite right, my lord arl. It is a shame that it has come to this, that honored brides are widowed before they are even wed. But imagine if it had been your daughter, ser. Would you have had her do any less to ensure her own survival, had it been her home taken and her family murdered?"

"No," he said after a thoughtful moment. "I guess I wouldn't. I suppose you've done your mother proud then, thriving as you have despite the adversity you've faced."

"Thank you, ser," she gave him polite bow of her head, and a soft smile she knew made her resemble her mother. "My lady mother always spoke very fondly of your kindness and generosity,
and my dear father as well. I can see they were right in all they said."

The arl stammered, "Ah, yes, well, thank you, Lady Cousland," and cleared his throat awkwardly. Beside her, she heard Fergus cough softly and didn't dare look over to see if he was suppressing a laugh.

"Brother," she suggested sweetly, "why don't you take Lady Alfstanna to get another glass of wine and perhaps discuss with her what sort of redresses we can demand from the regent at the Landsmeet for the atrocities Howe committed at his behest."

Fergus rose with a smile still twitching at his lips. "As you say, sister."

After a moment, Arl Bryland recovered himself enough to turn his mind to less personal matters. "It's a drastic accusation you're leveling against Loghain about the business at Ostagar, Lady Cousland. What proof do you have?"

"I've little enough direct proof of his actions at Ostagar, it's true," Elissa conceded. "As for the rest of it, it's quite certain that Loghain authorized the attack Howe carried out on Highever, in which my honored mother and father were slain. Howe confessed as much to my brother when he had him in his dungeon. As the only other teyrn in Ferelden, my father was the biggest single obstacle to Loghain's plans to name himself regent and seize control of the Theirin throne. The only other nobleman with nearly as much influence in the Landsmeet is Arl Eamon, and we also have proof that Loghain hired a blood mage to poison him."

"That is true," Alfstanna added as she accepted Fergus's hand to rise. "Once my brother started to stabilize, he had some very interesting information to convey about the regent's interference in his hunt for a known maleficar."

"And so you see, my lord arl, it all fits together a bit too neatly to be coincidence," Elissa concluded once Fergus and the bann left to seek another table. "Why would Teyrn Loghain, now the regent, give Howe license to slaughter my family and poison Arl Eamon—both of which schemes were put into play before the battle at Ostagar—unless he intended in advance to see the king dead and seize the throne for himself?"

"That makes a great deal of sense," Bryland admitted. "However, if you'll heed the advice of someone who first stood in the Landsmeet chamber long before you were born, you'll stick to claims you can prove when you make your case there."

"Thank you, my lord arl," Elissa said with another gracious bow of her head. "But surely with my brother's testimony of Loghain's involvement with Arl Howe's actions against my family, the circumstantial case is strong enough to be heard? After all, it would be a terrible injustice not to be able to call Loghain to account for the death of our king, especially since he saw fit to accuse myself and the Grey Wardens of that exact crime."

"It would indeed, Lady Cousland," the arl acknowledged, "and no doubt you have a strong desire to exonerate yourself of Loghain's accusations, but it's a gamble. You've convinced me that Loghain needs to at least explain himself on these charges, but some of the banns might not be swayed without direct evidence. Still, I will speak to whom I can, exert what influence I may, and perhaps justice may yet carry the day in the Landsmeet chamber."

Elissa gave him another modest smile, and when the arl returned it, she knew he was hers.

Politics, she mused as she asked after his daughter and Bryland launched into a tale of his woes, was merely a seduction of another sort.
Elissa and Alistair find their way to healing together in the aftermath of Fort Drakon.

Content Warning: discussion of past rape

Elissa's back was aching from hours sitting on the Gnawed Noble's padded benches in their conversation nooks. After Bryland departed, she joined Fergus in asking after Bann Sighard's son, Oswyn. Sighard's companion, Bann Ceorlic, would hear no accusations against Loghain and quickly departed when she and Fergus began their recitations of the regent's crimes for Sighard's benefit. After what was done to his son, the bann was only too happy to pledge his support in bringing down the man who had given Howe free rein.

Before they left, Sighard also pointed them in the direction of Arl Wulff, sitting in a far corner drinking by himself. Wulff's bannorn of West Hills had fallen to the Blight and his sons had been killed. Fergus was stunned by that news; one of Wulff's sons, Edric, had been his closest friend as a boy.

Wulff was bitter and disinclined to speak, wishing only to be left alone with his misery. When Elissa informed him she was a Grey Warden, however, his eyes flew to her figure and then lifted as he glared at her. "And now I know why the Blight is overrunning our lands," he muttered, raising his tankard and draining it.

"The Blight calls all of us to battle, my lord arl, no matter how unlikely a warrior he—or she—may seem," she said softly, resting a hand on her belly. Some of the bitterness left Wulff's eyes at that, and he nodded, entreating them once more to leave him to his grief.

When they returned to Arl Eamon's estate, Alistair and the rest of her companions had not returned from the Alienage. Fergus was weary and went immediately to his chamber to rest, while Elissa sought out Eamon and discussed with him the results of her outing and the nobles she thought they could count upon for support in the Landsmeet.

"Excellent," Eamon said approvingly when she told him what she had accomplished. "It's looking more and more likely that we'll have enough votes come the Landsmeet. You've done well, Lady Cousland."

"Thank you, my lord arl," Elissa said, rubbing at her aching back. "I think I shall retire now and rest until Alistair returns with his news from the Alienage."

"Before you go, there's one thing I would like to discuss." Eamon's voice was grave as he stopped her withdrawal from his study. "Alistair informed me this morning that he flatly refuses to consider an alliance of marriage with Anora."

"Yes, he informed me of the same decision," Elissa replied. "I attempted to make a case for why he should consider it, but he will not be moved. So, either he will take the throne on the strength of his own claim, or he will cede it to Anora. I no longer care either way, so long as the Grey Wardens have the resources they need to stop the Blight."
"He refuses to consider marriage to Anora because of you," Eamon accused. "Surely you must know that he cannot wed you."

Elissa looked at him coldly. "Do you think me a fool?" she asked shortly. "I'm well aware of my unsuitability and have told Alistair as much. Beyond that, there is nothing I can do to persuade him. He will make his own choice in this matter and I will respect that. You would be advised to do the same. Now, good evening, my lord arl."

Elissa swept from the arl's study, though her waddling gait allowed for a considerably less regal exit than she would have liked. Still, she couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment at all they had done that day. They had won at least three voices in their favor at the Landsmeet, she was sure of it. It even seemed she'd found a way to make a virtue of the potential disgrace of her pregnancy, which could only strengthen their crediblility.

As she gained her own chamber, however, she found the determination and drive that had carried her through the day and kept her misery at bay fleeing, and she sank wearily into a chair before the cold hearth, closing her eyes against the renewed impulse to cry. Without activity, without something to keep her going and focus her attention, she felt hollow and hopeless once more.

The evening wore into night, and still she sat there. The chambermaid brought a tray of supper and Elissa picked at it with little real interest. Before leaving the room, the maid lit the candles and opened the windows to let the cooler night breezes circulate through the chamber, but still Elissa did not rise.

_Do you think it will get better, brother?_

I hope so. It has to.

The echo of her conversation with her brother that afternoon brought to mind other things Fergus had said to her, and finally she rose, crossing not to the bed but to her packs in the corner. Digging deep into the bottom of a leather satchel, past the lovely Antivan courtesan's gown that had been gifted to her by Master Ignacio, she withdrew several rolled parchments, each bearing the royal seal.

Quickly she glanced at each of them until she found the one she sought and returned the others to her pack. The temptation was strong to sit and read over it again, but the words were already indelibly etched on her memory. All reading them again could accomplish would be to heighten her despair, and so instead she crossed quickly to the hearth and began building a small pile of tinder and kindling.

She was about to set the wick of a candle to the stack when the impatient rap of a steel-clad fist at her door made her drop the candle. It guttered and was snuffed, filling the chamber with the scent of burnt wax.

Calling out permission to enter, Elissa snatched up the extinguished candle, lighting it from another flame on the candelabrum and seating it back in its golden bracket. Tucking the parchment into a fold of her skirt, she went quickly back to her packs and stuffed it carelessly into the satchel, pulling the drawstring closed as the door opened.

"Were you asleep?" Alistair's voice asked, while his body cast a long shadow in the block of light from the torchlit hallway.

"No, not at all," Elissa forced herself to say casually. "Tell me what you found in the Alienage."

"Well, we—" Alistair stepped into the room, closing the door behind him, then froze as he saw her
clearly for the first time. "That's—a new look for you."

She shrugged nonchalantly, striving to mask her nervousness. Claiming her seat before the hearth again, she remarked, "That's right. I didn't realize before that you've never seen me in anything more genteel than my winter woolens. Believe it or not, I was not born in leather armor."

"You look lovely," he murmured. The soft yearning in his tone made her throat tighten.

She took a long, steadying breath. "The Alienage?" she forced herself to ask.

"Yes. Right. The Alienage." There was something cold and bitter in Alistair's voice as he turned his attention back to the matter at hand, as though he regretted—or resented—her prompting him away from whatever he'd been thinking before. "Loghain was selling the elves to Tevinter slavers."

"Maker's breath!" Elissa gasped. "You're certain?"

"I have documents proving it," he said, nodding. "The slavers are dead now. Zevran was in a bit of a bad mood once we realized what they were doing. The rest of us may have helped a bit."

She stared at him in disbelief. "Sweet Andraste, I don't know whether to be horrified or elated!"

"Do you think it's enough to bring Loghain down?"

"I don't see how the Landsmeet can overlook this. Not on top of his other crimes. Especially not with Anora standing against him."

"I've been thinking about that all day." Alistair muttered uncomfortably, sinking down into the settee opposite Elissa. "Am I doing the right thing, promising our support to her?"

"You've conversed with her more than I have," Elissa said carefully. "What do you think?"

"I think she's her father's daughter." As he spoke, his mouth twisted, as though he tasted something foul. "And I think that's the problem."

"In what regard?"

"She and Loghain... they're both convinced that anything they do in pursuit of their goals is justified. Loghain's clearly mad, but what's Anora's excuse? She'll betray her own father just to hold onto the throne, and you can be damn sure she'd feed us to the wolves in a heartbeat if she thought her chances were better with her father." He shrugged. "Seems to me that someone who will do anything, betray anyone, to be in power probably isn't the kind of person who should actually have power."

"Being convinced that your ends will justify your means isn't necessarily a bad mentality for a ruler to have," Elissa argued.

"Maybe not to some extent. After all, I certainly don't intend to actually tell Anora I no longer plan to support her. But... shouldn't there be a line somewhere? Aren't there some means that just can't be justified? Like, say, selling your own citizens into slavery? Abandoning your son-in-law and king to die?" Alistair's eyes were solemn as they met hers, and Elissa felt her heart constrict. In that look was all the innocence and idealism she'd once come to expect from him, the very innocence she'd fallen in love with. He hadn't lost it after all.

"If I was king... maybe I could make a difference. You didn't see that Alienage, Elissa. I never imagined people actually lived like that here. I doubt Anora cares all that much about making things
better. Maybe I could." He gave her a crooked smile. "Plus, you know, there's this whole Blight thing going on. Someone should do something to stop it, don't you think?"

She found herself answering his smile. Even now, she could no more deny his boyish charm than she could hold back the tides. No sooner had her lips curved, however, then his own smile fled, replaced by something terrifyingly honest and raw. "Maker's breath, I've missed that smile," he whispered.

"Don't, Alistair," Elissa pleaded, closing her eyes.

"Don't what?" She heard him move, felt his hands upon the arms of her chair as he knelt before her.

"I don't know. Whatever it is you're doing. I just can't."

"Why?"

Her brow crumpled, her composure fleeing. "Because right now it hurts too much."

"Why aren't we hurting together?"

"I don't know!" she repeated, fighting desperately not to cry. She was so very tired of weeping, so very tired of feeling hopeless and lost. She wanted her certainty back. "I'm afraid!"

"Of me?" Alistair's voice was hurt and perplexed. She could feel him there, just before her, looking up at her, and she knew if she opened her eyes and saw him she'd never be able to resist the entreaty there.

"No. Yes! Maker, Alistair, please!" Elissa's hands clenched into fists on her thighs as she struggled for strength, for calmness, for words. "Yes, I'm afraid of you. Before I knew you, I never felt ashamed, never cared about the opinions of others. I did what I felt I had to do, and everything else be damned. And now all I can think of is how badly I dread the day you look at me in disgust for all that I've done, for all that you've become."

"I'm not the one who's made you ashamed. It was Loghain, using us against each other." His hands fell upon hers, lightly. His skin was warm; he'd taken off his gauntlets. Before she knew what she was doing, Elissa's fingers had folded around his, gripping him urgently.

"He never said anything that wasn't true, Alistair."

"Every word he spoke was untrue."

"No...."

"Yes!" Alistair's fingers squeezed hers so hard it hurt. "He took the truth and he twisted and warped it to make everything that is beautiful and glorious about you seem wrong."

"You've never believed that," she said, shaking her head in denial as she finally opened her eyes to look at him. "You've only ever tolerated my licentiousness, considered it a perversion you had to force yourself to accept."

"No. Maybe once, long ago, back when I was still bound up in all that Chantry talk about virtue and chastity. But I'm free from that now. You helped me be free."

Alistair drew her hands to his face, pressing an ardent kiss on each one. "What the Chantry teaches, to try to shame the templars into chastity, that's perversion. To deny everything we're meant to do,
everything the Maker made us to do, that's perversion. What Loghain did to you, to both of us, that's perversion. What you do, what you've always done, is not. You've never used sex to hurt anyone, never tried to make anyone ashamed of what they feel. You've never forced anyone against their will. What you do is honest and...."

"And what?"

"Perfect. It's perfect. Who you are, what you do. You're perfect."

Elissa let out a whimpering sob, and Alistair reached up, touched the tears upon her cheek, stroked them away. "I'm afraid, too," he confessed, tears shining in his own eyes. "I'm afraid of what's going to happen if we go into the Landsmeet with you looking as shamed and miserable as you have since we left Fort Drakon. And I'm afraid that even if we bring him down, Loghain's going to win if he drives us apart. Tell me we're not going to let him have that victory."

"No," she whispered emphatically. "We're not."

She never would know who moved first, whether she pushed herself out of the chair and onto the floor, or if he pulled, but suddenly Alistair's arms were around her, and her face was buried in his neck as she wept. Joy and sorrow and fear and regret all whirled together in a frantic vortex of emotion as she clung to him. It didn't matter that his armor was hard and gouged her uncomfortably in places, or that her new gown was no doubt being ruined by the flecks of gore and smears of blood on his armor.

None of it mattered.

Only when her tears had spent themselves did she wrinkle her nose. "You haven't bathed," she said with a choked laugh.

Alistair breathed deeply, burying his nose in her hair. "Mmm. You have."

She drew out of his arms slowly, reluctantly. "I'll ring for a bath for you."

"I need to go see the arl, tell him what we found."

"Do that. I'll have a bath ready for you when you return."

Once Alistair was gone, Elissa rang for the chambermaid. She removed her gown and set it aside to send to the laundry to be cleaned, and dressed in a simple linen shift that Madame Lucille had sent.

Buckets of water were brought and the basin filled. Elissa felt an unaccustomed surge of gratitude for Eamon ordering his household staff not to retire until Alistair and his companions had returned for the night. It felt strangely domestic to be overseeing the preparation of his bath, especially after so many months in the wilderness. Peaceful. Wifely, even.

She liked the feeling.

When Alistair returned, she calmly helped him remove his armor and padding and undergarments, working the straps and buckles with skill born of practice. The chambermaid came back with the final buckets of water and Elissa sent the armor away to be cleaned and polished. She also instructed the maid to bring Alistair's packs from his chamber to hers.

She thought about her words earlier that day to Fergus, about presenting a chaste and proper demeanor before the Landsmeet, and realized she didn't care. She wouldn't deprive herself of even a single night she could spend in his arms, not simply for the sake of appearances. The maid was well-
trained and discreet enough not be act scandalized, and so when she returned, Elissa calmly took Alistair's packs from her and began to lay out clean braies and a shirt for him.

She and Alistair were both unusually silent as he sank into the bath and began to wash the sweat and gore of the day off. Awkwardly, she lowered herself to her knees on the floor beside him and helped him scrub his back. It was a tranquil, almost solemn scene and she found contentment in the quiet. There were things they had to discuss still; politics to be dissected, futures to be considered, but all that would wait. For now, the silent togetherness was enough.

Her thin shift grew wet and transparent as she poured ewers of water over his head to wash and rinse his hair, and Alistair's eyes warmed as they passed over the point where it clung to her dark nipples. She felt her body tighten in response and along with it came a surge of shame and fear, threatening to swallow her and drag her down into despair again. She forced that wave down, pushed it back, thrust it away from her as something vile and unwanted.

She could not, would not let Loghain steal this from her, the peace and joy and inherent rightness of her passion for Alistair. He couldn't have that. She wouldn't allow it.

Alistair's face grew worried as he noticed her apprehension, and he reached out, touching her face, his wet hand trailing water over her cheek. "I'm not expecting anything this soon, you know. Just... admiring." He offered her his crooked grin again.

Just having the offer there made her feel safer, more confident. She even considered it for a moment, considered sleeping chastely in his arms, content simply to be held. A part of her wanted to accept, and yet....

...The fear would still be there, underneath it all, waiting to resurface each time she began to let herself feel desire. She was a creature of passion; she was not meant to live a sexless life. It would only get easier to let herself avoid confronting it the longer she waited. And what if she waited too long?

"We may not have forever," Elissa heard herself saying. "There's the Landsmeet to consider, and whatever may come with you taking the throne. And then there's the Blight, and the archdemon, and who knows if we'll survive? I don't want to die knowing I missed a single moment when I might have felt your touch."

She pushed herself to her feet, ungainly as ever, and drew her damp shift over her head, letting it flutter to the floor. She heard splashing behind her as she crossed to the bed, fluffing the pillows and propping them up against the headboard. The soft shush of a large linen drying cloth on his skin accompanied her as she folded the sheets and embroidered coverlet back. Then she felt him behind her, his arms encircling her, his bare, still-damp body pressing close to hers as his chin settled on her shoulder and his hands covered the swell of her belly.

She leaned into him, let herself rest against him, closed her eyes and let herself be surrounded by him. She felt the moment they began breathing together, slow and deep and even, felt the warmth and secure familiarity of that rhythm they'd built between them all these months together.

How was it possible to be so terrified and still feel completely protected?

"Maker's breath," Alistair murmured with a husky laugh. "Is it possible that you've actually grown in just the few days since I saw you last?"

"Not just possible, but bloody likely," she chuckled.
"It's gorgeous," he breathed, using his hands on her shoulders to guide her around to face him. He sank to his knees before her, his lips sliding down that protruding curve. His hands started at the top of the mound and slowly caressed their way down while he stroked the sides of his face against her belly, much as a cat would rub against something to mark it with its scent.

"I love you," he whispered as she closed her eyes and swayed, her hands resting lightly upon damp hair.

His hands slid down to her hips, and slowly moved back to cup her buttocks, pulling her closer. "I love you," he whispered again as he licked the underside of that roundness with slow, languorous strokes of his tongue, just above the line of her curls.

"Sweet Andraste, Alistair..." she whimpered as he nuzzled his face against her damp, springy curls, coating himself with her moisture. The angle was entirely wrong for him to pleasure her with his mouth, but his tongue darted out to sample her flavor anyway.

"I love you," he whispered against her folds.

"I love you, too," she said breathlessly, her hands stoking his face as a tear stung her eye and rolled freely down her cheek.

She would never remember how she came to be laying upon her side on the soft ticks of the bed with Alistair's head buried between her thighs with his cock before her face. She licked and caressed it distractedly, too caught up in the pleasure his lips and tongue wrought to make a proper job of it.

He didn't seem to mind.

Nor would she be able to recall how she wound up on her knees, clutching the tall, elaborately carved headboard while Alistair knelt between her parted thighs. His hands caressed her breasts as he surged up into her, stroking across that point within that made her feel as though she would fly apart. One of his hands came up, cupped her face, turned her to look back over her shoulder so that he could kiss her, open-mouthed and greedy, reeking of her musk. When it began to ache to twist far enough to meet his lips, she took his thumb into her mouth and sucked upon it suggestively. He groaned and thrust harder in response.

"I need to see you," he rasped in her ear.

And then she was above him, braced by his raised knees behind her while they rocked together. His fingers kneaded her buttocks firmly until she began to tremble, tension mounting within her. Then one of his hands cupped her face, urged her to look down, to lock her gaze with his as the other pried its way between their bellies to find her nub. She came with a ragged cry, staring at him until the last crucial second when her eyes slammed shut and her mouth fell open, her body going rigid until the spasms had passed.

"You smiled," he said softly when her eyes opened again. He had stopped moving and was simply watching her.

Elissa blinked at him uncomprehendingly.

There was something of wonder in his eyes as he stared at her. "When you come, you smile. Sometimes just for a fleeting second, but it's sublime when it happens, your expression so peaceful."

She wasn't sure what he was trying to say, but there was something significant in his tone, in the stillness of his body as he cupped her face in both hands, his thumbs stroking across her cheekbones.

"You smiled with Zevran. You even smiled with the Spirit of the Forest. I don't think you smiled in
the Circle Tower, but I couldn't see you then. But I know you didn't smile with Loghain. Not once."

Her throat tightened. "Alistair...."

"Let me see it again. Smile for me," he entreated, surging upward again.

Caught somewhere between joyous laughter and tears, she smiled at him again, moving with him as his thrusts grew less cautious, more demanding. She watched as he tightened, gripped her harder, groaned her name.

He had a smile of his own, she realized, stunned that she had never noticed it before.

It was the last thing she saw before she lay down beside him and fell asleep with Alistair spooned against her back and their interlaced fingers resting on her belly while her child moved within.
"Quit fidgeting," Elissa said shortly, watching as Arl Eamon's squire once again lost his grip upon the buckle he was attempting to fasten.

"You say that as though you didn't hover for an hour before deciding which gown to wear," Alistair snorted, but he obediently stood still. From his seat on one of the settees before the hearth, Fergus snorted.

"That will be quite enough from you, brother," Elissa said with ill humor, rising from her perch at the edge of the bed to pace restlessly.

"And she tells me not to fidget," she heard Alistair grumble. Louder, he asked, "Are you certain I should be wearing Cailan's armor? Wouldn't the armor we found at Soldier's Peak place more of an emphasis on the fact that I'm a Grey Warden and there's a Blight going on?"

"It might," Elissa said, "but then if Loghain makes his case convincingly enough, it might also add credence to his accusations that the Grey Wardens are grasping for power. No, we want to portray you as Cailan's natural successor, and play upon your clear resemblance to the Theirin rulers of the past."

"Of course. How silly of me. Why worry about the Blight when we can bicker over the bloody throne?" he asked acerbically to no one in particular.

"It's not just that," Elissa said, crossing to him and touching his face softly. "We need the Landsmeet to see you as our leader. Fereldans don't follow the Grey Wardens, they follow the Theirin dynasty. If the Theirin king throws his support to the Grey Wardens, the nobility will fall in line, but the first hurdle is making certain they see you in that role."

"And what role are you supposed to be playing today?"

"They'll never accept me as a general or war leader, no matter what I've accomplished since Ostagar." It galled her more than she liked to admit that. She had come so far, done so very much, and yet it didn't matter. If she tried to put herself forward as the one who would lead them against the Blight, they would flock to Loghain's side rather than follow a woman who looked like she could--or actually could--give birth at any moment. "So I will be putting a gentler, more vulnerable face upon the tragedy of the civil war and the looming danger of the Blight. Let them believe it's you who have brought us this far. Let them see me as fragile and in need of protection; it will only make the tales of Loghain's atrocities and the losses we've endured that much more poignant."

"That hardly seems fair," Alistair complained. "You did all the work and I'm going to get all the credit."

"Politics is a game of perception," Elissa and Fergus intoned together. She gestured to her brother to
"What Elissa has done or hasn't done won't matter if they don't see her as being capable of leading us against the Blight," Fergus explained. "Some of them are old enough to remember their mothers and sisters wielding bows in the back ranks of the archers' corps against the Orlesians, and more than a few of those women were likely with child while they were doing it. But that was long ago and we've been at peace since then, with the luxury of pampering and coddling our noblewomen. Some still study martial theory and get training when they wish, yes, but more and more we expect them to be delicate flowers. My wife was from Antiva, and there it was unheard of for a noblewoman to go to war, and Ferelden seems to be adopting that sort of mentality. There are those who never saw what the women did during the occupation. And then there are those would just rather forget and cling to a gentler way of living. So, unless they want a tapestry embroidered, they're going to look for someone who isn't pregnant to perform the task. Even if it means following a madman."

"Besides," Elissa sighed, "the truth is I can't continue to lead us. Not this close to the babe's coming. Perhaps once I'm delivered and healed, yes, but we don't know we have that sort of time when the south has already fallen. The archdemon gets stronger in our dreams every day. Riordan says its coming. We need to move against the Blight now. We don't have a matter of weeks."

She looked over at Fergus. "Has Anora already left for the Landsmeet?"

"I believe her intention was to go back to the palace once the Landsmeet began and she'd be sure not to run into Loghain. She'll change her gown, and meet us there in time to make a dramatic entrance," Fergus answered. He'd spent the better part of the last two days charming the queen to keep her satisfied with the notion that the Wardens were going to support her bid for the throne, under the rationale that he was a better liar than Alistair and also a more practiced courtier.

"Very well," Elissa nodded. "All the better if we can keep her from encountering Alistair until after she supports us in the Landsmeet. If she sees him beforehand in Cailan's armor, with Maric's sword in hand, she's going to suspect he intends to claim the throne for himself."

The squire finished with the last buckle and made a silent exit, and Alistair turned a worried gaze to Elissa. "Are we sure we're doing the right thing?"

"This is your choice, Alistair. If you want to cede the throne to Anora, I'll support you."

Alistair closed his eyes, almost prayerfully. When he opened them again, he had that determined look she knew so well. "No. This is what I decided upon. It's what's best for the Grey Wardens, maybe even what's best for Ferelden. It may not necessarily be what's best for me but I'm getting used to the idea. It might even be interesting. I can do this. Especially with you... helping me."

A look of sorrow crossed his face as he spoke the last, and Elissa bit her lip nervously. Two days had passed since that night Alistair had returned from the Alienage, and they had not discussed the issue that had caused them to quarrel before they had arrived in Denerim. It hovered there between them, unspoken yet always present, since he had decided he would accept the crown. She knew he wanted to press the point but wasn't sure he could. He was resolved enough that he would be king alone if he had to be, but it clearly wasn't his first choice.

Elissa closed her eyes, drawing a deep breath. She should not have waited until just before the Landsmeet to discuss this with him. If the discussion went badly, it could be disastrous. And yet...

"Fergus, could you wait by the carriage for us?" she asked softly.

"Of course, pup," her brother nodded, leaving the room, and closing the door behind him.
Elissa rose to face Alistair, smoothing her hands nervously down the front of the green and gold damask bodice that covered her saffron silk kirtle and the high waist of her dark red overskirts. "We need to talk, my love, about what we're going to do after you take the throne."

If Fergus wondered why Elissa emerged from the bedchamber first with tears in her eyes, or why Alistair followed her some minutes later with a look of stern resolution on his face, he tactfully didn't ask.

Beside her brother, only Wynne accompanied them to the Landsmeet, as she could testify about the events in the Circle Tower and the fact that Loghain appeared to have encouraged Uldred's rebellion. Elissa wanted to bring all her people, but she knew it would be perceived as threatening. Sten was too foreign and intimidating, Morrigan too temperamental, Oghren too crass and Shale too disdainful of squishy flesh-and-blood creatures and therefore likely to say the most impolitic thing at precisely the wrong moment. Leliana would only serve as evidence of Loghain's mad claims of Orlesian conspiracy, and the presence of an assassin would send the wrong message entirely.

They were looking to reassure the Landsmeet that they were competent leaders with Ferelden's best interests in mind, not startle them with the wild collection of misfits they had gathered. Beside Wynne, the only other companion who came along was her mabari, since nothing said true Ferelden citizen like the presence of a faithful hound at one's side.

Perception was indeed everything.

Somehow it hadn't occurred to her, after the way Loghain allowed her to walk out of Fort Drakon, that he would make a last attempt to stop her from attending the Landsmeet, but the presence of Ser Cauthrien at the doors to the Landsmeet chamber quickly corrected that assumption.

"Warden. I am not surprised it has come to this," she said, and there was something dark and reluctant in her eyes. She was not happy with the job she was assigned to do.

"I beg you to stand aside, Ser Cauthrien," Elissa said softly. "Do not add to Loghain's atrocities by preventing the rightful admittance to the Landsmeet of the children of the Teyrn of Highever and the heir to the Ferelden throne."

"If Alistair was worthy of being called Maric's son, he would already be in the Landsmeet."

"My fitness as my father's son is not for you to decide," Alistair countered, and Elissa felt a moment of pride at his composure. "That matter is for the Landsmeet alone and I'll face their judgment."

"You have torn this land apart to oppose my lord!" Cauthrien said desperately. "You've never once understood why he is a hero to Ferelden!"

"Was a hero," Elissa corrected, her voice harsher and more ragged than she would have liked. "But the actions your lord undertook at Ostagar and at Fort Drakon while you looked on and did nothing were not the actions of a hero! Yes, once Loghain was a great man who did great things for our nation. But he has become something else entirely. Surely you must see this!"

The knight looked stricken. She clenched her jaw, as though waging some great internal battle. "I... admit I have had my doubts, lately," she finally confessed. "His hatred of Orlais has become an obsession. It has driven him to madness. He has done terrible things, but I owe him everything."

"Madness will not save us from the Blight," Elissa said gently. "I am not the one who has torn Ferelden apart. You've seen what Loghain is capable of doing. Will you be a party to it, ser knight?"
"You ask me to betray my lord," the knight cried hopelessly.

"I ask you to do nothing but stand aside and let us bring the matter before the justice of the Landsmeet."

Cauthrien raised her dark eyes to Elissa. "I am... sorry for what was done to you at Fort Drakon, Warden," she said. "My duty has never tasted so bitter as it did upon that day. Go, then, and stop him. Stop him from betraying everything he once loved, if you can."

The knight stood aside, bowing as they passed. Her heart thundered in her chest as they approached the great doors of the Landsmeet chamber. Within she could hear voices shouting in passionate argument, Arl Eamon's the loudest amongst them. Drawing a deep, calming breath, she faced the majordomo and gave him their names and their purpose for wishing to speak to the Landsmeet. The massive doors swung wide and allowed them entrance as the majordomo's booming voice announced their entry in the prescribed ceremonial verbiage.

"My lords and ladies! Teyrn Fergus Cousland of Highever! The Grey Warden, Lady Elissa Cousland of Highever! The Grey Warden, Alistair Theirin! Enchanter Wynne, of the Circle of Magi! These petitioners come before you seeking the justice of the Landsmeet! By the Maker's grace, may they be heard and judged with wisdom."

The voices that had been raised in debate fell silent as they entered, and a slow murmur of speculation began to swell in their place as they took in Alistair's, resplendent in Cailan's golden armor, and Elissa's protruding belly and wallowing gait. Only a few of the faces were familiar: Arl Bryland, who gave her an encouraging smile; Bann Alfstanna, looking stern and competent in her leather armor rather than court dress; Bann Sighard, who actually bowed to them as they passed.

Elissa flinched as she heard a familiar voice yell out, its strange sensuality lost in bitter sneer. "Ah! And here we have the puppeteer! This profligate girl plys the Cousland trade well, as we can all see. Tell us, 'Warden,' how will the Orlesians steal our nation from us? Will they deign to send troops, or simply issue their commands through this would-be prince as you pull him along by his... lead?"

There was a part of Elissa that wanted to answer him hotly, decry his slander and fling accusations back at him, but she stopped herself. She was to play the serene and delicate girl, wrongly accused. She was to make them want to defend her against his bullying and make his wild accusations seem mad compared with her calm and quiet reason.

"You prattle about the Orlesians, Loghain, while the darkspawn overtake our nation," she said, calmly, ignoring his insinuation. "The Blight is the threat we face here, a threat from which you have distracted us, to the ruin of a great deal of our noble land."

"As evidenced by the refugees pouring into my bannorn every day," Bann Alfstanna agreed.

"The south has fallen, Loghain!" Arl Wulff cried. "Even this chit can see that, while you just rant endlessly about Orlais. Will you let the darkspawn take the whole country?"

"It is not the reality of the Blight that I doubt, Wulff," Loghain replied. "Only claims that we need Grey Wardens to fight it. They say they alone can defeat the Blight, yet they failed spectacularly at Ostagar. Of course, we can all see why fighting the darkspawn may have been of secondary importance to this one," he jeered with a dismissive wave of his hand at Elissa. A discontented grumbling arose at his vulgar implication, but she couldn't be certain if they were offended by her, or his words.

"Perhaps you were the one preoccupied at Ostagar, Loghain," Fergus answered with cold fury.
"After all, it must have been a terrible burden, plotting the demise of so many of your political rivals all at once, such as the poisoning of Arl Eamon by an apostate you employed before you ever left for Ostagar. Then, of course, there is the matter of Rendon Howe's attack on Highever, which resulted in the deaths of all my family, save my sister. Even down to my six-year-old son."

Indignant gasps and mutters followed that news. Though they had known the Couslands had been killed, few had considered the innocents that had been murdered as well.

Loghain shrugged. "I cannot see any great ill in Howe ridding Ferelden of a whoring clan of Orlesian conspirators."

"The Couslands were no such thing!" Arl Bryland shouted angrily. "I stood beside Bryce Cousland against Orlais and he fought just as hard for the freedom of Ferelden as you did, Loghain! They were true Fereldans, loyal and honorable to the last!"

"Yes," Loghain drawled, looking pointedly at Elissa. "We can all see just how honorable the Couslands are. But it is of no matter. Their rivalry with Howe has nothing to do with our discussion here today."

"It does if you set Howe upon the task," Fergus countered. "I spent many months in Howe's dungeons. He was most forthcoming about whose idea it was to kill my father, and Bann Alfstanna's brother can testify to your involvement in Arl Eamon's attempted murder."

"Seen in that light," Bryland interjected, "your actions at Ostagar raise troubling questions, Loghain. One might think you were clearing the way for a bid for the throne. Did you even attempt to defend the king?"

"The king allowed himself to be seduced by the Grey Wardens and their tales of griffons flying into battle," Loghain argued. "I saved the lives of as many troops as I could once I saw the battle was lost. No one regrets the death of Maric's son, my king, more than I do."

"Do you also regret imprisoning and torturing Ferelden citizens?" Elissa asked sharply. "My brother was not the only nobleman freed from Howe's dungeon."

"The Warden speaks the truth!" Bann Sighard shouted. "My son was taken under cover of night as he searched for a man who reported being ordered to leave the field at Ostagar before King Cailan fell. Oswyn will be fortunate to walk again."

"Howe was responsible for himself," Loghain declared, pacing agitatedly. "He will answer to the Maker for his actions, as must we all."

"And will you answer to the Maker for selling Ferelden citizens into slavery?" Alistair asked, his voice cold but steady.

Loghain's face darkened with rage as a new outcry erupted, led by Bann Sighard. The muttering of the gathered nobles grew uglier as the regent was forced to attempt to justify his actions in the Alienage.

Loghain paused until he had their attention. "What of you, Warden? What have you done to save this land? Whatever Bryland may claim, we all know the tales about the Couslands. Stories of wild debaucheries from Redcliffe and all across Ferelden have reached us here in Denerim. You claim to be defending our land from the Blight, but one wonders when you've found the time."

"The Warden saved Redcliffe Village," Teagan spoke firmly, stepping up to stand beside Eamon. "I was there. She saved my sister-in-law and nephew when she might have let either of them die, saved
my brother from Loghain's assassination attempt. I will vouch for her conduct."

"We have provided incontrovertible proof of your crimes, Loghain," Elissa said, lifting her chin proudly. "Yet all you can do is fling slanderous gossip about my family and unsubstantiated accusations of lewd conduct. Have you no proof of your own to provide?"

"Proof?" Loghain chuckled, a rude, knowing sound. "Shall I testify for the Landsmeet then, Warden, and tell them the things you said to me that day at Fort Drakon? The things you begged me to do?"

Elissa stared at him a moment, unwilling to believe he'd actually opened that door. Did he believe he could smear her character enough to justify his actions that day?

"The day you tortured me, you mean," she clarified, sounding anything but calm. She made a deliberate show of stroking her belly, attempting to look innocent and aggrieved as another low rumble began to build in the crowd. "The day you suspended me by my wrists, so that I could not even shift my stance to ease the weight of my babe off my back?"

The grumbling grew louder.

She made no effort to stop the gleam of tears that came to her eyes as she recalled what had passed in the dungeon. Damn them all, she would play the victim if that was what it took to stop him. "The day you pierced my flesh with silver spikes? The day you threatened to have me flayed with a whip? The day you vowed to have King Maric's son killed if I disobeyed your lewd commands? If that is the day you speak of, Loghain, then I submit to the Landsmeet that I spoke naught but the words my captor demanded of me as the price for our freedom and the safety of my child."

"That is not how it happened!" Loghain protested, concern touching his eyes as horrified voices demanded he answer the charges she laid against him. "I have a witness to the confessions you made that day, Warden, a witness to just how unfit you are to guide Ferelden through this conflict!"

Loghain raised his hand and Ser Cauthrien came forth, looking troubled. "Tell the Landsmeet what you witnessed that day, Cauthrien."

The knight closed her eyes for a long moment, then looked around the Landsmeet chamber. "Twice," she said slowly, "did the Warden speak without first being bidden to do so by the regent. The first time, she requested water to wash herself after the regent allowed his men to defile her. The second time," Ser Cauthrien paused, waiting for the stunned gasps and outcries to fade. Once they had, she drew a deep breath in the waiting silence. "The second time she begged the regent not to harm her babe when he threatened to let a mage stop its heart."

Loghain's eyes bulged with disbelief as he stared at his trusted knight, and Cauthrien bowed her head miserably. "Forgive me, my lord," she said so softly only Elissa and Loghain could hear. "But there must be an end to this madness."

"This is an outrage, Loghain!" Arl Bryland shouted. "You would abuse a young noblewoman, and she with child? Whatever improprieties the girl may or may not have committed, this cannot stand! If this girl isn't safe from your insanity, none of our children are!"

It was a bitter victory to see them all turn against him as they did, for it was bought at the cost of her dissemblance. They saw her as fragile and vulnerable, in need of protection. They did not see all she had done, all the long months of danger and toil. But she would play the role to bring him down. She would do it for her family, for Duncan, for Cailan, for her nation torn apart by this man's madness.

She would lie to the Maker himself at the very gates of the Black City to end Loghain.
The entrance of Anora was almost insignificant as the debate devolved into a furor, though Loghain attempted to hurl an accusation of kidnapping at the Grey Wardens. Whether or not the queen would have supported them once she saw Alistair arrayed in Cailan’s armor ceased to matter. When Anora realized that the Landsmeet was firmly set against Loghain, she had no choice but to support the Elissa and Alistair if she wanted any chance to keep her throne.

Elissa wasn’t sure if she admired the queen for her single-minded determination, or despised her for caring about her crown for more than any person she claimed to love.

"So, the Warden’s influence has poisoned even your mind, Anora?" Loghain hunched over for a moment, as though he’d taken a hard physical blow. To be betrayed twice in the space of minutes had thrown him, taken out of him some of the zealous passion that had driven his arguments.

Elissa found she could almost pity him. Almost. There was no room for pity in the churning maelstrom of loathing she felt for him, nor in the screaming demand for justice that reverberated through her mind.

The vote was nearly unanimous against Loghain. Even Bann Ceorlic, the one holdout, looked awkward and uncomfortable when he voted in Loghain's favor. As more and more voices threw their support to her and Alistair, Elissa felt some of the crushing burden of fear lifting from her heart.

"The Landsmeet is against you, Loghain," she said with a genteel calm she did not feel, elation and something she did not dare name warring within her. "Step down."

She could meet Loghain's eyes proudly, she discovered, without the sickening sense of powerlessness threatening to drag her under. And yet it still wasn't enough. Maker help her, she needed to see him destroyed. She was almost relieved when he refused to abide by the judgment of the Landsmeet and called for a duel.

When Loghain faced her again, his affectations of disdain for her were gone, and she could see again what she saw that day in the dungeon, some small hint of admiration or respect.

"I would never have thought it would come to this, that day we met at Ostagar," he said quietly, speaking to her alone as though there was not an entire audience chamber full of people present. She could not help but recall the intimacy of his kisses. "But that seems like it happened in another lifetime. Maric once said to me that a man is made by the quality of his enemies. I wonder if it's more a compliment to you or me?"

Elissa dropped her eyes as the terms of the duel were declared, uncertain how to respond. She wondered if it might have all been different, had they not positioned themselves as enemies that afternoon at Ostagar when they both spoke so recklessly to one another. Had Loghain not orchestrated the death of her family, had Duncan attempted to work with Loghain to make Cailan see reason rather than allowing him to charge heedlessly against the darkspawn ill-prepared. They might have accomplished great things, the Grey Wardens and Loghain, and spared Ferelden much.

Could she had done aught to prevent this from coming to pass? she wondered.

It didn’t matter, she realized with a sigh. She could not undo the past. If she ever wanted to sleep peacefully again, she knew this man who had shamed and humiliated her, who had stripped her of everything that made her feel strong, must die.

"I assume you'll be naming a champion?" Loghain asked with a touch of irony, and Elissa could feel the ripple of amusement that ran through the Landsmeet chamber at her expense.
Once again, it stung her pride, to be discounted so, but she gave him a small, amused smile. "Naturally," she answered. "Alistair Theirin shall be my champion."

Again, a wave of murmurs through the chamber as Alistair stepped forward. "So be it," Loghain said with a touch of disdain. "Let us test the mettle of this would-be king."

As Loghain withdrew to arm and prepare himself, Elissa met Alistair's determined gaze, the bitter taste of fear upon her tongue. "I would beg you not to think of Duncan, or of Fort Drakon, but I know it would be futile. Do not let it make you reckless. You are not Oghren, to harness your rage to devastating effect. We are here for justice, and none will be had if your anger gives you a vulnerability he may exploit."

Alistair nodded grimly and stepped to the center of the chamber, drawing Maric's sword. He looked every inch the young, regal king in that moment, beautiful to behold and deadly of purpose. But Cailan, too, had looked beautiful when she last saw him, striding off toward battle, and Elissa felt her fear would choke her as Loghain and Alistair faced off. Alistair had youth and righteous anger on his side, but Loghain fought with a bitter, desperate fury. The battle seemed to take forever, as both men grew weary, their reactions slower, their breaths beginning to come in great, ragged heaves.

And then somehow, Loghain was on his knees, disarmed and defeated. Alistair did not hesitate. He invoked Duncan's name and swung his sword one last time and Loghain's headless body crumpled upon the floor of the Landsmeet chamber. The silence was broken only by Anora's soft weeping as she knelt by her father's body, until the majordomo came forth with a corps of ceremonial guards to carry the corpse away. Ser Cauthrien waved one of the guards off and took his place, accompanying Loghain's body as it was taken to be prepared for a pyre.

Eamon suggested a recess, after which they would reconvene to discuss the matter of the succession, which was granted. The nobles filed out of the Landsmeet chamber, their conversations a discordant buzz in the back of Elissa's mind. She found herself riveted to the floor, unable to move or stop staring at that puddle of blood.

She'd gotten her justice. Justice for herself, for her family, for Cailan and Duncan and the countless soldiers who had died at Ostagar and even more, those who had died fighting Loghain's civil war while the Blight ravaged their lands. They'd brought him down. He'd never make her feel trapped and powerless again.

Where was the sense of elation she should have felt?

"Are you coming?" Alistair asked quietly, reaching for her arm but stopping himself lest he get blood upon her gown.

"Yes," she murmured, looking at that bloodstain a final time before turning away.

During the recess, Fergus attempted to clean Alistair's armor and face as best they could, while Elissa sat, weary and dazed and silent nearby. They all spoke surprisingly little; whether due to relief or ambivalence, she couldn't be certain. They had won a tremendous victory; why did they all feel so grim?

After a brief repast, the Landsmeet was called back into session. Elissa indicated that Alistair should enter first, and fell into step behind him, beside her brother. After Loghain's accusations that she was the one who led Alistair, she knew they must see him standing alone, the king who would lead them.

Eamon stepped forward to meet them. "So it is decided," he announced. "Alistair will take his father's throne."
Elissa glanced over at Anora, who had used the recess to change out of the gown which had been splattered with her father's blood. She looked cool and composed, except for the fury in her eyes. Perhaps there was more passion in the queen than anyone had ever suspected.

"I accept this decision," Alistair said solemnly, and when Elissa looked at him, his eyes were calm and certain. "And Lady Elissa Cousland will rule beside me as my queen."

Gasp of shock and troubled murmurs of concern threatened to swell to a din as Elissa stared at him, the blood draining from her face. Whatever she had expected he would do after their conversation that morning, this was not it.

"There's something I need to show you, Alistair." She swallowed nervously as Fergus closed the door behind him. She crossed to her packs and knelt beside one, digging through it until she found the parchment she sought.

"I was going to destroy this," she explained as she rose to bring it to him. "I thought it would be the only way to ever truly prove that I love you far more than I desire any crown."

She placed the parchment in Alistair's hands, her fingers closing tightly upon his for a moment. "But after what you said the other night, how bravely you've resigned yourself to taking a throne you never wanted, I realized it wouldn't be fair to deny you the chance to choose for yourself. And so I'm giving it to you, to do with it what you will."

Elissa bowed her head. "I'm asking you now, if you suspect there is any chance—any chance at all—that someday you may think I have used or mislead you, hold it over the candle and destroy it. I will stand beside you all the same, whatever you choose, for as long as you will have me."

"Your Majesty," Eamon said carefully, "Surely there is time to decide these matters later...."

"No, there is not," Alistair declared. "Not when I may fall in battle against the Blight at any time. This is what my brother intended."

He withdrew the parchment Elissa had given him and passed it along to Eamon, who scanned it quickly.

Elissa thought she might faint, so loud was the roaring of her blood in her ears. She had thought Alistair would wait until the political situation had settled somewhat, at the very least, before deciding what to do with it, not share it before the whole Landsmeet! Maker's breath, what was he thinking?

"This letter is in Cailan's hand. It bears the royal seal and is dated two nights before the battle at Ostagar," Eamon explained for the sake of the other nobles. "It details King Cailan's intention to set Queen Anora aside due to their failure to produce an heir together, and marry Lady Elissa Cousland. The king states that if he should fall in battle before the betrothal could be formalized, any offspring Lady Cousland might bear within the appropriate amount of time should be considered his own issue."

She heard a sound from beside her, where her brother stood, that might have been a muffled laugh disguised behind a cough. The nobles muttered, and Elissa could practically hear them counting on their fingers the number of months that had passed since Ostagar.

"This is absurd!" Anora protested. Elissa spared her a glance and felt a surge of guilt when she beheld the queen's pale, shocked face. Anora had never done her any wrong, and yet she had taken everything from the queen. "You all heard what my father said about this girl, this Grey Warden. She
could claim any man's child was my husband's and no one could disprove it!"

Eamon drew a deep breath, rolling the parchment purposefully as he resigned himself to see this new development through. "You'll forgive me, Anora, but you're hardly the best person to mediate this matter. Not to be indecent, but the letter does make mention of the fact that King Cailan had ample evidence of Lady Cousland's chastity."

"I can vouch for that as well," Arl Bryland, her father's friend and once her mother's lover, announced. "I was friends with the Couslands for many years and saw how the teyrn and his wife sheltered the girl. Who here among us ever saw her at court, even after she reached the age when she should have been presented? Bryce and Eleanor were honorable people, no matter what Loghain may have insinuated, and their daughter is an honorable woman."

After a moment of hesitation, Teagan added his voice in agreement, and Bann Alfstanna after him, citing her own familiarity with the Couslands as evidence of Elissa's character. Elissa stared at them, awestruck, particularly at Teagan, who knew he lied. He merely gave her a solemn bow.

"Then it's settled," Alistair said firmly. "Lady Cousland will be my queen and will rule in my absence. If I fall in battle, or fail to produce an heir of my own, my brother's child will be my heir. My first choice, were matters different, would be to have my fellow Grey Warden lead my troops. Since that's not possible, Teyrn Fergus Cousland will serve as my general in his sister's place."

There were no voices of dissent save Anora's. Elissa supposed after the insult she had been dealt that the queen would not step aside peacefully. Alistair was forced to have her imprisoned, her fate to be decided after the Blight had been dealt with.

She watched, astonished as Alistair fell almost effortlessly into his new role, speaking with passion and authority, inspiring the Landsmeet and winning their confidence. After all that had gone before, it seemed almost ridiculously easy that they found themselves finally in motion against the Blight.

She would have expected Fergus to be gloatingly gleeful as he hovered at the fringes of their activity. Instead as she began making arrangements for they royal suites to be prepared for them and their belongings to be brought from Arl Eamon's estate, he looked dejected.

She understood, as perhaps only another Cousland could. This day's triumph would not replace all they had lost.

She found herself sending the chamberlain off to carry out her bidding while Alistair conferred with Arl Eamon. She approached her brother where he milled about, looking as though he didn't quite know what to do with himself.

"I'm sorry," she said, taking his hand. "With the preparations for war, it's going to take some time before we can get our Denerim estate cleared of Howe's men, and probably a good deal longer after that before it can be restored to habitable condition. I know you wanted to go home, but I hope the palace will do for now?"

"Of course, Your Majesty," he gave a courtly bow, attempting a teasing smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Oh, stop it," she muttered. "I'm not queen yet."

"No," Fergus agreed, growing serious once more. "But Mother and Father would be proud of all you've accomplished here, pup. Don't worry about me. It's probably actually best that I'm not at our estate alone. Too many memories."
"I understand," Elissa said solemnly. Her brother met her eyes and Elissa saw in them a deep understanding of the sorrow and grief that even Alistair couldn’t quite comprehend. She wanted to draw Fergus to her and hold him, to commune in their grief and shared loss, but now was not the time. Instead, she squeezed his hand once more and returned to Alistair’s side as Arl Eamon bowed—bowed to him, Elissa noted with satisfaction—and was dismissed.

"Now," Alistair growled in her ear when he saw they had a rare moment of privacy, "when are these rooms of ours going to be ready? We are going to have a very long talk about you keeping that letter from me and making me think I was going to have to do all this alone!"
Exigency

Chapter Summary

The day before Alistair departs to lead the army against the Blight, he and Elissa share a moment. Morrigan and Elissa have a talk about their differences.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Alistair

Since the Blight seemed to be moving north and west, the decision was made to gather the armies at Redcliffe and march against it from there. The five days it took to prepare the royal entourage—and Alistair turned pale and looked faint the first time he heard it referred to as such—to depart for Redcliffe were passed in a frenzy of activity.

The first order of business, upon which both Alistair and Fergus were adamant, needed to be a wedding. Elissa could only imagine what Eamon would have had to say about it had he not departed for Redcliffe the morning after the Landsmeet to prepare for the arrival of the army. The arl seemed affronted that Alistair had completely side-stepped him on the business of choosing a bride to begin with. She herself thought it was an unnecessary distraction, but she was overruled by Alistair. She considered it a sentimental undertaking on Alistair's part until Fergus confessed it was his idea.

"Have you gone mad?" she shouted, rounding furiously on her brother once they were alone. These days it seemed her temper was hanging by a thread, a combination of her discomfort and impatience with being pregnant and the pressures of preparing to send an army to war. "We've only just convinced the Landsmeet that the Grey Wardens are not grasping for power and you give Alistair the idea to rush a wedding without the proper formalities? Andraste's ass, Fergus! This is not the time for Cousland ambition!"

"If Alistair falls in battle, Ferelden will be without a ruler if we don't solidify your place as Alistair's queen and the babe as his heir," Fergus said patiently. "The last thing we need is another civil war so soon after the succession has been decided. This is the politically expedient thing to do, pup."

She'd immediately felt contrite for not giving Alistair and her brother more credit for sensible motivations and acquiesced to the scheme. The Grand Cleric was summoned—as well as the few members of the nobility who had not yet departed for their own arlings and bannorns—to serve as witnesses in addition to their own companions for a very impromptu royal wedding. Elissa was certain there would be pressure for a more formal affair at some point in the future, but once she resigned herself to the idea, it seemed fitting that their wedding should be an understated event. Still, it was a relief to have it done with so that they could turn their attention to more pressing affairs.

It was not merely their companions who would be accompanying Alistair back to Redcliffe, but half the city guard as well. Alistair wasn't happy leaving Elissa in Denerim with a depleted guard, but since the royal army had been effectively destroyed at Ostagar, Denerim actually had very few troops remaining to contribute to the combined army the Grey Wardens had pulled together. Elissa sent Zevran to seek out the Crimson Oars and the other mercenary companies Loghain had assembled and convince them—with gold, if necessary—that with Loghain's death, their allegiance was being paid for by the new king.

Thus, Alistair would be traveling to Redcliffe with an army at his back, and at the core of it would be
an honor guard assembled of the companions they had gathered through their travels.

She and Alistair had one truly spectacular quarrel during that time, and that was over whether Wynne would accompany Alistair into battle, or remain in Denerim to act as midwife to Elissa when the babe came. Elissa had immediately dismissed the midwives who had attended Anora when they reacted in horror to the level of activity she engaged in even in these final weeks of her pregnancy. They seemed to be under the impression that she could not possibly bring the babe to birth safely unless she spent her pregnancy abed.

"Do you imagine the darkspawn I've fought over the last nine months simply pierced themselves upon my arrows while I rested?" she asked scathingly when the one who identified herself as the chief midwife told her she was endangering her babe by being on her feet. "It's little wonder Queen Anora failed to produce an heir with you ignorant lot attending her."

Once Alistair learned of what she had done, he had insisted that she keep Wynne with her. Elissa was equally determined that Wynne should go with Alistair, as he would have no healer in his personal guard otherwise. He argued that he could find another spirit healer among the Circle mages that would be joining the army, to which Elissa replied that she hadn't the knowledge of or faith in those healers that she had in Wynne.

When Alistair threatened to delay his departure for Redcliffe until after Elissa gave birth so that Wynne could be with her—a proposition that sent Elissa into a rage—Wynne finally stepped in and settled the dispute. Elissa had no idea where she found the midwife she produced—she suspected the woman was one of the mages of the Collective—but the woman was so ancient and frail in appearance that Elissa wondered that a simple breeze wouldn't knock her over.

"Alba is a strong mage with healer talents, and a very competent midwife," Wynne explained when Alistair stared at the mage skeptically. "She attended the birth of my own son, many years ago, before she... retired from the Circle. She will attend the queen and I will go into battle with the king."

It took Alistair testing the mage with his templar talents—stopping just short of actually smiting the old woman, whose diminutive stature was only partially explained when she removed her cowl to reveal her pointed ears—before he gave his approval to the plan. From that moment on, Elissa learned her status as the queen of Ferelden meant absolutely nothing to the venerable old mage. The elf shared her disdain for inactivity, but nonetheless implemented and enforced a strict schedule for eating and resting at intervals when Elissa would have allowed the business of preparing for Alistair's departure to cause her to forget such things. She quickly came to dread the sharpness of the old woman's tongue and learned that unquestioning obedience was the only hope for sparing herself a verbal flaying.

She woke early from her afternoon nap the day before Alistair was due to leave for Redcliffe to find Alistair slipping quietly into her chambers. He was dressed only in his a linen shirt and a simple pair of leather breeches, which meant he had taken the time to stop by his own chambers to remove his armor and change his clothing. She wondered if he'd summoned one of his body servants to help him; having an attendant—much less several of them—for dealing with the complicated process of donning and doffing his armor after so many months of relying upon his companions for such services in the wilderness was proving a bit of an adjustment.

"Did I wake you?" he asked when he saw her eyes were open.

"It doesn't matter," she said dismissively, struggling to sit as he crossed the huge chamber to her bed. She spent most nights in his chamber but found it to be less disruptive to the routine of his personal retainers if she napped in her own. "What are you doing here in the middle of the day?"
"I find myself with surprisingly little left to do," he said, looking perplexed. "All the preparations are made, except for a few details Fergus insists on seeing to himself as general of the royal army. All that remains to do at this point is wait for sunrise so that we can depart, since it's too late to leave today."

"I see," Elissa said, not entirely happily. She hated the thought that she would not be going with him into battle, that she would not be there beside him to bring the archdemon down after all they had done together. But she forced herself to push those thoughts aside; there was no help for it. She simple could not cross Ferelden again this close to the babe's coming, much less do so marching at an army's pace. "Then what is your intention, husband?"

"Well, no sooner did I come to the realization that I was completely unnecessary then that midwife of yours cornered me. She's scary, you know."

"I do, indeed," Elissa said with humor.

"Anyway, completely oblivious to my discomfiture, she informed me that there is one service I can provide my queen before I leave."

"Oh?"

"Oh, yes," Alistair nodded, a smile she knew all too well flitting about his lips as he stripped off his shirt and crawled onto her enormous bed. Elissa allowed herself to be momentarily distracted by the taut flexing of his buttocks beneath the snug leather of his breeches. "She tells me that you're getting rather impatient with being pregnant."

"Well, it would be nice to not wallow around like a drunken bronto everywhere I go," Elissa agreed. "And having a day pass without my back aching abominably would be grand. Or to be able to wear my boots again, which I've been unable to do this past week due to this horrid swelling of my ankles. Not to mention going longer than an hour without having to use the necessity. Speaking of which...."

Grimacing, she rose from the bed and ducked into the garderobe, emerging a moment later much more comfortable, though considerably lighter of dignity.

"As I was saying," Alistair continued, sprawled comfortably across the silk coverlet on her bed. The muscles of his back rippled as he rolled up onto his side, drawing her frankly admiring attention. "According to Alba, sex can help bring on labor."

"Yes, she said much the same to me," Elissa acknowledged with a small smile, climbing ungracefully onto the high bed.

"And when were you planning on mentioning this to me?" he asked, reaching for the hem of her shift.

"Hmm, should I have done so when you were pouring yourself into bed in the middle of the night utterly exhausted? Or perhaps an hour or two later when we both woke up screaming from nightmares of the archdemon? Or maybe at the very crack of dawn when we both dragged ourselves out of bed to begin the whole thing again?" She lifted an eyebrow at him. "Really, Alistair, you simply must appoint a chancellor to help you attend to these things."

"True. I was thinking after we've defeated the Blight of perhaps offering Fergus that position."

Elissa shook her head. "No. He's going to have his hands full getting Highever back on its feet, and administrative affairs were never his strong suit. Besides, it would look too much like a Cousland grab for power to have both of us so close to you. I'd recommend Eamon."
"Really?" Alistair looked surprised. "After all you said about him trying to run Ferelden through me?"

"It will placate him after the way you circumvented him in the matter of choosing a wife, and I'll be here to counterbalance him should he get it in his head that he has more authority than he does."

Alistair began to respond then shut his mouth with a snap, looking irritated. "Maker's breath, are we honestly going to sit and talk politics in bed together on my last evening with you here?" he asked, blowing out his breath with a huff.

Elissa gave him an apologetic shrug and a contrite, if flirtatious, smile. "My apologies, husband. You had something else you'd rather discuss?"

"Actually, I'm under rather strict orders by that martinet masquerading as a midwife you employ to make love to you at least once before I leave."

"At least once?"

"At the very least," he confirmed, his voice dropping low.

"I see. Well, if I've learned nothing these past days, I've learned it simply does not do to disobey Alba."

"I think I came to much the same conclusion," Alistair agreed as she let him raise her shift over her head and toss it away.

His hand came up immediately to cup her breast, his thumb stroking across the peak as it grew taut. "I was informed that this is especially useful in helping to bring about labor," he murmured, leaning close to draw her nipple into his mouth. He hummed as he collected a small amount of thick, creamy fluid on his tongue.

"I'm very much in favor of this plan," Elissa sighed, feeling the languid warmth of arousal suffuse her even as other parts of her body tightened pleasantly. "But why all this interest in bringing on my labor?"

When Alistair raised his head, there was something dark and troubled in his eyes. He looked afraid. "It's going to drive me crazy to be out there not knowing how you're—if you've—" His voice trailed off uncertainly.

"I'll be fine, Alistair," Elissa murmured, sliding her knuckles down the line of his jaw. "I'm young and strong and it's been a very healthy pregnancy."

"But women die. My mother died."

"I can't give you any guarantees, my love. It will be as the Maker wills," she said softly, then she smiled, trying to lighten his mood. "But your mother didn't have a martinet whom I've been assured is the most powerful healer in all of Ferelden looking after her during her confinement."

"I know. I know. You're right," he sighed, laying his head on her belly. The babe immediately began kicking, either curious about or unhappy with the pressure. "But if I have to leave not knowing, it will haunt me every day."

"Do you think I won't feel the same?" she asked unhappily. "To know you're out there facing the Blight without me by your side... It will be agony to be here and not know how you're faring. But this is what we must do, Alistair. You must lead our people against the Blight. And I cannot go with
'you, however desperately I wish it could be otherwise.'

He clasped her to him then, so hard it was nearly painful, depriving her of breath. And yet Elissa clung to him, holding him even tighter.

"I'll do everything I can to come back to you, my love," he vowed, pressing his lips into her hair. "I swear it."

Darkness had fallen before they slept, weary and replete, but Elissa woke not long after for yet another trip to the privy. She ached pleasantly from Alistair's determined lovemaking, which had featured an ambitious number of orgasms (also per Alba's instructions, Alistair had explained with his head between her legs) and she took the time to wash her sticky thighs after she'd attended to her most urgent need.

She felt the periodic surges of tension in her womb that seemed to come and go at times and picked at the tray of food her maid had brought for them at supper while she waited to see if they would continue. Deciding they were intense enough that it couldn't hurt to encourage matters along, she resolved to walk for a while, an exercise Alba told her would aid labor once it began.

Donning her shift and a light dressing gown and stepping into her slippers—thankfully it was not necessary to bend over to put them on—she left the chamber so that she wouldn't wake Alistair and worry him unduly. Her mabari, sleeping in his accustomed spot near her door, immediately rose to join her, panting contentedly at her side.

The normally active palace was strangely silent, save for the occasional guard patrolling the hallways. They bowed politely and she greeted them with a dignified nod. She came to a long, wide gallery lined with portraits of Theirin kings and queens who had ruled since the days of King Calenhad. Someday, when the Blight was over and there was time for such niceties, Alistair's portrait would join them, and perhaps her child's as well. She paused for a long while before Cailan's portrait, sparing a moment to wonder—as she had in the Landsmeet—just where Ferelden would be now had Ostagar turned out differently. Would things have been worse, with Cailan mismanaging the war against the darkspawn? What sort of Ferelden would she had brought her babe into had things gone otherwise?

At the end of the gallery a tall door opened onto a balcony that overlooked the gardens. Elissa stepped out onto it, pausing a moment to adjust as the damp coolness of the interior of the palace gave way to the hot, humid air outside. The night had only cooled the miserably hot day to a barely tolerable temperature, and Elissa was about to retreat back within the cool, thick stone walls of the palace when a shadow moving down in the garden. The shape resolved itself into a familiar wolf, and its yellow eyes looked up as though it sensed her staring at it. The wolf wavered, shimmered, and began to dissolve, and in a moment it was no longer there. From where it had stood, a large hawk or falcon launched itself from the ground and flew to the balcony. Once again, the shape wavered and grew indistinct, and then suddenly Morrigan was standing before her.

"Unable to rest, Warden?" the witch asked coolly. "I would have expected you to be abed with your beloved."

"And so I would be, if my blasted womb would decide whether or not it's serious about having this babe," Elissa answered impatiently. As ever, Morrigan glanced away and looked discomfited by mention of her pregnancy.

"'Tis a curious thing," Morrigan said after a long, thoughtful moment. "I scarcely know what to make of it."
"Shall I venture a guess as to what you're referring? Is it possible you've just had your first feeling?" Elissa asked tartly, then immediately regretted it. She and Morrigan had never become friendly, Morrigan's stand-offishness had seen to that, but she'd never sought to antagonize the witch before. It was the heat and her discomfort and weariness, she thought, irritated with herself.

Morrigan seemed amused by her acerbic response, however. "That would be unlikely, wouldn't it? I am reminded of the first time I saw you in the Wilds. I had been watching you for some time in my animal form, intrigued. You were much younger and clearly less proficient at arms than the men you accompanied, and yet you carried with you an aura of power and authority and they deferred to you. It was not until that night when I saw you slip into the tent of one of your fellow Wardens that I saw how very much alike we actually are. We both know our power over men and how to get the most out of it. I suppose that's why I resented it so when Flemeth sent me to travel with you. In some ways, we are too much alike, you and I. I assumed you would drive me from your company in short order."

"We've never been close, it's true," Elissa acknowledged. "But why would I do that?"

"There is only so much room for women like us in a given group. You drew the men—and even the other women—to you like a lodestone, and made even those you did not take to your bed care for you. And even though I did not want them, still there seemed to be nothing left for me. I am well aware that I have little talent for forming friendships," Morrigan confessed. "I know nearly nothing about such things, and see little use for them."

"Whereas, I've recently been told, forming bonds of affection is one of my strengths," Elissa agreed. "Yes, I can see why we puzzle each other so."

Morrigan nodded. "Yet, when I discovered Flemeth's plans, you did not abandon me. It could have cost the lives of companions you valued far more highly than me, but still you fought that terrible battle on my behalf."

"Once again you've managed to misunderstand me," Elissa sighed. "I may feel more affection for others amongst our party, but you have been my companion as well. Your life has no less value to me than that of any other in our company."

"And that is what I do not understand!" Morrigan said in frustration. "I am not your friend nor am I your lover. My usefulness does not explain why you made overtures of, well, friendship toward me in those early days after we left the Wilds, before I rebuffed you. You could have ignored me entirely, and yet you did not. Instead, you put yourself, and your child, and the rest of your companions in danger to defend me."

"You are one of my people, Morrigan," Elissa explained. "It's as simple as that. Whether we are close or not has no bearing on it. You have fought beside me, risked your life and bled in my cause. We may not have friendship between us, you and I, but there is still a loyalty there, an allegiance. Your life has value to me not because of the camaraderie you provide, or the services you render, but because you are one of my people. I can do no less."

"I see," the witch bowed her head, seeming troubled. "I still do not know what to make of it, but no matter. I only wish to say... I am grateful for this loyalty, this... allegiance you have shown me. Perhaps I have been unworthy of it, but I shall always value it. I wanted you to know that, before I leave here, for I have no intention of returning after the archdemon is dead."

"Thank you," Elissa said with a nod. "I appreciate the thought."

"I also wish you to know that perhaps I can reciprocate the service you have done me. It may be you
will not care for it when the time comes, but I will do my best.”

Before Elissa could respond to that last cryptic statement, Morrigan was gone, and a hawk was winging away from the balcony, leaving Elissa to stare after its dark shape, disturbed.

After Morrigan had departed, Elissa realized the tightening in her belly had once again ceased entirely, and disappointed, she began to walk back to her chambers to rest as best she could. She was nearly to her door when she heard the scream of the archdemon echo through her mind, followed by Alistair's yell from inside her chamber.

She ran the rest of the way to find him sitting up in her bed, panting and sweating, his eyes wild and frightened. "Did you hear it?" he gasped.

"Yes, even fully awake I heard it," she said, scrambling onto the bed. "It was like that night the shrieks attacked our camp. It's getting stronger."

"And what is it we know?"

"That one way or the other, this is coming to an end," he answered, his voice hard and his eyes bleak.

She flung herself at him, clinging to him. "Alistair, I'm afraid."

"I am, too," he whispered, gripping her tightly.

Their coming together was thunder and fury, hands clutching and kneading as their mouths clashed against each other, open and frantic. Alistair tore at her dressing gown and shift, rough and urgent in his need to have her bare skin against his. The echoes of the archdemon were drowned out by feral cries of another sort as they clawed and bit at one another, surging together as though they could drive their fear away with desperate thrusts of their bodies.

The sky was beginning to hint at the first predawn light when Elissa came the final time, looking down at him, her face wet with tears she could not remember shedding. And then there was no more time as Alistair returned to his chambers to allow his grooms to dress and arm him for the march to Redcliffe.

Strangely, there were no tears at the king’s departure, a formal and ceremonial affair at the city gates where all the court and a good portion of the citizens turned out to bid him farewell. Elissa stood there solemn and silent, arrayed in her finest gown, as Alistair bent and placed a chaste kiss upon her cheek. There was a murmur of approval from what little of the court remained, and she knew what a heroic and romantic picture the two of them must have made, their leave-taking so dignified and yet tragically poignant.

She stood there until long after the forms of Alistair and her brother, walking side-by-side to war, disappeared in the distance. Then with a sigh she straightened her shoulders and returned to the palace and her duty.
Endgame, Part 1: The Queen's Sacrifice

Chapter Summary

Managing affairs in Denerim, Elissa received shocking news from Riordan about what is necessary to end the Blight.

Chapter Pairings: Elissa/Alistair, Elissa/Riordan (UST)

The call of the archdemon strengthened as the days passed and Elissa stoically went about the business of administrating the affairs of the kingdom in her husband's absence. She immediately began to regret releasing Urien's son Vaughan from Howe's dungeons. Her first inclination had been to let him rot after what the elf in the dungeons had told her about his actions in the Alienage, but she had thought she might need his voice in the Landsmeet. Unfortunately, he proved useless in the matter of actually fulfilling his duty as the new Arl of Denerim, which meant the job of managing the city fell to her as well.

When word reached her through the city guard that Vaughan was once again harassing female elves within the Alienage, Elissa summoned him to the palace to explain himself. He arrived drunk and insolent, sneering at Elissa's reprimand.

"Don't get above yourself, girl. You may have pretensions of being queen, but don't think we weren't listening to what Loghain said about you," Vaughan slurred, staggering toward her. "You know, this is the reason I go to the Alienage. At least the whores there know how to put their mouths to better use than nagging a man to death."

Elissa's snarl of offense was lost beneath Alba's outraged yell and her lady-in-waiting, Valaria's, horrified gasp. As he attempted to grab her, two things happened simultaneously. Vaughan was knocked back, clear across the audience chamber by an unseen force that sounded like a boulder rolling, and the queen's guard charged forward, their swords clearing their sheaths. Elissa's anger turned to shock as she whirled to face Alba and watched the residual power bleed away from the ancient elf's wrinkled hands.

Apparently Vaughan hadn't considered the consequences of insulting elven women before a very powerful elven mage.

"Take this worthless piece of offal masquerading as a man to Fort Drakon on charges of treason and attempted assault upon the queen," she commanded her guards as Vaughan groaned, attempting to rise and holding his head in pain. His shouts that "that shriveled old elf bitch" should be arrested for assaulting him fell on deaf ears, as did his threats of retaliation against Elissa. Her guard was only too happy to drag the arl away, cursing and howling.

At Fort Drakon he would await the next Landsmeet, at which time she would bring a proposal to unseat him as the Arl of Denerim and raise another in his place. While this did nothing to lighten the amount of work she found herself having to do, at least she had the satisfaction of rectifying the mistake she had made in releasing the odious man from the dungeon in the first place.

Meanwhile, the call of the archdemon grew louder.
She heard it as she toured the city's warehouses and granaries to assess what sort of emergency stores could supply Denerim if the Bannorn, where the majority of Ferelden's farmland lay, should fall to the Blight entirely or the supply routes be cut off.

She heard it as she went to the waterfront, where Ferelden's small navy lay at anchor, and dispatched two ships. One would bear a message to Empress Celene in Val Royeaux and another, written by Riordan, to the Grey Wardens of Orlais. The other ship would sail north around the Antivan peninsula to the shores of the Nocen Sea in the Tevinter Imperium, from whence a messenger would travel overland into the Anderfels bearing a message--also in Riodan's hand--for Weisshaupt.

She heard it in the dead of night eight days after Alistair left Denerim, as Alba and her personal maid took turns pressing firmly with their fists on her lower back just above her hips until their hands were numb. As they did this, Elissa held onto the massive bedpost and rocked her pelvis back and forth, attempting to alleviate some of the horrid agony in her back. Her screams echoed the archdemon's roar as she clung to a knotted end of a sheet Alba had tied to the canopy rails of her bed so that Elissa could grasp it and hang some of her weight upon it as she squatted. It was a position which made the excruciating contractions that gripped her over and over far more bearable than lying upon the bed had done.

She heard it as dawn broke the next morning, when she sat exhausted upon her bed with joyful tears in her eyes and brought her beautiful daughter to her breast for the first time.

Naming the babe became its own ordeal, for political expediency demanded an emphasis on her paternity and connection to so many of Ferelden's most powerful noble bloodlines. Left to her own desires, Elissa would simply have named her daughter after her mother. But instead, she sat in the Chantry two days later, hearing the archdemon's call in her mind, as the Revered Mother consecrated Caila Rowan Eleanor Theirin in a simple and austere ceremony.

It seemed to be growing louder.

After those first few days, Elissa could not remain abed, however badly she wanted to simply sit there and marvel at her babe. Caila's hair was only a thin, downy layer upon her scalp, but it gleamed golden in the light, and when her skin lost the blotchy red and yellow hues that nearly all infants possessed, Elissa had no doubt she would be possessed of the fair complexion that was a signature of the Theirin bloodline. Before the week was out, whisper reached her that the servants were calling the child Princess Ella.

Since Elissa could not have the usual lying-in period to heal and recuperate, Alba used a small touch of healing to hasten the matter along and make it easier for the queen to function. It was something of a scandal with the few noblewomen remaining at court that Elissa refused to hand Ella off to a wet-nurse. Still, she could not ignore her duties in favor of motherhood entirely, Alba showed her how to knot a wide length of cloth about herself to fashion a sling for the babe as she attended to the affairs of the realm. The wet-nurse, Hortense, was always near at hand, however, for the moments when Elissa simply could not pause to tend to Ella's needs, and between the two of them they managed to care for the babe while Elissa conducted the business of being queen.

Six days after Ella's birth, Riordan returned from the south. He came late in the evening, striding purposefully through the palace with the guards anxiously following at his heels, uncertain whether they should detain him or let him through.

Elissa was in the comfortable parlor in the queen's suite nursing Ella while the wet-nurse and Alba— who to all appearances had decided to make herself a permanent fixture as one of Elissa's attendants—sat nearby with their embroidery and Valaria laid out Elissa's supper on the small table. When she heard the sound of rapid footfalls in the hallway outside and voices raised in consternation, she
handed Ella to Hortense and stepped outside to investigate.

"Maker's breath! Riordan!" she gasped in astonishment. The elder Warden was haggard and filthy, but looked immensely relieved to see her.

"Your Majesty—" he began, bowing, but Elissa waved him off.

"None of that, Riordan, please. Let there be no such formalities between us Grey Wardens. And you," she turned her attention to the guards, "why was I not informed immediately when the Warden arrived?"

"Your pardon, Your Majesty," the guard bowed. "There was no time to announce him. He came straight to you."

"Very well, then, return to your post. Come in, Riordan, and have something to eat. I'm sure you've had nothing worthy of being called a meal in days. Valaria, please call for another tray of food to be brought, and see that a chamber is prepared for Riordan, and a bath as well."

"Thank you, Elissa," Riordan said, sinking into a chair before the small table. He devoured Elissa's supper with no ceremony while Alba checked him over at Elissa's insistence to be sure he was uninjured. Elissa shared with him the second tray of food that was brought and once the edge had been taken off his hunger, Riordan was able to explain his purpose in coming.

"I thought you intended to rendezvous with the royal army at Redcliffe after you had completed scouting," Elissa questioned, refilling his goblet with rich, red wine herself.

"I did," he replied, sipping gratefully. "And I will be departing at dawn to do just that. But what I discovered in the south required that I first come back to Denerim to tell you. The darkspawn horde is now moving east, toward Denerim. And the archdemon leads them."

"Oh, Andraste's mercy!" she breathed in horror. "You're certain?"

"Quite," he said with certainty. "I have been able to understand a good deal of what the archdemon has been saying, and they are headed this way."

"That's why the archdemon has been growing louder in my mind," Elissa murmured and Riordan gave a grim nod. Elissa rose and began pacing as she considered aloud what his news would mean. "We must begin an evacuation immediately, get as many people out of the city as possible, send them north. The food stores must be moved. Perhaps we can load them onto ships and send them to Amaranthine or Highever to await the refugees. Dear Maker, this is going to be disastrous. We'll never be able to get everyone out!"

"There is more," Riordan added, "but—forgive me—it is news only for Grey Wardens to hear."

"I see," Elissa said, blinking. "Hortense, give Ella to me, you may go to bed. Alba, Valaria, you may also go to your rest. I will not need you again tonight."

"Your Majesty!" Valaria protested, looking scandalized. "This is most improper!"

"This is Grey Warden business," Elissa said coldly. "There is no question of impropriety, and certainly not less than a week after I've given birth. Now leave us!"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Valaria muttered, blushing and curtsying as she took her leave.

Once she sensed her mother's nearness, Ella immediately began rooting and whimpered when she
could not find her objective. Elissa opened her bodice and guided the flailing infant to her breast, where she quieted immediately. When Elissa glanced up, Riordan's gaze quickly darted aside.

"Forgive me, Elissa," he murmured awkwardly. "I had a lover once, many years ago, and she bore a child, and I always did enjoy... but that is no matter. You did not send your ladies away to listen to me reminisce."

Elissa gave him a small smile, neither offended nor abashed that he had been admiring the sight of her feeding her child. The truth was, despite the urgency of the news he carried, this act made her feel peaceful and calm, and she could find no cause for shame or awkwardness in it.

"What is this news you could not share in front of my ladies?" she asked gently.

"This is—this is not something I would choose to burden a young mother with," he said regretfully. "I wonder what Duncan thought he was doing, recruiting one so young, and now to have a new babe...."

"My youth has not kept me from doing what needed to be done all these months, Riordan. Why is it suddenly a burden now?"

"It is tragic enough that you could be taken by the taint at such an early age, but did Duncan ever have a chance to explain to you why Grey Wardens are required to fight the archdemon?"

Elissa shook her head. "No, I'm afraid he fell before he had the opportunity. I always assumed it had something to do with the taint in our blood."

"You assumed correctly," Riordan sighed, and began to explain. When he had finished, Elissa stared at him, her face white and horrified.

"So you see, Elissa, why it pains me to bring you this news. But we have no choice. We are Grey Wardens, and we do what we must. There must be as many of us as possible there when we confront the archdemon, especially with so few of us here in Ferelden. I am the eldest, and the taint will not spare me much longer. If I can, I will be the one to deal the deathblow. But if I should fall before the archdemon dies...."

"...Then either Alistair or I must die," she finished for him, astounded by how composed her voice was, when everything within her was railing against the injustice of the situation.

"Yes. And so you must be there at the battle as well as Alistair and myself. You cannot evacuate with the rest of the citizens of Denerim. It is here we must make our stand."

"I understand," she said hollowly, clutching Ella closer as the babe's suckling grew shallow and lazy. Her mouth began to grow slack upon Elissa's nipple as she fell asleep, and gently Elissa removed her from the breast and righted her bodice with a shaking hand.

"You should rest." She didn't look at Riordan as she spoke, but instead stared at the flickering flames of the candles. "By now your chambers and bath should be prepared, and you will need to get an early start if you wish to reach Redcliffe in time to do Denerim any good."

Riordan nodded and rose while Elissa summoned her maid to show him to his chamber. Before he left, he bowed and lifted her hand, placing a kiss upon it. "Again, I am very sorry, Elissa," he murmured, and left before she could even acknowledge his apology.

She had thought she might dissolve into hysterics after the senior Warden left, but the tears she had expected did not come. She felt a terrible sense of purpose take hold of her as she rose and carried
Ella into her bedchamber. She did not lay the babe in her gorgeously carved cradle, but instead laid her upon the bed while Elissa removed her gown. She lay down with Ella snuggled against her breast and listened to the babe’s rapid, softly snuffling breath, gently stroking her downy head until sleep finally overtook her as well.

She awoke some hours later as the archdemon's roar shattered her sleep, barely able to prevent herself from screaming in response. Ella woke with a start and began rooting and whimpering and so Elissa sat up and suckled her as the sweat of panic dried upon her skin.

By the time Ella was fed and half-asleep again, Elissa was fully awake. She donned her dressing gown and took the babe to Hortense to tend her for the rest of the night, then went to Alba's chamber and knocked upon the paneled door.

The ancient healer either slept lightly, or had not been asleep at all, for she answered promptly and appeared alert.

"Is there something you need, Your Majesty?" the mage asked, standing aside to allow Elissa to enter.

"In the morning I must begin preparing to evacuate as many people from Denerim as possible," Elissa said. "I haven't the time to finish healing from the birth on my own. I'm still sore when I bend over. Sitting is uncomfortable, and the bleeding is an inconvenience I can no longer afford."

"I have warned Your Majesty that it is best to let these things run their course," Alba reminded her with a touch of impatience. "It could affect your ability to bear future children to rush it."

"I am a Grey Warden!" There was an hysterical edge to her voice as she made the declaration. "The fact that I've had a babe at all under the circumstances is astonishing. It's extremely unlikely I shall ever have another. Now do what you can."

The mage instructed Elissa to lie upon her bed, and her hands began to glow with energy as she approached. One hand she placed upon Elissa's belly, directly over her womb. Immediately, Elissa felt that tingling warmth of healing energy, followed by a tightening, an almost painful cramping that drew a surprised grunt from her. A moment later Alba's other hand pressed against Elissa's sex, her fingers curling ever so slightly inside. The sensation of the stretched and torn tissues knitting together was uncomfortable, but Elissa bit her lip against the impulse to complain about the prickling ache and waited until the mage drew away, nodding.

"If I do any more, you'll find yourself a virgin again," Alba announced with a touch of humor, going to the basin to wash her hands.

"No, thank you," Elissa said with a shudder, remembering that painful moment of rending when Cailan had taken her. Then she was reminded that it was unlikely she would ever experience sex again, one way or the other, and her mood grew morose.

She sat up and found she could move without discomfort. She thanked the midwife again and returned to her own chamber. She dug through her wardrobe until she located her Dalish leather armor, but it hurt to bind her new, larger breasts tightly enough that it would fit. Vowing she would discuss that problem with Alba in the morning, she instead donned only the leather war skirt with a simple linen shirt over a short, snug chemise. Her boots and vambraces and gauntlets followed, though she figured they would hardly be necessary for what she intended. Then she took up her daggers and bow and made her way through the torchlit palace to the courtyard off the armory where the strawmen were set up for the use of the palace guards. There were no guards about this late and
she had the training ground to herself.

She was not nearly so out of practice with her bow as she was with her daggers, and so she set the bow aside and slowly began tracing her way through the forms and stances she had learned all those months ago in the company of Zevran and Isabela, the round, whirling movements that kept her from being where her enemy was attempting to strike, while using the momentum of her motion to add force to her next blow.

She was panting and sweating by the time she heard booted feet on the cobblestones of the courtyard and turned to find Riordan walking toward her.

"The archdemon woke you as well?" he asked unnecessarily.

Elissa nodded, wiping beads of sweat from her brow on the sleeve of her shirt. "Strange thing about knowing you're going to die soon," she said bitterly, "it suddenly makes sleep much less appealing. Spar with me."

"As you wish," he agreed with a bow, drawing his daggers. "I see you fight in a style very similar to my own."

Elissa's eyes widened as he began turning his own gracefully dangerous dance to counter her strikes. "Odd, I thought it a unique and rare style when I learned it. You didn't happen to pick it up from a pirate, did you?"

"A pirate?" Riordan gave her an confused look. "No, it's simply the way I fight. You need not be the one to die, you know."

Elissa barely managed to side-step his next strike, turning in the same motion to slash at him with her off-hand dagger as he moved nimbly aside. "Yes," she panted, "I do."

"If I should fall, then Alistair is the next senior Grey Warden," he pointed out as she deflected an easy jab to which she had left herself open with her vambrace. He managed to pull the strike just in time to avoid slicing her upper arm. Maker, this was foolish! She was inadequately armored, out of practice, and bone-weary. He could have defeated her easily, but instead he let her continue to press him.

"Ferelden must have a ruler who can unite the nobility!" Elissa grated, charging him with a series of bold attacks that abandoned grace for aggression. "My rule as queen right now is more a matter of goodwill and courtesy on the part of the nobles than any real willingness to unite behind me. If Alistair dies, I will not be able to hold them together as queen-regent until Ella has grown. Don't you understand? If you fall, it must be me!"

She scarcely noticed when Riordan ceased attempting to attack her and concentrated solely on defending himself. Her breath came in ragged, choking gasps as her arms grew heavier with the effort of trying to find a way through his defenses.

"I will not live to see my nation recover from all that has happened and thrive once more. I will not live to see Highever restored to my family, to see my brother take his place as teyrn. I will not live to see Alistair's coronation nor ever hold him in my arms again! I will not live to see my daughter grow into a woman! Maker, Riordan!" she screamed as he deftly disarmed her before she could actually harm him. "Why?!"

She thrust her fists against his leather clad chest, pounding against him, and he took her blows, murmuring soothingly until she rested her head upon his chest with a helpless mewl, clutching his
baldric in one fist. She couldn't even sob or have a proper fit of hysterics, her grief too deep for tears, and so instead she stood there a long moment, trembling as his hands stroked her shoulders.

"Oh, sweet Andraste, my little Ella... I don't want to die," she murmured finally. "Not when I have so much to live for."

"I will do everything I can to keep that from happening," he assured her. Becoming aware of a tingling ache in her breasts, she quickly pulled away and looked down to see a large wet patch turning the fine linen of her shirt and the shift beneath transparent, revealing a hint of her darkened nipple.

"Maker's ass!" she cursed in disgust, feeling ridiculously close to tears over such a minor thing. "How am I supposed to fight like this?"

She did not sense Riordan move until his fingers were upon the back of her head, pulling her mouth against his. Her lips parted on a shocked gasp and stayed parted as his tongue thrust between and it felt good, Maker help her it felt good. He smelled good and tasted good and his kiss felt like life in the middle of death and she wanted more. Now she understood some of the desperate urgency that had driven Duncan on their flight from Highever to Ostagar.

Her fingers threaded through his dark hair and drew him in closer.

There was something wrong, she knew as she felt his lips upon her neck. Riordan was an attractive man, but there were many attractive men with whom she did not forget herself like this. Was it only the knowledge of her own mortality making her react this way, or was she drawn to him because he was also a Grey Warden? Perhaps because he understood in a way no other ever would, or perhaps it was more than that. Perhaps the taint drew them together. Was that why she had fallen in love with Alistair, rather than Zevran or Teagan or any other man she might have chosen?

It was hard to think, hard to do anything other than feel and respond. Riordan's hands worked her shirt up and then his gloveless fingers delved down the front of her shift, drawing her breast out. She arched and swayed as his lips found her nipple and her milk began to flow with an mildly painful tingle. Without meaning to, she clutched at him, urged him on.

Her eyes opened when his mouth abandoned her breast to seek her lips again, her milk sweet on his tongue, and suddenly it was wrong. The wrong face, the wrong lips, the wrong man.

"No!" she gasped, jerking away from him. Riordan looked almost startled, but he quickly shook himself and regained his composure.

"I'm... terribly sorry, Elissa. I should not have done that," he apologized, and she knew he was sincere.

"No, it's all right, Riordan," she muttered, straightening her clothing. "I understand why it happened. I do. And I'm sorry. If circumstances were different, perhaps... but, no. If I'm to die, I don't want the very last thing I do to be betraying my husband. Even with another Grey Warden also bound to die."

"Of course, Elissa. Your Majesty," he corrected himself with a bow, and Elissa knew he would never allow himself to be informal with her again. A part of her regretted it, regretted that she could not offer him any greater comfort in his final days. "I will be departing within the hour. I do not imagine we shall ever see each other again."

"No, I doubt we shall," she sighed, recalling Alistair's last words to Duncan. "May the Maker watch over you, Riordan."
"May He watch over you as well, Your Majesty," he said, bowing deeply, and then he turned and was gone.

The city quickly descended into utter chaos as news of the impending arrival of the darkspawn and the planned evacuation spread. Elissa's first command was to load as much of the food stores as possible onto the naval ships and send them to the ports at Highever and Amaranthine to await the arrival of the refugees. Two more ships she dispatched to Highever with as many troops as she could spare and a small household staff. Their orders were to clear Howe's scum from Highever Castle in preparation for the arrival of the final ship, which she kept awaiting at the docks.

That final ship she boarded personally to discuss her plans with the captain. When the darkspawn horde was sighted, Elissa would send Ella in the company of Hortense and Alba to travel aboard it, in the company of a full three-quarters of the remaining palace guard. They were to wait at anchor far out in the harbor for a week, watching the city for a signal. If the signal came, it meant the city was secured and it would be safe to return with the princess. If the signal did not come, they were to sail to Highever and establish a household for the princess in the castle there and attempt to hold it against the progress of the darkspawn horde.

If it appeared Highever was to fall to the darkspawn as well, Ella was to be taken back aboard the ship and they were to sail for Antiva, where Alba and Hortense were to seek refuge with a noble family with whom her parents had formed close ties. They would bear a letter Elissa had written, pleading for sanctuary for the heir to the Ferelden throne.

They would bear a letter Elissa had written, pleading for sanctuary for the heir to the Ferelden throne.

The captain of the guard objected vigorously to her plan that they leave her with so few guarding the palace, until Elissa rounded on him in fury.

"She is the Theirin heir, not me!" she shouted, slamming her hand down upon a solid oaken table. "Your first duty is to protect the princess."

Her second order of business was a visit to the armorsmith Wade. She offered him an enormous bonus to remain in Denerim as long as possible and fashion for her a set of armor from the scales of the dragon they had slain while searching for the ashes of Andraste. Truthfully, it appeared it was the challenge of working with dragonscales, rather than the bonus, which kept him in Denerim. It felt strange to be wearing something heavier than her Dalish leather once again, and given the nature of the upcoming battle she knew ultimately the armor would make little difference, but it was finely crafted and comfortable and afforded far more protection, a fact which pleased her guards immensely.

She spent every moment she could with Ella, though those moments were far fewer than she would have liked. Much of her time was spent on the training grounds, where she worked herself to exhaustion trying to improve her skill with her blades as well as her bow, not knowing what it would take to bring down the archdemon. She knew it was foolish to delay Ella's departure, but if she was to die, she would not deprive herself of one day she might have spent with her child in her arms.

The city guard found it nearly impossible to quell all the looting and rioting took place as the evacuation gained momentum, and finally Elissa had to order them to concentrate all their efforts on getting as many refugees out of the city and on their way to the northern ports as possible. The shopkeepers would simply have to cope with their losses when they returned to find their stores looted.

The tenth day after Riordan departed, all that remained in the city were thieving gangs of thugs and a handful of stubborn souls who would not abandon their homes and belongings. Strangely, this actually made the city guards' task easier, for now it was simpler to differentiate between the looters
and the citizens.

Her temper grew shorter as the roar of the archdemon became a constant cacophony within her head and she ordered the guard not to trouble themselves attempting to arrest the looters and thugs who would prey on the weak, but to slay them. When the captain complained that too many of his men were being injured or intimidated in the performance of their duties, Elissa relieved him of his post and promoted Sergeant Kylon to Captain of the Guard. There was a rash of desertions as Kylon put an end to the former captain’s policy of placating the noble bastards that had been posted to the guard, but almost immediately the remaining guard became a much more effective force.

On the twelfth day after Riordan's departure, scouts reported the darkspawn horde to be as near as Dragon's Peak. She spared a thought for Bann Sighard and wondered if he and his family had gotten out in time. Then she sent out word that the city guard should concentrate and reinforce the palace district; they could not hold the city, and it would only waste lives if they tried.

It was upon that day that Elissa personally carried Ella onto the ship she had kept at the docks for this moment. She sobbed openly as she kissed her babe for the final time and relinquished her to Hortense. When she returned to the palace, she bound her aching breasts tightly, knowing that without the babe to suckle for days or possibly weeks, even if she survived her milk might dry up before she saw Ella again. Following Alba's advice, when she could find the time, she used her hands, stroking firmly down her breasts to make the milk flow in an effort to simulate the demands of the babe and encourage her breasts to continue making milk, but it was likely to be a futile battle unless she could regain custody of her daughter soon. The ache of missing her babe was far worse than the agony of full and inadequately drained breasts, and she spent what few hours she could find to rest weeping miserably in her bed.

On the thirteenth day, the first wave of darkspawn breached the city gates. After an intense round of negotiations with the captain of her personal guard, Elissa agreed to wait safely within the palace until the location of the archdemon became known. She remained barricaded in the Great Hall, pacing before Alistair's throne, as reports from runners stationed around the city came in, telling with sectors were being overrun by the darkspawn and whether or not the archdemon had been sighted.

She could hear him, deafeningly loud within her head. So very near.

Lives were being lost to keep those runners stationed about the city, and yet they were her only window into the battle outside. The city gates had been breached. The Market District overrun. The Alienage besieged.

The final runner to arrive bore completely unexpected news. The royal army and their allied forces were at the city gates, engaging the bulk of the darkspawn horde.

_Alistair!_

She wanted to go to him, to help in the battle, but there was no way to break through the lines of the darkspawn already within the city to reach him. And so she waited, for what seemed to be endless hours, until the scream of the archdemon was heard overhead, shaking the palace walls.

Again and again they heard the archdemon roar and then there was a shriek that shattered the panes of glass in the windows followed by a tremendous crash in the distance that rumbled as though from deep within the ground. When her ears had stopped ringing enough for her to hear again, one of the guard that had been keeping watch upon the palace walls was reporting that the archdemon was atop Fort Drakon, apparently badly wounded.

"Then it's time," Elissa said grimly, taking up her bow. Her company of personal guardsmen fell into
step around her as she marched grimly from the palace toward the fort.

It was clear from the scattered bodies of the darkspawn, the fallen elven archers, dwarven warriors, Circle mages and soldiers bearing the device of the Arl of Redcliffe that Alistair and his forces were ahead of her as she made her way through the palace district toward the prison. She cursed in frustration. She needed to get there ahead of him, but there were more waves of darkspawn, lighter, thinner, but nonetheless slowing her down. She could hear the constant, agonized roars of the archdemon as it lumbered, wounded, atop the prison. She discovered Riordan's ruined body quite by accident and panic seized her. She needed to move faster, before Alistair could deal the killing blow.

Once inside the fort, it was so loud she thought surely the walls would begin to collapse, but still she moved forward. Her guardsmen fell one after the other as they fought to keep the darkspawn away from her, and still she moved forward. She stumbled over a familiar corpse and discovered it would no longer be necessary to petition the Landsmeet to unseat Arl Vaughan. Never again would he steal another elven woman from the Alienage. Despite her loathing for the man, she could not help but feel she’d failed in her duty for forgetting to evacuate the prison along with the rest of the city.

And still the archdemon screamed. More urgently now, as though engaged in battle. Elissa fairly flew through the last level of the fort, leaving her guards behind to deal with the darkspawn who would have delayed her. She rushed onto the roof to see a golden form she knew must be Alistair and his company battling the archdemon, who seemed to be staggering and growing weaker. It flew to a portion of the roof where it could not be reached by those with swords and Elissa added her arrows to those of the Dalish elves shooting at it, while the brightly colored flares of magic were flung through the darkened sky at the archdemon. Occasionally she caught a glimpse of someone she thought might have been Morrigan, or Leliana, or Wynne, but in the chaos she could not be certain. She did not know who among the company she had gathered still lived.

The roaring in her ears and in her mind was maddening, as yet she sent arrow after arrow into that horrid creature. It took clumsily to wing again, lumbering back into the fray with Alistair and the rest of their people. She saw it fling Alistair across the rooftop with a sweep of its head before it collapsed weakly and ceased to move.

Not dead. Not dead, she realized. The song was still there within her mind, that terrible roar that drove out all reason. No, there. It had moved. Only slightly, but it was trying to raise its head, trying to get up again. Closing her eyes for a moment, Elissa felt that calm, sure sense of purpose wash through her again. This was her chance, now, before the archdemon recovered.

Her daggers had been lost in one of the many skirmishes along the way to the top of the tower, and so she grabbed a sword sticking out of a darkspawn corpse and began running toward the archdemon.
In Redcliffe, Alistair forms a bond of camaraderie with Fergus, learns the truth from Riordan, and finds himself confronted by Morrigan and her life-saving offer.

A flash of gold in her peripheral vision drew Elissa's attention and she spared a glance to see that Alistair, too, was charging toward the fallen archdemon, his sword in his hand. She didn't know whether he had seen her, or if he was simply determined to end the corrupted Old God, but he was closer to the monstrous dragon than she was. Horrified, she screamed for him to stop.

"Alistair! NO!"

Perhaps he didn't hear her, or perhaps he was determined to make this sacrifice himself, but he did not pause before he slid under the massive head of the beast, his sword thrusting in to the underside of its jaw. The archdemon's scream was unearthly, nearly driving Elissa to her knees from the agony of hearing it both from without and within.

When she looked up again, Alistair was poised beside the archdemon's head, his sword drawn back as he prepared to thrust it into the skull. She screamed again, but it was too late. The sword plunged downward, and then the world erupted around her.

"The Circle mages have arrived, the messengers say we can expect the dwarven forces to arrive within a day or two, and the elves are on their way and should be here by the end of the week."

"Huh?" Alistair shook his head, realizing belatedly that Fergus had spoken to him. He turned away from the window in Arl Eamon's study, which he and Fergus has commandeered for their war councils. In the valley beneath them, spreading out from the quiet village he had grown up in, was a vast, busy encampment of the army they had amassed. As he watched, one by one torches began to ignite as the sun sank lower. "Sorry, I wasn't listening. Say that last part again."

"Distracted, Your Majesty?" Fergus asked, giving Alistair a knowing smile that was eerily identical to his sister's.

Alistair felt himself blush. "I was just... wondering how things are going in Denerim."

"If I know my sister, by now she's likely got the whole place under her charming yet astonishingly firm thumb," Fergus snickered.

Normally Fergus could draw him out of his fretting moods with quips about Elissa, but this time Alistair merely went back to staring at the window at the darkening landscape. "Do you think she's had the baby?"

"It's been nearly three weeks since we left, Your Majesty. I imagine the chances are fairly good that she has."
He didn't allow himself to ask whether or not Fergus thought she was all right. No amount of speculative reassurance was going to do anything to quell the worry in Alistair's heart until he actually heard some news.

"What was it like when your wife gave birth?" he asked instead.

"I don't actually know. Mother and Nan and the midwife drove me from the room. Then Father got me good and drunk and kept me that way until it was over," his general answered. "I'd offer to render you the same service, but under the circumstances it really wouldn't do for you to be soused until we go up against the archdemon. So, the best I can offer you is strategy and some moldy old maps."

"I appreciate the thought," Alistair muttered, forcing himself to abandon his post by the window. "Now, what was that you were saying about the dwarves and the elves?"

Fergus spoke at length about the state of their supplies and the expected arrival of their allies, and Alistair made himself attend carefully. His brother-in-law was turning out to be something of a surprise for Alistair. He should have known—from the fact that Elissa had always been a competent, if not stellar, fighter and strategist—that the upbringing of the Cousland children had involved considerably more than simply tutelage in matters of sex. Yet he hadn't thought that idea through to its natural conclusion. Somehow, like an idiot, he had managed to settle himself on the notion that they had been taught how to seduce and little else.

He had appointed Fergus as his general before the Landsmeet while specifically making it clear that had Elissa not been at the end of her pregnancy, it would have been her leading his armies. His reason for doing so had been to offer some sort of acknowledgment before the nobility of all Elissa had accomplished in leading them against the Blight, to give her credit for the unimaginably difficult task she had undertaken. But Fergus had turned out to be a highly skilled military leader and planner in his own right, and only once he realized this did Alistair remember that Elissa's brother had been sent to Ostagar to lead Highever's troops against the darkspawn. Whenever other skills he may have been taught, Fergus Cousland was indeed a man of arms and had been groomed to lead armies. Alistair's choice to make him general had turned out to be one of the most astute moves of his reign, brief though it had been so far.

With his army in such expert hands, Alistair had realized that there was actually very little for him to do and that his presence was more inspirational than useful. He wasn't going to repeat his brother's mistakes and ignore the advice of his general in favor of yielding to his own impulses, even though the part of him hearing the call of the archdemon day and night (and the other part of him that wished to get back to Denerim as soon as possible) wanted to charge into battle immediately. Instead, he let himself be guided and so they had been in Redcliffe nearly two weeks, waiting while more troops from their allies arrived each day and the size of their army swelled.

Far more than his military knowledge, however, Alistair was finding he valued Fergus as a companion. During their months of travel, he had enjoyed the company of Leliana and Wynne, since Orzammar he'd become friendlier with Zevran than he had ever imagined he would be, and even Oghren could be agreeable on occasion, when he wasn't being a completely offensive ass. But Fergus—perhaps because of his similarities to and affection for Elissa, or perhaps simply because he was that personable—was quickly becoming a comrade and confidante of the sort Alistair hadn't had since Duncan had died.

That thought, however, led Alistair to remember that both Fergus and his wife had slept with Duncan, and that thought brought him back to his understanding of the Cousland family dynamics. It made him uncomfortable, even as he longed to question Fergus about all the things he just still didn't
quite understand about the way Elissa looked at things. Perhaps a male perspective would help.

The truth was, Alistair was concerned about Elissa. For a while, he'd been so grateful that things with the Landsmeet had worked out so unreasonably well that he hadn't dared question anything. He and Elissa had survived. They'd brought down Loghain. They'd even gotten married. With the exception of the looming Blight and the separation it entailed, he should have been sublimely happy, and a part of him was. But the other part....

...The other part didn't like the way Elissa had been behaving since Fort Drakon. It was nothing overt. She still smiled and laughed, still made love to him with a passion that took his breath away. And yet there seemed to be something missing. She was subdued. Too subdued. Her smile didn't brighten her eyes the way it once had. She was behaving....

...Like a perfectly brought-up noblewoman.

He would have thought it an act, a mask she wore in her capacity as queen, except that she never took it off, even when alone with him. Her joy and sparkle were diminished. Her unabashed and keen sensuality had been dampened until she was barely recognizable as the woman he had traveled with for so many months.

She was suddenly everything Alistair would have once imagined he wanted in the woman he loved, modest and sweet and in no way aggressive or intimidating.

But she wasn't Elissa.

Perhaps it was just because she'd been nearing her time with the babe. Perhaps once he returned to Denerim—and he refused to let himself dwell on the possibility that he wouldn't return to her—she would be herself again.

But what if she wasn't? What if it wasn't the babe, but Loghain, who had wrought the changes Alistair had seen?

"Still concerned about matters back in Denerim, Your Majesty?" Fergus's voice once again intruded upon his thoughts, and he turned to look at his brother-in-law, whose eyes and smile were so like Elissa's.

"In a manner of speaking," Alistair muttered. "I'm thinking getting drunk isn't such a bad idea."

"Well, I can't sanction any plan to get you well and truly besotted, but I hardly think Arl Eamon would begrudge a flagon of his finest," the teyrn suggested, and thus it was that they found themselves sitting in two comfortable armchairs in the arl's study with the heavy oak door closed and the desk cleared of its usual array of map. In place of the maps was a flagon of wine and two golden goblets.

"So, what seems to be the problem, Your Majesty?"

"Please," Alistair said uncomfortably. "No titles when there's a bottle of wine open."

Fergus gave him Elissa's smile again. "Very well, then—brother. What's the trouble?"

"What was Elissa like, as a girl?" he asked abruptly. "When I met her, your parents had just been murdered and she was scheming to marry Cailan and then the battle at Ostagar happened and everyone was dead and I dumped all this responsibility on her.... I have no idea who she was, before all that, or how what happened in those days may have changed her."
Fergus gave Alistair a long, considering look, as though weighing him, before turning his gaze to the closed door of the study. Finally he said cautiously, "If you know about the plan for her to marry Cailan then I suppose Elissa has told you at least a little about our family secrets."

"Much more than a little." Fergus's eyebrows lifted in surprise, and Alistair shrugged. "She doesn't like to lie."

"No. She never did. Which is surprising, because she's damnably good at it when she decides to do it," Fergus said with a chuckle. "But she always had this very rigid sense of honor. She'd plot, scheme and manipulate to get her way, but her word was always golden and she took a great deal of pride in that fact."

"What else?" Alistair prompted.

"She was always very confident, very assured. She knew who she was and what her strengths were. And once she realized the power she could have over men she became downright dangerous. As much to herself as to the men around her, I think."

"How so?"

Fergus hesitated. "It feels disloyal to say this, but I think Mother and Father—may the Maker keep them—started teaching us too young."

"Elissa said something very similar once to me. That she might have been better off with a little more time embracing her innocence," Alistair remarked, not adding that he had agreed wholeheartedly with that sentiment.

"It's true," Fergus nodded. "Oh, I'm not denying the usefulness of the things they taught us. It's served us all very well, but Elissa's temperament made it a volatile combination. As much as she tries to be analytical and pragmatic—and she can be frighteningly so at times—she'll always be a creature of passion. It was easier for me, I think. I learned my lessons and learned them well, but it was my skill as a warrior that really shaped the way I thought of myself. Elissa thought of herself first and foremost in terms of sex. It became her identity, the first thing she thought of to solve all her problems. It wasn't just a weapon in her arsenal, it was her arsenal. Or so she thought."

Alistair snorted. "I know exactly what you mean. She's never thought particularly highly of her other skills. Now I think I understand why she's reacting so badly to what happened with Loghain."

"She never gave me all the details there, but then she didn't need to. And I think you're right," Fergus agreed, taking a long sip of his wine. "Nothing cuts quite as deep as your own sword when it's turned against you."

"How do I help her?"

"You don't." Alistair gave Fergus an irritated look, not finding the answer even remotely helpful, but Elissa's brother was unfazed. "This isn't something you can fix. She's got to find her own way through it, figure out how to reclaim herself."

Alistair cursed and muttered into his goblet.

"What was that?" Fergus asked.

"I said I'd rather go back to the days when I had to stand by while she took one man after another to her bed and she was happy and full of life than return to Denerim and watch her float around the palace being so careful and proper and never really seeming to truly care about anything."
Fergus guffawed, nearly choking on his wine in the process. "Welcome to the family, brother!" he said, raising his goblet in a toast.

Finding himself relaxed and his tongue loosened by the wine, Alistair ventured to ask, "How did you do it?"

"Eh?" Fergus looked at him curiously.

"How were you able to... share your wife?"

Fergus seemed on the verge of cracking another joke, then grew serious when he saw how earnest Alistair was. "Well, it helped to realize she wasn't mine to begin with. Oriana and I came to care about one another very much, but I went into the marriage with no illusions of her being a chaste maiden."

"What made you choose an Antivan courtesan?" Alistair asked.

"Was I supposed to bring some shy, cloistered virgin into our family?" Fergus scoffed, shrugging. "That would hardly have been fair to the girl, nor beneficial to my family. In fact, if the girl turned out to be prone to gossip, or to running back to her father with hysterical tales of debauchery and lewd conduct, it could have been ruinous. No, I needed a wife who wouldn't be easily shocked, who would understand our family and our aims. I was always more comfortable with martial matters, anyway, and of limited utility in games of seduction, considering the strong preponderance of males in the ranks of Ferelden nobility, only a handful of whom have any taste for men. Elissa was still a child, and so it was best to bring into the family a wife who could fulfill that role while I focused on training and leading our armies."

"But if you came to care for her, didn't it drive you mad to think of her with other men?" Alistair insisted.

Fergus smirked. "Only in the best possible way."

"Meaning—?"

"Meaning there are some pleasures a woman can only enjoy completely when pressed between two men, and I came to enjoy indulging my wife's taste for those pleasures very much indeed, especially when they happened to coincide with the indulgence of certain pleasures of my own." Fergus gave Alistair another look that reminded him of Elissa, one that made him squirm and blush again as he recalled once more that, even though he was much less blatantly flirtatious than Zevran, Fergus did enjoy the company of men.

Thinking of Zevran led him to recall that night in Orzammar, how it had felt to hold Elissa and listen to her cries of pleasure while Zevran fucked her. Had the pleasure been enhanced for her by both of them being there? Was that an experience she wished to repeat? Perhaps with both of them pleasing her at once, rather than just one while the other watched.

Alistair's mind started supplying mental images of the various possibilities, and he quickly had to force himself to stop thinking of it as his body began to react.

"I suppose it doesn't matter anyway," he murmured after a long moment. "Now that I'm king and she's queen, we're likely to draw too much attention if we were to carry on in such a way."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Fergus said, setting his empty goblet aside. "So long as it yields an heir, the king's bedchamber is the least scrutinized parcel of territory in all of Ferelden."
Alistair had no ready response for that, and was fortunately saved from having to concoct one by a firm rap on the door of the study.

"Enter!" he called out, almost grateful for the interruption.

The door opened to admit Ser Cauthrien, who—as always—bowed and would not meet Alistair's eyes. He'd been shocked when Fergus had made her his second-in-command, but Fergus had shrugged and said that after the service she had done Elissa in the Landsmeet, he owed her a chance. "Forgive the intrusion, Your Majesty, general. The Grey Warden Riordan has just arrived and I thought you would want to be informed immediately."

"Please, send him in at once," Alistair ordered, rising quickly from his chair. He heard Fergus murmur his thanks to the knight, but his attention was completely upon the filthy and grizzled Warden who came through the door.

"Your Majesty," said the Senior Warden with a bow, but Alistair waved him off.

"Just Alistair, Riordan, please. What's kept you? We were expecting you over a week ago."

"I apologize for my late arrival," Riordan said. "I went out of my way to take news of the Blight to Denerim before leaving for Redcliffe."

"You've been to Denerim?" Alistair asked avidly. "How is the queen?"

"She was well when I saw her, Alistair. She was delivered of a daughter perhaps a week before I arrived, and both she and the princess were doing fine."

"Oh, thank the Maker," Alistair breathed, and then a slow, foolishly pleased smile began to cross his face. Fergus grinned and congratulated him with a slap on the shoulder.

"The news is not all good, however," Riordan added. "The reason I traveled first to Denerim was to inform the queen that the darkspawn horde has turned east and is heading toward Denerim. Her Majesty is organizing an evacuation of the city, but the darkspawn should be there in perhaps a week. And the archdemon is leading them."

"Oh, Maker's balls!" Alistair heard Fergus curse through the ringing of his own pulse in his ears. "And here we are on the bloody other side of Ferelden!"

"Get the army ready to travel," Alistair commanded. "The dwarves will have to catch up to us, and we'll meet the Dalish elves along the way. We leave at daybreak to march on Denerim and not a minute later."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Fergus said, bowing deeply, and left the study, quickly rolling up his maps and battle plans to take with him.

"There's more, Alistair." His agitated pacing was interrupted by Riordan's softly accented voice. "There was one other piece of information I needed to share with the queen, and with you as well. The queen will not be evacuating Denerim with the rest of the citizens. She is a Grey Warden. She will be there, to help fight the archdemon. We all must."

Something in Riordan's words made Alistair stop and look at him sharply.

"Why?"
He didn't remember leaving the arl's study. He didn't notice when the two armored guards who had stood sentry outside the study fell into step behind him, following him up the stairs to his bedchamber. Beside his door, two more guards stood watch, but Alistair noticed them no more than he had others. He simply walked into his chamber and shut the door behind him, leaning on it heavily. He covered his face with his hands as Riordan's words ran again and again through his mind.

... If the archdemon is slain by a Grey Warden, its essence travels into the Warden... The essence of the archdemon is destroyed, and so is the Grey Warden.

The Grey Warden who kills the archdemon... dies?

I am the eldest, and the taint will not spare me much longer. But if I fail, the deed falls on either you or Elissa. She is aware of this, and will be in Denerim awaiting the arrival of the army for the final battle. The Blight must be stopped now. For what it's worth... I'm sorry.

I'll do it. I'll take the blow.

He wanted to rant in fury at Riordan for going to Denerim and telling Elissa about this, rather than letting her evacuate with the rest of the city's population. She just had a baby, for Andraste's sake! How could Riordan think of her sacrificing herself when she had a newborn who needed her?

"I'll take the blow," he whispered again, dragging his shaking hands down his cheeks.

"That may not be necessary," a familiar voice emerged from the shadows in the depths of the chamber. He felt Morrigan, felt the press of her magic against his templar-attuned senses, before she actually stepped forward.

"What—" Startled, it took him a moment to come up with a coherent response to her presence. He was so distracted he couldn't even be bothered to wonder why she was there. "How did you get past the royal guards? Actually, you know what? Nevermind. I don't care. Just... get out."

"I would not be so hasty to throw me out, if I were you," she cautioned, and even the sound of her voice grated upon him! "I may have the solution to your dilemma, you see."

"What are you talking about? And why are you still here?"

"I am aware of what happens when the archdemon dies," Morrigan informed him. "A Grey Warden will die as well, and there's a good chance it may be you, or your queen. While I care nothing for your life, your wife has been kind to me even when she needn't have been. I would be loathe to see her perish, or to see her suffer the loss her beloved."

Alistair stared at her, attending her words for the first time. "How—how do you know this?"

"How matters little," the witch said dismissively. "What is important is that I am offering you a way out. A way to keep either you or your queen from being forced to sacrifice yourselves."

"It may not come to that. Riordan said—"

"And if this Riordan does not succeed? What will you do then?"

"I'll do it," he declared. "I'll make the sacrifice. Elissa will make a better queen than I would a king, anyway."

"Indeed?" Morrigan gave him a scathing look that he'd come to know all too well. Usually he saw it
just before she made some cutting remark about his intelligence. But instead, she merely asked, "And do you think she would thank you for throwing your life away when you might have saved yourself?"

"Saved myself... how?"

"With a ritual, performed on the eve of battle in the dark of night."

"What kind of ritual?" Alistair asked suspiciously.

"The uninformed would call it blood magic, but you were there at the Circle Tower, and have seen enough to know it is magic derived from sexual energy, rather than blood." Her lips twisted in a sneer. "Honestly, I'm not sure which description will least offend your templar sensibilities."

"Sex magic? You mean—?"

"Yes. You must lie with me. Tonight. I know you despise me, but I will entreat you, for once, to listen to reason." With his head spinning in outrage and confusion, it didn't seem worth it to protest her accusation of unreasonability. "If your queen were here, I would bring this proposal to her instead, but as she is not, I must attempt to convince you."

"You would be able to do this ritual with her?"

"No. I would merely request that she convince you for me, since you do not trust me. For the ritual, the participant must be male and he must be a Grey Warden."

"Why not Riordan?" Alistair asked desperately. This could not be happening. Morrigan could not possibly be asking him to choose between having sex with her or dying.

Morrigan shook her head. "He has been exposed to the taint for too long. You are the only suitable Grey Warden."

"So what do you get out of this? You hate me every bit as much as I hate you."

She looked away, unwilling to meet his eyes. "As I've said, I owe your fellow Warden a debt of gratitude."

Something in her reluctance to speak of her motivations made Alistair nervous. There was something more here, something he was missing. "That's not everything."

"No, it is not, but beyond that my reasons are my own and I will not speak of them. All you need know that once the battle is over, I will leave and neither of you shall ever see me again."

"I need more than that," Alistair insisted, shaking his head in refusal. "Nothing comes without a price. There are always consequences to this sort of thing. Maker's breath, what if there was to be a child...?"

He froze then, staring at her as horror congealed in his stomach. Morrigan looked as uncomfortable and awkward as he'd ever seen her. "That's it, isn't it? That's what all this is about. You plan to have a child, my child!"

She sighed impatiently. "Yes. From the ritual, a child will be conceived."

For a moment, Alistair was speechless, unable to do more than gape at her. Finally he found his voice again. "This is insane! Andraste's teeth! Why would you want such a thing? Are you... Is this
some plan to go after the throne?"

The look she gave him was so contemptuous and full of venom it should have withered him to a cinder on the spot. "Don't be a fool!" she spat. "I care nothing for your throne or your politics. The child will bear the taint, and the taint will enable the child to absorb the essence of the archdemon, without being destroyed. Most importantly, for your purposes, is that no Grey Warden need be sacrificed."

"That still doesn't tell me why you would want this."

"Very well. What I seek is the uncorrupted soul of the Old God, born in the child's body."

"Oh, well that's so much better than just another bastard heir to the throne!" Alistair shouted, storming past her toward the decanter of brandy on the mantle. "Because there's no threat at all from some sort of dragon... god... thing!" He splashed brandy into a heavy glass snifter and drank it down in one searing gulp as he tried to collect his scattered, racing thoughts. "Just what do you think you're going to do with it, anyway?"

"Some things are worth preserving in this world. Make of that what you will," Morrigan said, looking more sincere than he'd ever seen her. "I will raise the child apart from society, and you have my word I will teach it to respect that from which it came."

"And I'm supposed to believe that? You teaching a child respect for humanity?"

She grimaced. "Believe what you will. I care not. What becomes of the child will not be your concern. I will leave and you will give me your word never to attempt to locate me. So far as you're concerned, the material point here is that neither you nor Elissa need die. Your Ferelden shall have its heroic king and queen. She shall have her beloved by her side, and her child shall not have to live without its mother."

Alistair tried to think beyond her words, to the myriad possibilities and dangers posed by the sort of being the witch seemed determined to create, but all he could see was Elissa's lifeless body in his arms, and a babe crying for her mother, who would never again return.

A thought occurred to him. "That's why you've always disliked her, even when she tried to be nice to you," he observed. "You've had this planned all along, and you didn't want her child to interfere."

Morrigan looked away. "It's true, the fact that her babe has been born before we confront the archdemon is... fortuitous for my purposes. I do not know how, or if, a child in the womb of a Grey Warden might have affected the outcome of my ritual. It is for the best that things have worked out as they have."

"So you don't deny you've intended this from the start."

"'Tis why Flemeth sent me with you, all those months ago," she acknowledged. "But what I intended, and when, and why, does not alter the truth of the matter. I offer you a chance to be free of the burden you have been called upon to bear. Now, enough talk. You must decide. Do I depart tonight, or do I remain and render you this one final service?"

Alistair braced his hand on the mantle, closing his eyes as he sought to bring his unruly thoughts to some sort of order. Maker's breath, he didn't want to do this, didn't want to even consider touching Morrigan, much less fucking her.

When he opened his eyes and looked at the witch, standing there calmly waiting for his reply, he knew there was only one choice he could make.
Elissa couldn't remember picking herself up off the stones of the roof of Fort Drakon after the explosion. Her head was ringing; she could barely see, barely hear. All around her people were lying unconscious, or moaning and struggling to rise. Heedlessly, she forced herself forward, toward the dark, massive bulk of the archdemon, and beside it, a prone form in golden armor, still and silent.

She fell to her knees, sobbing, clutching him in her arms, dragging him onto her lap. "Wynne!" she screamed hysterically, searching the rooftop for the familiar robed form. "Dear Maker, help me! Wynne!"

Even as she called out for the mage, she knew it was hopeless. If Riordan had been telling the truth, there was nothing Wynne could do. Her kind, gentle, shy Alistair was gone; not merely dead, but his soul destroyed. He would not even be awaiting her in the Fade, with a ready quip on his lips. He was simply... gone. And yet it didn't seem to matter that she knew it was hopeless, she had to do something and so she screamed for Wynne again, and from out of the smoke and the clamor of battle as the final remaining darkspawn were slain by the army she had pulled together, the mage staggered, blood trickling down her face from a wound on her scalp.

"Help him, Wynne!" she sobbed desperately. "Please!"

Wynne's hands felt for Alistair's throat as Elissa rocked with him, her hand stroking his face. Warm. He still felt warm.

Warm....

"Thank the Maker. He still has a pulse," Wynne said weakly, placing her ear before Alistair's mouth. "He's breathing!"

Elissa stared at her in disbelieve. Wynne's hand began to glow as she placed it upon Alistair's breastplate and sent a gentle surge of cool, rejuvenating energy into him. Alistair coughed and spluttered, jerking in her arms, and slowly his golden eyes opened to stare up at her.

Alistair tried to lift his hand toward her face, but winced. "Ow," he complained, coughing again.

"You're alive!" she gasped, joy and wonder and incredulity combining in a mad tumult within her. "How?"

He gave her his dear, crooked smile. "I just... did what I knew you would have done."
The very first thing Elissa did after the archdemon fell was to have Alistair taken to the palace and ensconced in his bedchamber under Wynne's care. Then she joined Fergus in leading the remaining army in destroying the isolated bands of darkspawn throughout the city, though without the archdemon her sensitivity to the presence of the darkspawn was somehow diminished. It was nearly two days before the city was declared secure, and Elissa and Fergus returned to the palace.

By then, the pain of her full breasts and the yearning to hold her baby was so intense she could no longer bear it. She dispatched a company of soldiers and one mage to the docks to send up the signal for the ship bearing her daughter to return to shore. Mindful of the darkspawn filth covering her skin and armor, she retired to chambers for a hasty bath, unwilling to risk exposing Ella to the corruption of the taint. Even the thought of her babe caused her hideously aching breasts to begin leaking copiously within the bindings underneath her cuirass, and the linen strips were saturated and chafing by the time her maid had peeled them from her. She donned a simple gown and wasted no time grooming, but rushed barefoot to the palace gates to await the arrival of her daughter.

Sobbing with relief, the front of her gown darkening with wet stains, she fairly snatched Ella from Hortense's arms and carried her into the palace. If any of the soldiers bringing in reports of the status of the city found it strange for her to issue commands from Alistair's throne with her bodice open and the babe at her breast, they said nothing.

She sent Alba to relieve Wynne in tending to Alistair, but not before the mage somehow managed to browbeat Elissa into agreeing to go rest herself. By then the queen had been running on rejuvenation spells for over three days, and she was shaking with exhaustion. Wearily, she accompanied Alba to Alistair's chambers and removed her gown and shift, climbing into the king's massive bed. There she lay on her side and brought Ella to the breast now situated perfectly at a level with the babe lying on the bed. She was asleep before Ella had stopped suckling.

They slept throughout the next day, only waking every few hours to pull Ella onto her chest and carefully roll to her other side so that she could nurse from the other breast. Periodically she was aware of Alba or Hortense taking the babe to change her, but she was brought quickly back and Elissa was able to rest again.

Eventually, she woke to realize Alistair was awake and pressed against her back, propped up on his elbow to peer over her shoulder at the babe that slept peacefully against her breast.

"Maker's breath, she's gorgeous," he whispered in awe, reaching out to gently run a finger along Ella's soft cheek.
Sitting up, Elissa lifted the babe and laid her upon Alistair's lap. Gently, he unwrapped Ella's swaddling and inspected her, marveling at her tiny fingers and toes, perfect down to the minuscule fingernails. Less marvelous was the moment when the coverlet over his lap became wet. Hortense was summoned to take the babe away and change her.

Elissa would have risen as well and dressed to return to overseeing the efforts to secure and repair to city, but the moment she threw back the coverlet to rise, Alba appeared and informed her that Teyrn Fergus and Arl Eamon had matters well in hand until the king and queen were released from the care of their healers. Elissa was prepared to argue the point, feeling duty-bound to return to her responsibilities, until she actually stood and found herself dizzy with hunger and a-tremble with some strange weakness she could not name a cause for. Alistair was unable to get out of bed at all.

"We haven't any knowledge of what effect the death of an archdemon has upon Grey Wardens," Wynne speculated when she was summoned to assess the problem. "It's possible some lingering effect of your link to the archdemon has weakened you. Since the order has persisted even after the end of the previous Blights, we may presume it's a temporary difficulty. For now, I would advise you continue to rest."

Thus, Elissa resigned herself to spending at least another day abed. When Hortense returned with Ella, the babe was sucking voraciously upon her tiny fist. Wynne, Alba, the wet-nurse and their steadily increasing flock of care-takers and attendants retreated to give them privacy. Propping pillows behind her, Elissa reclined and brought the babe to breast, wincing as always at that first hard pull upon her nipple.

"Ahem. Those are new," Alistair said, staring avidly at her breasts, much larger now than when he had last seen them. As he watched, thin streams began to leak from her unoccupied nipple, much to his fascination. It was only then that Elissa realized her entire torso was sticky with dried rivulets of milk that had flowed while she slept. She would need to ring for another bath soon, she thought, even as Alistair reached a finger out to capture a droplet and sample it.

"You're not going to distract me from asking how it is that we're both alive, you know," she said dryly as his eyes lit up in delight at the sweetness of her milk.

"How am I supposed to think about that with this before me?" he asked, leaning forward to cup her breast in his hand. Feeling the now-familiar tension within her breast, she opened her mouth to warn him against applying any pressure, but she was too late and Alistair spluttered in surprise, jerking back as thin, rapid jets of milk sprayed him directly in the face.

She couldn't help the soft laugh that escaped her lips as he wiped his face clean, but she quickly sobered, staring at him in wonder.

"How are we both here?" she asked earnestly, tears burning her eyes. "I'd meant to take that blow myself, and when I saw you do it—Maker, I thought the grief would kill me, knowing you were dead! I don't understand how this is possible."

Seeing her distress, Alistair gave over his fascination and lay back down beside her. He would not meet her eyes as he confessed what he had done to ensure their survival.

"You had sex. With Morrigan?" Elissa asked in amazement, too stunned even for jealousy as she lifted Ella to her shoulder and patted her back firmly.

Alistair groaned, covering his eyes. "I'd really rather forget about it, thank you," he muttered. "It wasn't the easiest thing I've ever done, nor did I behave particularly well. The only way I could function was to remind myself how very much I hate her...."
A mental image filled her mind, then, of Alistair lying miserable and awkward beneath Morrigan's cool hands as she caressed him. The witch drew back to make a scathing remark and slowly, his eyes filled with rage until he reached up and grabbed her angrily by the throat. He held her for a long, tension-filled moment, until she was on the verge of calling her power to defend herself, before pulling her cold lips to his in a brutal, furious kiss.

Elissa wasn't entirely sure if the image revolted her or not. Suddenly she had a new appreciation for what Alistair must have gone through at Fort Drakon.

"I'm sure this is all someday going to come back to haunt us," he said, closing his eyes. "Maybe it was the wrong choice. I don't know. But if I hadn't made it, we wouldn't have this moment. I would never have seen you again, never have seen our daughter...."

Elissa's throat tightened as two silent tears made their way down her face.

Alistair wasn't finished. "You know, in a way, it was actually you who saved us."

She shook her head in confusion. "I don't understand."

"If I had been the man I was before I met you, I would never have done it," he said. "I wouldn't have cared enough about what was right for me to let myself make the selfish choice, the choice to risk the unknown to be with you instead of dying."

She relaxed against the pillows as he draped an arm over her thighs and rested his head beside her bare hip. How far they had both come, from the wild, recklessly ambitious girl she had been and the shy, awkward templar afraid of his own strength and passion. She had no doubt that he was right; someday his decision to accept Morrigan's offer would come back to haunt them. But that would be many years from now, and in the meantime they had each other, their daughter, their companions, and a realm to rule.

At that moment, it seemed to be enough.

Alistair and Elissa's inexplicable weakness passed and they returned to their duties, focused primarily on rebuilding Denerim as the refugees began to flood back into the city, returning to the homes that were often no more than cinders and rubble. The death of the archdemon was not the end of Blight-related difficulties for Ferelden. Though there was an atmosphere of celebration throughout the city and the realm as summer cooled into autumn, Elissa knew it would not last. Unless they managed to find other sources of food, there would be a famine come the winter, for the Blight had spread too far over the Bannorn and a great deal of Ferelden's most productive acreage would fail to yield crops this season.

It would be at least another year for the land to recover from the corruption of the Blight, and so a proposal to send emissaries to Antiva and Orlais to request aid came before the Landsmeet. Mindful of the accusations that had been made against her family, Elissa did not feel it wise for her or Alistair to make the proposal, and instead she sought the aid of Arl Bryland, who—as a veteran of the Orlesian occupation—could not be accused of being a sympathizer. For all Loghain's fear-mongering about the Orlesians, when faced with the prospect of food riots and watching the people of their arlings and bannorns starve, the Landsmeet was surprisingly amenable to the plan.

Their second biggest concern was what to do about the arling of Denerim and the teyrnir of Gwaren and the power void their vacancy left in the Landsmeet. The disposition of Amarathine had been easy. They had granted it to the Grey Wardens, though there was some annoyance that once the Wardens from Orlais arrived to begin rebuilding the Fereldan order, this would effectively make an
Orlesian the Arl of Amaranthine. There was some talk of Elissa taking on the role, but she didn't dare take Ella with her with news of darkspawn raids continuing in Amaranthine, and she steadfastly refused to leave her babe behind in Denerim. Thus, it would by necessity be an Orlesian overseeing the new Grey Warden stronghold. The benefit to the move, however, was that it would give the Grey Wardens a voice in the Landsmeet, even if that voice was Orlesian.

Gwaren they granted to Teagan, which thrilled Eamon (as it was a rise in power for the Guerrin clan) even though it left him scrambling for someone to run Redcliffe while he fulfilled his duties as chancellor. Secretly, Elissa hoped the move would divide Eamon's attention enough that he would be too busy to overstep himself in his role as chancellor.

This, however, left the very small bannorn of Rainesfere without a bann. Just as debate was heating up amongst Alistair's councilors over what should be done with it—Eamon wanted to keep it in the Guerrin family or, at the very least, fold it back into Redcliffe's holdings—word came that repair and reconstruction work on the Circle of Magi tower at Kinloch Hold was being called to a halt. The Veil was now too weak there, reported the messenger sent by First Enchanter Irving. Apprentices were having accidents, and even seasoned mages were finding it difficult to control the amount of magic they were drawing from the Fade.

Elissa had an audacious suggestion for the problem, though she saved it for the privacy of Alistair's chambers that night.

"Commission a new tower built at Rainesfere and deed it to the mages?" he asked incredulously when she told him her idea. "Are you mad?"

"You yourself said we ought to reward their service in battle against the archdemon," she shrugged. "You've always had your reservations about the way the Chantry treats mages. Why not reward them with an act of trust?"

"Because it might set a bad precedent to start our reign by provoking an Exalted March against us!" Alistair protested.

"When you chose to become king, you told me you wanted to make a difference in the lives of the lesser citizens of Ferelden, and you cannot to that without running the risk of making yourself unpopular, for the greater citizens will not like having their comfort disturbed. Still, the elves of the Alienage are not the only Fereldans living in virtual bondage."

Alistair had no ready reply for that, and his thoughtful frown let Elissa know she had carried her point.

"Rainesfere is a minor bannorn, for all that Teagan has become a powerful voice in the Landsmeet. It has very few freeholders that look to it for protection, which means the mages would not have to keep a large number of troops, which should help placate any misgivings about the idea. They can focus on rebuilding the Circle with a degree of autonomy from the Chantry."

"But mages are forbidden to hold titles," Alistair argued. "Who would be the bann?"

"For matters of managing the oversight of the freeholders, let the First Enchanter appoint a seneschal, who would ideally be a non-mage to calm any reservations the freeholders might have about being under the authority of the mages," Elissa suggested. "The Grand Cleric has a voice at the Landsmeet. Let the mages have one as well. If the nobles are concerned that a mage might use blood magic to control their will, let the seneschal act as their emissary to the Landsmeet also."

Eamon thought they were mad, but Alistair and Elissa sent a message to Irving nonetheless, seeking
his opinion on the idea. It was Irving who recommended that the plan be amended so that the templars would be kept on in place of the fighting troops most bannorns hosted for the aid and defense of their freeholders. The Knight-Commander would be appointed as the seneschal, forming a partnership between the First Enchanter and the Knight-Commander of sorts. This would put the mages on more equal footing with the templars, while still keeping the templars present should they be needed. It would also provide the templars with an investment in helping the mages, rather than merely attempting to control them. In addition, it would go a long way toward soothing the qualms of the chantry and the nobility.

Thus, Rainesfere was deeded to the Circle of Magi and the mages freed from their effective imprisonment. Only the enormous popularity of Alistair following his slaying of the archdemon prevented the move from becoming a major political crisis. Finally, the matter was settled with the Landsmeet declaring that they would revisit the situation at Rainesfere on an annual basis to assess whether or not the king and queen's trust in the mages had been misplaced. While not the vote of confidence they might have wished for, it was a reasonable compromise.

After a good deal of intense consultation and debate with it was decided that the arling of Denerim would be granted to Bann Sighard's son Oswyn—whom, Fergus assured them, was actually a very capable man despite their history of carousing together in their youth. It was presented as a token of gratitude for the service he had done the crown in attempting to investigate allegations of Loghain's desertion at Ostagar. Bann Sighard had other children who could eventually inherit Dragon's Peak, and so it worked out well. Elissa wondered if they were actually doing Oswyn a disservice, considering he would be living in the estate where he had been tortured, but the move had the benefit of winning them at least one more powerful voice in the Landsmeet and a capable administrator for Denerim.

Weeks spun into months without Elissa actually noticing. Autumn moved inexorably toward what was certain to be a brutal winter, even with the arrival of ships of grain and other foodstores from Orlais. Ella grew more beautiful with every day, managing to completely enchant Alistair, who regarded her as his own regardless of her paternity. Her Theirin heritage was unmistakable, and it was Arl Eamon himself who observed that she had Rowan Guerrin's eyes, settling—at least privately—any doubts that may have lingered in his mind about Cailan actually being Ella's father. He quickly became resigned to Alistair's choice of Elissa as his queen, and if Eamon and Elissa still occasionally clashed whenever Eamon seemed to take too much authority upon himself in his role as chancellor, he was much more willing to heed her own authority as queen, knowing she had kept the Guerrin link to the monarchy alive.

Somehow Alba made herself a permanent part of their company of attendants. Elissa wasn't entirely sure why, but the ancient mage seemed disinclined to leave court and return to wherever Wynne had found her. Even when Elissa explained that she was extremely unlikely to have another child, the midwife still insisted that her talents were best used attending the queen, and that was that. In some ways, it was pleasant to have a familiar face that would not leave. Morrigan had only been the first of her companions to depart; Sten for Seheron, Shale and Wynne for Tevinter, Oghren for Lake Calenhad, Leliana for Orlais.

Only Zevran remained. To Elissa's surprise, that had been at Alistair's request. The assassin served in an unofficial capacity as Alistair's master of spies. The nobility, so accustomed to not seeing the elves around them, were remarkably unguarded in his presence, and with Zevran's ability to conceal himself, he was able to glean many tidbits of information about who was loyal and who was not, and what plots they were hatching.

Though busier than she had ever imagined herself to be, it was also a time of relative contentment. Leery of giving the accusations Loghain had made against her any traction, she maintained a very
modest court and presented as proper an image as she could manage, attempting to emulate Anora's cool and regal demeanor. With the exception of Alistair's coronation, revelries at court were kept to a minimum, as it wouldn't do to be seen being decadent or extravagant during a time of famine. What seductions and intrigues the nobles at court conducted among themselves, she could not say, for she steadfastly refused to involve herself in such games.

If she felt Alistair's concerned eyes upon her when she declined to return the Antivan ambassador's flirtations, she did not ask what troubled him.

Only when she was alone with Alistair in his bedchamber at night did she allow herself to consider that the queen she portrayed during the day had become a disguise she no longer knew how to shed. Though she welcomed his passion and returned it full measure, she knew something was missing. Everything was perfect and yet it all felt... hollow. He made love to her tenderly, carefully, as though he feared being too aggressive and she... she never sought more, never tried to find those hidden passions within him and bring them to the fore, never urged him to give his darker desires free rein. She felt Alistair's expectant gaze, as though he were waiting for her to do something, but she did not know what it was.

Only when he cautiously proposed inviting Zevran to join them some night did she begin to understand what he was waiting for.

"Have you lost your senses?" she forced herself to laugh lightly, snuggling against his chest with the sweat of passion cooling on her skin, even as she felt a cold knot of fear tighten in her chest.

"I've been, well, told that being between two men is something some women enjoy," he said awkwardly.

"Well, yes, but— We can't possibly do that, Alistair. Not now. Not without risking gossip."

"From Zevran?" Alistair lifted his head to stare at her incredulously. "If there's anyone who knows about discretion, it's him."

"No! From anyone who may be attending too closely to our habits," Elissa said, pulling away from him uncomfortably. "We don't want to confirm what—what the gossips have said about me."

"You mean Loghain," Alistair corrected tightly, his jaw hardening angrily. "We don't want to confirm what Loghain said about you."

"Yes," Elissa snapped, drawing the sheets over her breasts as though they were more substantial armor and crossing her arms. "Yes, that's precisely what I mean. Maker's blood, Alistair! He called me a whore before the entire Landsmeet."

"Yes, I heard him," Alistair said impatiently. "I also heard Bryland and Teagan, and in a way even Cailan himself, testify otherwise. I saw how the nobles looked at you that day, Elissa. You were their darling. None of them believed Loghain's claims, except perhaps a few who were devoutly loyal to him or Howe."

She shook her head in stubborn refusal. "It doesn't matter. We can't take the chance."

"Are you really afraid the nobility will believe Loghain," he asked, irritation sharpening his tone, "or are you afraid you will?"

"And what precisely is that supposed to mean?"

"Why didn't you fuck Riordan?" Alistair demanded.
Taken aback, she stared at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"Why didn't you fuck Riordan?" he insisted, biting off each syllable sharply. "As far as you knew, he was going to die, and maybe you would as well. A fellow Grey Warden, going to his doom. Handsome, vaguely reminiscent of Duncan, possibly the only person at that moment in all of Denerim who understood what you were going through. Why not?"

"Are you saying I should have?"

"I'm saying that there was a time you would have without hesitation."

"I wouldn't do such a thing to you, Alistair. It would have been a betrayal. You're my husband...."

"A husband who knew exactly who you were long before I married you. Once, you wouldn't have let that stop you. You would have done it and found a way to make me understand later."

"Perhaps, but things have changed."

"You've changed." He threw the covers back, flinging himself from the bed to pace the bedchamber, his nudity cast in golden-red glory by the fire on the massive hearth. "I've been watching you tiptoe around for months acting like you're scared of your own shadow, always cautious, always restrained. You don't take joy in things the way you used to, you don't allow yourself to feel pleasure the way you used to. And I think the idea that someone might believe Loghain is a convenient excuse for the fact that you've never stopped believing him yourself. You're afraid if you let go, if you let yourself be who you are, it will prove him right."

"He was right, Alistair."

"No. We've been over this before."

"Yes" she insisted. "He was able to make me respond because he knew me, because he knew I would feel pleasure no matter how wrong it was, no matter how badly it would hurt you, not matter how little I wanted it. And that's not the woman I want to be."

"Even if that's the woman it took to save our lives?"

"I don't understand."

"If not for you, when Morrigan had offered me the chance to save us, I would have refused out of sheer prudery," he said, moving toward her slowly. If she'd expected him to try to soothe or placate her, to be tender and conciliatory, she was wrong. His eyes glowed angrily, and his movements spoke of barely contained fury. "It's because you are who you are that we're alive. Because I learned from you, learned to stop acting as though desire was a fate worse than death, as though sex always has to be something romantic and pure and white-washed with the Chantry's seal of approval. I didn't want to feel passion with her, but that was the energy she needed for her ritual, and so I stopped holding back and let myself feel it anyway. And I never would have known how to do that if not for you."

He climbed onto the bed, crawling toward her, the line of his bare body almost predatory. Maker help her, it called to her, made her yearn to respond, to urge him to unleash that savagery. "I want that woman back," he said as he reached her, kneeling before her and clasping her face as he stared at her intently, his fingers sliding through the hair at her temples. "I want the wanton creature who could stroll into a tavern full of men smiling and take them all, the woman who used to laugh and make jokes and whisper filthy things to me while I was buried inside her. I want all of you, not just this... shadow of who you used to be."
Elissa closed her eyes and shivered, suddenly afraid. Not of Alistair, though this was the first time since Fort Drakon he'd been even a little demanding of her, but of her own response. She wanted. Dear Maker, what she wanted.... It was nothing the woman she was trying to be should want. She wanted the brutality his frustration hinted was simmering below the surface. She wanted rage and force and fury and pain. She wanted the sort of catharsis she'd had all those months ago on the journey to Ostagar with Duncan, to spend her fear and despair in some sort of ordeal that would give physical manifestation to the turmoil inside.

Before she could allow herself to accept that she wanted these things, much less give voice to those desires, Alistair sighed heavily, his frustration and tension draining from him. The hands cupping her face became gentle as he murmured, "I'm sorry, my love. I shouldn't press you like that. You'll do what you think is best for you, I'm sure. I just... I miss you. That's all. I miss you."

Pressing a kiss to her brow, he lay back down, turning his back to her, leaving her trembling with fear and arousal. His sudden yielding, his conciliation, was so completely not what she needed that she thought she might weep. Why hadn't he pushed her?

That answer, of course, she knew. He hadn't pushed because he loved her and he didn't want to frighten her. He didn't want to force her, to take away her choices and her ability to refuse as Loghain had. He had stopped because he trusted her to tell him what it was she desired, just as he had promised he would always be honest about his desires with her.

She'd not let herself truly feel desire for months. She thought if she was careful, if she didn't allow herself feel the things Loghain had used against her, she would be safe. But avoiding her desires wasn't making her feel safer. It merely made her feel as though she was treading on eggshells.

Perhaps what she needed was not less depravity, but more.

The next day she traveled to the Cousland estate in Denerim. Fergus was in Highever, though he would be returning to Denerim for the First Day celebration. His efforts at restoring their estates were finally beginning to pay off, and the Cousland manor was beginning to look like the noble dwelling it was rather than the looted and ransacked shell it had been when they had turned their attention to evicting Howe's wallowing swine. Many of their treasures had been stolen or sold; gold and silver plate, tapestries, furnishings and pieces of art. A number of the family portraits had been defiled beyond repair or outright destroyed.

She was hoping that there was one cache of treasures Howe's men hadn't discovered. She left her guards outside the door and went into her mother's bedchamber. There, behind a secret panel that opened only by exerting just the right amount of pressure on a precise spot in the wall, she found it. Drawing a deep, nervous breath she began to fill a satchel.

After nursing Ella a final time following supper, Elissa turned her over to Hortense and informed the nurse that she was not to be disturbed this evening except in an emergency. She also instructed Alba to come to the king's chamber first thing upon waking, as her services might be needed.

While Alistair attended to some final affairs for the day with Eamon, Elissa went to his bedchamber and began to lay out her family's treasures. Nervous anticipation made her heart pound rapidly beneath her breast, made her palms sweat, and underneath it desire tightened things low in her body. It terrified her, that desire. Terrified her to know how badly she wanted this.

When had she started to fear her desires? She knew the answer to that, and she hated that it had never occurred to her to question it before. Loghain was dead. She and Alistair had destroyed him. She shouldn't have had to be afraid of him, and yet she was. How had she never noticed this insidious
fear creeping in and taking over her life?

She heard voices in the wardrobe and knew that Alistair had returned and that his attendants were removing his armor and undressing him. She heard him dismiss the servants and then the door opened and he was there in his loose linen shirt and brayes. He paused for a long moment in the open doorway as he took in Elissa, perched barefoot on the edge of the bed in a simple shift, and then the array of items upon the table. Blinking, he carefully and gently closed the door behind him.

"What's all this, then?" he asked cautiously.

"I don't want to be afraid anymore," Elissa blurted, clasping her hands together to control their shaking.

"All right." Alistair nodded slowly, his eyes guarded. "I don't think that answers my question."

Elissa swallowed hard, licked her lips, tried to force herself to speak past the knot of fear in her throat, threatening to choke her. "I want you to force me," she finally said, and Alistair jerked as though he'd received a jolt. "I want you to take me. I want you to hurt me. I want you to push me past my fear."

Alistair opened his mouth to speak, and she could see refusal in his eyes even though the condition of his braies spoke of another impulse entirely. Then he stopped himself and approached the table, inspecting the items there. There were carved phalli both wide and slender, straight and contoured, made from rare woods and even the tusks of some great rare beast from Rivain, polished to a smooth sheen. Their bases were etched and inlaid with gold in the laurel wreath device of House Cousland. There were cuffs fashioned from the finest leather, soft as butter on the inside but strong and reinforced, secured by a wide buckle and also etched with the Cousland device. Small golden nipple vises, tightened with fine-threaded screws, lay upon a length of velvet, trailing their bejeweled chains.

But where Alistair hesitated was over the small whip she had laid out, little more than a fine, braided leather cord with a knotted end, attached to a long, slightly flexible rod with a weighted handle.

"I can't." But even as he spoke the words, there was something dark and feral in his eyes, in the coiled tension of his posture, in the way his pulse jumped at the side of his neck that said he could. And eagerly.

"I need this."

"Andraste's mercy, why?"

"Loghain took something from me, Alistair," she said softly.

"I know." His voice was tight, as though he struggled for rationality and couldn't quite find it. "I was there."

"It wasn't just sex he took. Or even pleasure. He broke me down. He took my will, my power to refuse, my ability to deny everything he demanded and everything he said, until somehow his words became my truth."

"And you think my forcing you all over again is going to change that?" Alistair asked in disbelief.

"No." Elissa shook her head. "But by surrendering myself to you, I take myself back from him. And what you take from me, you'll give back."
A long, tension-fraught moment dragged out in which Elissa was certain he would refuse, certain she had asked of him something he could not bring himself to do. But then Alistair was striding across the chamber toward her, grim and determined. He reached out, grabbed for her, but she was not there, ducking away and evading his grasp.

"It will not be so easy as that, my lord," she vowed, and at some other time, playing some other game, her voice might have been teasing, taunting. Now, however, it was simply tense and angry. She realized then that she was not merely speaking to Alistair, but to the shade of a man who had died months ago. "I will not yield without a fight. Not this time."

Alistair's eyes flared and without warning he lunged for her again, sprinting after her across the chamber until she was trapped against the wall. With nowhere to go but through him, she flew at him, punching and clawing and kicking as he caught her body against his. Her fingernails left gouges on his skin that he didn't even notice. He grunted as her fist found his hard-muscled stomach, as much to her own pain as his. He barely managed to shield himself when her knee sought his more vulnerable parts. When he finally captured her wrists, she won her freedom again by slamming her head into his face, stunning him and bringing a trickle of blood to his nose.

He staggered back and the chase was on again as she once more darted across the large bedchamber, seeking projectiles to throw at him, a book, a candelabrum, an ornately carved comb. Alistair batted her missiles away almost casually and continued his advance, stripping his shirt from his sweat-beaded chest as he went. A feral gleam that lit his amber eyes promised dire recompense, and somewhere within, Elissa was appalled at how quickly the intensity of the struggle had escalated. She had not set out to hurt him, and yet she was elated she had landed so many successful blows. What little shred of reason she possessed knew she should have established a safety word, and yet....

...Safety words were for games, and this was no game. This was deadly earnest.

It was not Alistair she was fighting. She knew that as well. And she would fight until she had spent every last bit of strength in her body. She would pour into that struggle all the ferocity she had never been able to unleash upon Loghain or his men, either because she had been bound or for fear of harming her babe.

She found herself backed into a corner, breathing in great, ragged pants as he trapped her purposefully. Again, she lashed out with fists and fingernails. Warmed to the chase now, Alistair caught her wrists almost easily; gathering them in one hand while the other tore her shift down the front, spilling her breasts out. He let go of her wrists and then his mouth was upon her breast, as though it didn't matter that she clawed and pounded ineffectually at his back and pulled his hair while his mouth drew at her nipple, starting her milk flowing. It no longer sprayed and leaked as it had in those early weeks after Ella was born, but still he could draw it from her nipple easily. He drank it down, lapped at it greedily with vulgar slurping sounds as she fought to push him away. As he sucked, his hands busied themselves shredding the rest of her shift until the rags fell from her body.

A cuff to his ear dazed him and gave her room to maneuver, to renew her struggle, but she could not get past his body to make her escape. Alistair shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears and then he slammed into her, driving the breath from her as he placed his shoulder against her stomach and slung her over it, straightening to carry her across the room to the table where she had laid out her objets d'amour. Thought she kicked and yelled and squirmed, she could not manage to get out of his grasp.

From her upside down position, Elissa could see some of the items had spilled onto the floor. She did not remember slamming into the table in her struggles, but an aching bruise on her thigh told another story. She could not see what Alistair gathered, but then he turned from the table and threw Elissa
onto the bed. She lay there stunned, the breath driven from her again, and he was upon her before she could recover enough to rise.

She fought and bucked and screamed as he crawled over her body to straddle her torso, but she hadn't the strength to dislodge him and escape. He grabbed one of her wrists and stretched it far up over her head upon the mattress, so that she couldn't get enough leverage to wrench it from his grasp. Though she beat at him with her other fist, he barely flinched as he fastened one of the cuffs around the wrist he held captive. She could see her blows had bruised him, her nails had drawn blood, but even such proof of the uncontrolled violence of this affair failed to daunt her. Alistair released the wrist he had cuffed and caught the other to repeat the process, and still she snarled and clawed at him like a captive animal.

She couldn't breathe as he straddled her chest to pull her arms up over her head, looping a chain that dangled from one cuff around the bedpost and fastening it to the other cuff. Thus freed of the necessity to control her arms, Alistair could turn his attention to subduing her in other ways.

He rolled off her body and moved safely beyond the reach of her feet, watching for a long moment as she kicked and writhed. She spat curses at him, and still he stared, hid eyes burning with a fury all his own as he released the drawstring on his braies and pushing them down his hips. His cock reared up before him, and he stroked himself once, twice, hard, rapid strokes that pulled back the hood of skin and revealed the deep red, swollen head.

Then, quick as a striking serpent, he was upon her, pushing her thighs up and apart with hard, bruising hands, thrusting into her. She was wet and ready, but so tense with her struggle that it hurt to stretch and that was good. She wanted the pain, that exquisite agony of being forced to accommodate his girth. Just the press of his groin against her clitoris was enough and she screamed her pleasure, shuddering and arching. If her hands had been free she would have gouged new furrows in his back, but all she could do was buck against him. Her climax loosened her, let him drive deeper, and soon Alistair had his arms hooked behind her knees, slamming his cock deep within her. She wailed with each thrust, but it didn't take long until he went still and rigid above her, coming with a long, low groan.

If he thought she would prove compliant afterward, she quickly showed him otherwise. When Alistair bent to kiss her, Elissa's teeth sank into his lip, drawing blood. He jerked back and before either of them realized what was happening, her head had rocked to the side, her cheek burning from the ringing slap. Alistair's wide, horrified eyes met hers and his mouth opened—no doubt to issue a tormented apology—but his words were cut off by a grunt as her muscles tightened around his softening cock.

"Yessss...." she hissed before he could recover himself to apologize. He studied her for a long, tense moment, and silently she willed him not to stop. Cautiously he dipped his head again to attempt to kiss her and Elissa immediately lunged up at him, trying to bite. Alistair shoved her back down and, much more deliberately, slapped her again.

If he stopped, or required her to explain herself, she'd never be able to describe the peace that descended upon her as stinging warmth spread over the side of her face. She'd never be able to make him understand. And yet he seemed to be reading what he needed to know from her reactions. This, the pain, the shock, the moment of stunned disbelief and humiliation of being slapped across the face. This was what she needed; not only to fight, not only to be overpowered, but to be beaten until she couldn't fight anymore, until submission was all that was left.

His mouth slanted down on hers then, and she allowed it, tasting the blood she had drawn from his lip. Some instinct made him draw back the instant she tensed to try to bite him again, though, and he
drew back far enough to backhand her lightly. Not enough to bruise or injure, but enough to turn her head, to stun her for a second. Enough to hurt exactly the way she needed to hurt. It was almost as though she could feel those blows in her cunt, each slap generating its own surge of arousal.

Alistair's softened cock slid from her body, trailing slick seed down her thigh, and he used the opportunity to adjust his position above her, bracing himself on one arm while he kept the other available to chastise her for resisting. The fourth time, tears stung her eyes as her head snapped to the side. The fifth time a sob that owed as much to pleasure as pain rose from her throat.

After the sixth slap, she yielded, the fight gone out of her for the moment. She returned his kiss with passionate desperation, opening to his tongue, welcoming it as he used it to fuck her mouth almost rudely. She writhed against him, already on the knife-edge of release. All it would take was a bit of pressure, a mere touch....

Then his fingers were there, that same hand that had slapped her, stroking firmly across her nub and her shriek of release was swallowed by his mouth. Wave after wave of intense, unendurable pleasure brought her arching off the bed, thrusting against his body where his weight pinned her down. She jerked and strained against the chain binding her arms to the bedpost. When she came back to herself, whimpering and shaking, Alistair was kissing away tears she hadn't even known she shed, his tongue darting out to sample the salt of them.

He gave her a moment, trailing gentle kisses against her aching cheeks, licking the shell of her ear as she lay passive and still half-stunned beneath him. And then he whispered two words into her ear.

"You're mine."

"No!" she snarled, and in an instant the fight was rejoined. She kicked and flailed, growling like a rabid beast. Alistair made no attempt to subdue her, but drew back and watched her struggles, studying her as though trying to ascertain why his words had set her off again. After a moment he rose from the bed, casually, as though her thrashing efforts meant nothing to him. She managed to roll over and get her knees under her, crawling closer to the bedpost her wrists were chained to.

The buckles on the cuffs were awkwardly placed and difficult to manage with one hand. Before she could make any progress in freeing herself, Alistair was back, crawling onto the bed behind her. She spared a brief look over her shoulder to see him drop a number of the items she had retrieved from her parents' cache onto the bed. He pressed against her back, and Elissa cursed herself for turning her back to him, for now she was even less effective at fighting him.

His arms came around her, his hands groping her breasts until milk leaked from her nipples and he very deliberately ground himself against her backside. His cock was still soft, but the tell-tale twitching she felt told her that wouldn't be the case for long. She struggled to wrench away from him, but it was useless, and the way he so very leisurely thrust against her buttocks was infuriatingly smug.

"Mine," he murmured in her ear again, and Elissa jerked harder against her chain.

"No!"

His teeth nipped at the tendon joining her shoulder to her neck, just hard enough to be uncomfortable.

"Mine."

"No."
He bit her, hard, so hard she was certain he would draw blood. Her body went rigid with pain, and still he clutched her against him, not relenting until he’d dragged a cry of anguish from her lips.

"No," she gasped again before he had an opportunity to repeat his claim. He bit her again, and again, until her neck and shoulders were bruised and aching and still she denied him.

His fingers closed on her nipples, brutally hard and Elissa cried out in pain. She writhed and tried to pull away, but that only made the pain worse. But it was a good pain, a perfect pain, pain she could ride, pain she could resist. Even if she couldn’t fight back, he could not defeat her doing this. It made no difference when he traded his fingers for the small vises, tightening the screws until she bit back a scream. He fastened them tighter than she might have chosen had pleasure been the goal; she’d never had a chance to teach him to use them properly, and it hurt fiercely.

But when he said it again, she thrashed her head back and forth in adamant denial. "No!"

He pulled back as the sharp pain in her nipples turned to a constant, dull, throbbing agony. She made an effort to hold still because any movement set the short, bejeweled chains attached to the clamps swinging, renewing her torment. She felt Alistair's breath at the small of her back an instant before the wet warmth of his tongue stroked down the cleft of her buttocks.

Oh, Maker.... Elissa could no longer tell how much of the wetness trickling down her thighs was his residual seed and how much was her own arousal. She tried to flex her buttocks together, push her pelvis forward, deny him access, but his large hands settled on her hips and pulled her back roughly, inexorably, until she was no longer kneeling upright but lying face down with her arms stretched above her head, her knees tucked underneath her and her ass in the air.

"Mine," he said again as his tongue found her tight rear entrance and began to stroke and probe.

"No," she whispered, shuddering in pleasure.

He took his time using his tongue on her ass. Any attempt to get away re-awakened the pain of the clamps on her nipples and so she was forced to lie there and suffer the pleasure as he pushed the globes of her ass apart and devoured her as avidly as he’d ever eaten her cunt. Alistair licked and sucked and pushed his tongue into the gradually relaxing ring, fucking her firmly with it. He squeezed her buttocks with his fingers until she was certain he would leave bruises, then nibbled gently upon them, alternating pain and pleasure.

She was trembling when he withdrew again, her breasts singing a song of agony while the rest of her was taut with desire. His hands returned to her ass, his fingers slick with oil, and without preamble he eased a finger into her, and then another soon thereafter, thrusting and pushing and massaging with the oil until the muscle stopped resisting and relaxed.

"Mine."

"No." She tensed, pushed with her knees while pulling against her chain, trying to rise, to crawl away from his probing fingers, but his other hand pushed firmly between her shoulder blades, forcing her chest back down. She yelled and shuddered with pain as her imprisoned nipples rubbed against the sheet, but still he did not relent. The struggle had tightened her around his fingers, and once again he began the process of relaxing the tense muscle.

He left her a moment, and when he came back it was with something cool and hard and covered in oil. A carved phallus. As he began to press it slowly but insistently within her, she knew he had not chosen one of the slender ones that might be easily expelled, but one which widened gradually until it was at least as large as a cock. That would be one of the contoured implements, then, that
narrowed abruptly after the widest point to remain seated firmly within. This, too, she had never explained to him; he had simply determined on his own the correct tool for the job.

He fucked her with it, slowly, pulling back and advancing, giving her time to adjust before pushing it in deeper, stretching her further. By the time the widest point passed through, there was barely even a burn, just that amazing fullness that made her moan an invocation to the Maker into the bed-linens.

"Mine," he declared, pulling on the base of the phallus until the widest part began to emerge again. Elissa groaned, caught up in sensation, barely remembering to repeat her refusal before he pushed it inside once more. Again he pulled it out and pushed it back in, and again, until the widest point passed easily into her. Elissa's clawed hands formed tight fists in the linens; she was trembling and sweating with the intensity of being stretched and filled.

It was too much, and yet any attempt to resist made her ordeal worse, and that, too, was perfect.

Alistair practically slammed the phallus into her a final time. "Mine!" he growled, and she could feel against her thigh his renewed desire.

"No!" she panted.

The sound of his hand against her buttock echoed like a thundercrack in the bedchamber and Elissa howled, rearing up, trying to crawl away from that pain. A new wave of torment awoke in her nipples as she struggled, and yet she could do nothing else. Alistair dragged her back down and his hand cracked hard against her other buttock, spreading stinging pain across her skin and jolting the plug still seated in her ass.

Another blow, and another, each one drawing a scream from Elissa. Though he'd never spanked her before, he did not hesitate, did not withhold the force of his blows. No teasing game of pain and pleasure was this, but punishment for her obstinacy, for her refusal to yield to his claim of ownership.

And refuse she did, until her entire backside was burning with pain, until the muscles beneath her skin felt bruised and sore. Yet arousal was there was well, throbbing within her cunt in time to the blows. Somewhere along the way she began to weep in pain, wailing each time his hard hand and yet she still found within her the will to say "no" over and over.

At last the punishing blows ceased as she mewled and shook, her face buried in bed-linens that had grown damp with her tears. The blazing pain of of her backside somehow made the constant hard ache of her nipples less, until she had forgotten all about the vises pinching her. Only when he slid his tongue across the heated, inflamed skin of her ass and she tried to crawl away from the sensation was she reminded and she gave a sharp moan as her nipples dragged across the linens.

Alistair pulled her back down and rolled her over, creating another twist in the chain securing her cuffed wrists and drawing it tighter, giving her even less freedom to move her hands. She screamed when he teased one aching, nearly purple nipple with the tip of his tongue. When he gently tugged on the jeweled chain to one of the vises, Elissa shrieked and arched, thrashing wildly.

"Mine," he declared again.

"No," she whined as he released the chain once more. Abruptly he released the screw tightening the vise and she wailed again as all the sensation came roaring back into her nipple with the restoration of the flow of blood. When he released the second vise, she screamed.

"Mine." He drew her nipple into his mouth, and Maker all the feeling that had been diminished due to the babe nursing was back, tenfold in its intensity. It hurt and yet it was wonderful and she
whimpered and moaned and pulled at the chain binding her wrists.

Milk began to flow again as Alistair took her breast in hand and squeezed as he suckled. The sharp pain that had flooded her nipples when the vises were removed was soothed to a gentle ache as Alistair drew out his attentions to her breasts, kneading and nuzzling, rubbing his stubbly chin along her soft skin until the flesh of her breasts was red and tender. He pressed leisurely kisses from her neck to her navel, and she could do nothing to stop him.

"Mine," he asserted once more, dipping his tongue into her navel and she watched in fascination as he thrust and withdrew it in a pantomime of fucking.

"No."

His fingers delved into her cunt, a tighter, snugger fit with the phallus still lodged in her rear. Her hips lifted off the bed as his palm pressed against the cushion of flesh surrounding her nub and his fingers curled firmly, seeking, seeking until he found the spot within her that made her groan and seize with pleasure.

When he withdrew his hand, his fingers were dripping wet with their mingled fluids. He wiped them nonchalantly on her face, smearing the slick liquid across her mouth where it quickly dried and grew tacky. He reached for another phallus, slender, but long and smooth and curved at the end.

The carved implement was harder than flesh, and it was a strange sensation to have it rub against the one in her ass through the barrier of tissue and muscle. But that quickly became an afterthought as that artful curve found the spot that Alistair had sought with his fingers moments before. Elissa's face contorted in a grimace at the almost unbearable feeling of needing to relieve herself. She thrashed her head and bucked her hips, a constant chorus of moans and cries rising from her lips as he began to fuck her with the phallus, hard and fast, dragging the curved end across that spot rapidly.

The bed-linens beneath her began to grow damp as it pulled a strange, watery fluid from her in spurts, and Elissa heard herself as though from a great distance, growling and moaning and wailing in unremitting pleasure. And then she was coming, with deep, hard contractions of her womb, coming with waves and surges that wracked her body and tore ragged screams from her throat. Only when Alistair stopped fucking her with the carved phallus did it finally abate, leaving her dazed and trembling, emitting soft whimpers as though in residual pain rather than pleasure. It was almost a relief when he pulled the phallus from her and laid it aside.

"Mine," he said, and still she shook her head. A strange feeling of triumph began to warm her as she realized that he could not make her yield.

"No," she whispered, feeling as though a great burden were lifting from her as she spoke the words. "Mine."

Alistair smiled then, a slow, sweet smile that erased the dark, almost angry expression on his face. Joyfully he covered her body with his and kissed her, long and lovingly. His fingers threaded through her hair as her mouth opened beneath his, her tongue darting out to seek his. There was something cleansing in that kiss, washing away her fear and shame and regrets.

She felt his cock, hard and insistent against her thigh, but she was too sensitive to be fucked again just yet, and so instead she requested, "Whip me."

"Why?" Alistair drew back, studying her face intently. But she was calm and sure, never more certain than she was in that moment.
"Because it's what I choose," she said simply.

She wasn't sure that would make sense to him; she wasn't even sure exactly why she wanted it herself, except perhaps to satisfy that part of her that regretted that she refused Loghain the final time and taken the whipping with which he had threatened her. Whether he understood or not, Alistair seemed to accept it, nodding gravely and rising from the bed.

There was no question of him forcing this upon her. This was her choice, and so rather than lying prone, she rolled over and pulled herself up to her knees, wrapping her arms around the bedpost and pressing her body against it.

She heard a sharp whistle and a snap, and realized Alistair was practicing with the whip she had laid out. It did not crack deafeningly like the one in Fort Drakon had done, for it did not have the length or speed, but she knew that, if wielded with a brutal enough hand, that thin knotted cord could slice. Indeed, when she looked over her shoulder at Alistair, he was studying a vivid red weal on his left forearm. He struck himself twice more, testing the speed and force with which the whip could be used.

"You're sure about this?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she said, sighing peacefully. Strange, she didn't feel at all frightened. She knew it would be agony and yet she did not fear it. This was the ordeal of her choosing, and she would welcome it. "Unchain me."

He did not ask again if she was certain, but uncuffed her wrists. As he worked, she noticed his erection had not flagged in the slightest and that was very interesting and would bear investigating another day, for she had not thought he would be aroused by this request.

He kissed her when he had laid the cuffs aside, tenderly, sweetly and she breathed into that kiss. Then she again wrapped her arms around the bedpost and rested her forehead against the hard, cool wood.

The first stroke of that short, thin whip to fall on her shoulder was barely enough to sting and she waited for Alistair to become more confident in what he was doing. The next stroke was harder, and the next one harder still. She hissed in discomfort, but it wasn't what she wanted, it wasn't enough.

"Harder," she urged.

The next time the lash fell, it burned, a line of heat sizzling across her skin. She flinched and gave a soft whimper, bracing herself the next time the whip whistled through the air. Soon each stripe it made across her skin was its own melody of pain, and still it wasn't enough.

"Alistair," she said between clenched teeth, "hurt me."

Again the cord on its flexible switch of a handle whistled through the air, sharper and faster this time and when it landed on her skin she shrieked like a wounded animal. It felt like she had been branded, the line of agonizing fire on her flesh unlike any pain she had ever known. Alistair gave himself over to his task, no longer holding back. Each subsequent stroke upon her shoulders and upper back burned as though acid was being poured down her skin. Her voice grew hoarse and raw from screaming and yet she did not ask him to stop.

She seized the pain, rode it, made it hers, and it was peaceful and joyous and right. Here she was safe. Here she could suffer without losing herself. Here no one would make her endure anything more than she chose to endure. It was exhilarating.
She felt herself drifting even as she screamed and writhed, clutching the bedpost desperately. She was riding the pain, but even that did little to diminish the agony, the searing stripes blazing across flesh. It was too intense for her to distance herself from it. But it was hers.

When it felt that every inch of her back from one shoulder to the other was covered in fiery weals, some of them seeping blood, Alistair began to work on her buttocks and the backs of her thighs. There the pain was different, but no less acute. She shrieked until her voice broke and refused to produce any more sound, as one red line after another appeared on her pale flesh, tears flooding down her face where she pressed it against the bedpost. Her body writhed of its own volition, but she did not relinquish her grip upon the bed nor make any attempt to escape.

Something broke inside her and she began to sob, savage spasms wracking her until she could scarcely breathe. There, there it was. This was what she needed, what she had sought, this release, this point at which suffering became a liberating sort of ecstasy. On it went, and on, until she was almost unaware of the pain of the lash, because everything else in her body ached from sobbing so hard.

Finally, the flood of emotion passed, and she was able to whisper, "Enough." She had feared she would be so breathless and weak that Alistair wouldn't hear her, but he immediately flung the whip away and pried her gripping hands off the bedpost, guiding her down onto her stomach upon the bed. She felt herself floating so far that she was skirting the edge of unconsciousness, awareness coming in vague waves as he gently eased the phallus that was lodged in her bottom free.

He brought an ewer of fresh water and clean linens to the bed and began to dab at her weals, drawing pained hisses from her even as weariness tried to drag her off into oblivion. Then he began spreading a healing poultice on the ones where the skin had broken open and soon the stinging of medicinal herbs had faded to a tingling warmth. Alistair crawled onto the bed and lay beside her, not daring to draw her into his arms.

"Thank you," she murmured tiredly. The sheets beneath her were damp and uncomfortable, but she couldn't bring herself to move just yet. Glancing at Alistair she realized his erection had still not subsided entirely, even while he tended to her wounds.

"Don't make me do that again," he said, his voice shaky and rough. At some point, he had been weeping, she realized. That was enough to bring her back from the edge of sleep.

"Why?" Elissa asked, reaching out to gently touch his half-hard cock.

"I don't want to enjoy that," he breathed, even as his body twitched with renewed interest.

"It doesn't always have to be that intense. Would something less be more comfortable for you?"

"Much more comfortable," Alistair agreed.

Elissa smiled. "Then we'll have to explore that someday, won't we?"

"It's— good to hear you talk that way again," Alistair said with a sigh.

"What way?"

"Like you used to, back when you were helping me learn all kinds of new pleasures, as though it was nothing to be afraid of."

"I'm not afraid," she murmured, pushing herself up to kiss his shoulder. Her weals stung when she moved, but she didn't care.
"Make love to me," she found herself saying impulsively.

"What, now? After all that?"

"Yes, now. Now, when I still hurt. Don't pleasure me, just fuck me."

A shudder ran through Alistair and she saw his cock begin to lengthen and harden. She rolled onto her back and watched as Alistair pushed himself up, positioning himself above her. He took his cock in hand and slowly drew back the cowl from the head, squeezing a drop of fluid from the tip on his next stroke.

She watched him caress himself as though mesmerized, her eyes fixed on his hand as he brought himself back to erection. The sheet was uncomfortable against her abraded skin, but that was its own brand of pleasure, a reminder of her ordeal. She embraced him as his body slid over hers and hooked a leg around his thighs when he pushed into her, meeting his thrust.

She didn't come again and that was perfect. She was tender and slightly sore from being fucked earlier and that was perfect, too. She watched the play of emotions and pleasure on his face as he surged into her, her hands caressing his sweaty skin, kissing salty droplets off his neck and chest as he groaned above her.

"Mine," she whispered, holding him tighter as his pace increased and he buried his face in the crook of her neck with a shout and a groan, spilling himself into her. "Mine."
The First Day festival was the first extravagant event to be held at court since Alistair's coronation. Elissa wasn't entirely happy with it, considering how lean the winter was proving to be across the Bannorn, but there was something to be said for projecting an image of well-being for the morale of the people. If they saw the royal court celebrating First Day joyfully, perhaps they would have hope that the harsh winter would end and the spring would bring new life to their lands.

In some ways, the festival was actually overwhelming for her, for she had never attended such functions before. To not only be attending her first court festival but to be presiding over it was quite intimidating, but she'd fortunately been trained well for such functions.

The same could not be said of Alistair. Once he learned there would be dancing, he'd nearly panicked over his lack of training in courtly comportment. Had Fergus not been in Highever she would have called upon him for help, but instead she had only Zevran with whom she could demonstrate for Alistair the steps and forms of the dances he would be expected to know. Fortunately, he proved a competent student, and while he would never be a great dancer, he mastered the forms well enough that he could fulfill his obligation to partner Elissa in the first dance of the ball, after which no one would think to criticize him for sitting with his ale and watching the festivities while Elissa took on the responsibility of entertaining the nobles.

Which she did merrily, resplendent in her golden gown with its wide crimson stomacher displaying her restored figure to full advantage. She used the excuse of still nursing Ella to affect a lower-cut bodice that revealed a generous hint of her ample breasts. She felt young and beautiful and delightfully alive, charming her way through one dance partner after another. It didn't matter how old or curmudgeonly they might be, if they were gallant enough to request her hand, she granted it and flirted through the set with them until she drew a smile from even the most taciturn face.

How different she felt from just weeks ago, when she'd been afraid even to laugh too boisterously for fear of being thought wanton!

Through it all, her eyes would find their way to Alistair's, and he watched her raptly, his golden eyes sometimes darkening with jealousy if her partner was too handsome. That possessive gleam promised fun of an entirely different sort when the revelry was over for the night. Nonetheless, it seemed his pleasure was in watching her as he conversed easily with the noblemen who approached him, and her enjoyment of the evening was made even greater by the knowledge that he was entertained as well.

If there was one thing that dampened her spirits it was Fergus. Since his return from Highever a few days prior to the festival, he'd been dispirited. Unfortunately, Elissa had not had time in the preparations to discuss the situation at Highever with him, and until the night of the festival she
hadn't noticed his melancholy. Though he began the evening attempting to be cheerful, his efforts quickly faltered. He danced the first two sets only; the first with Bann Alfstanna, and the second with Elissa herself. After that, he stood by looking ever more morose with each tankard of ale he sipped.

As Elissa watched, Alfstanna approached Fergus with an inviting smile. Though Elissa could not hear them speak, she saw Alfstanna's hand slide up Fergus's arm, caressing warmly. Whatever it was the bann said to him—and Elissa would have wagered it was an invitation to her bed that night—Fergus declined with a shake of his head and a sad smile, and Alfstanna walked away looking confused and put out.

By the time Elissa was able to detach herself from her partner, Fergus was gone. Making her excuses to Teagan, to whom she had promised the next set, she returned to Alistair's side, sitting in the ornately carved, velvet-upholstered chair beside him. Overheated from dancing and the press of so many bodies, she gratefully accepted a goblet of wine and drank deeply.

"It's well past midnight, husband," she said formally for the benefit of anyone listening, "and I find I am quite fatigued. I need to speak with my brother about something, and then I think I shall retire."

"That sounds like an excellent notion," Alistair said, a bit more eagerly than was perhaps proper. Nonetheless, she took his arm as he stood and offered it and wishing their guests a joyous First Day, left the garlanded festal hall.

Alistair escorted her to the wing of the palace occupied by the family quarters and as they walked, Elissa quietly explained her concerns for Fergus. Her brother was to stay in the palace overnight rather than returning to Cousland Manor so late, and so she promised to meet Alistair in his chambers after seeing to Fergus and walked away.

Fergus opened the door at her soft call, already changed out of his satin doublet into a loose linen shirt he'd not even managed yet to lace. He clutched another tankard of ale in his hand and bid her enter.

"You left the ball early," Elissa noted without preamble. "I'm worried for you, brother."

"I'm worried for myself," Fergus said bitterly, draining his tankard when she refused his offer to share it.

"Were conditions at Highever so very terrible, then?"

"The castle was a shambles. Howe's men seemed more intent on destroying than actually occupying the place. And no one could tell me what became of their bodies." His voice was hollow and aching. "As near as we can figure, Howe's men disposed of them all on one mass pyre. Mother and Father and Oriana and Oren, burned alongside the stableboy and the kennelmaster, with no more ceremony than the lowest kitchen elf."

Tears burned Elissa's eyes. "Oh, Maker, Fergus...."

"It's been nearly a year since I learned they were dead, pup," he said, his voice breaking. "But somehow it all seems fresh."

"Is that why you refused Alfstanna?"

"Yes. That, and Howe. After what he did to me, the months of pain and humiliation...." Fergus shook his head. "She wants me to be her lover again. And that should be perfect; she has no interest in marriage and neither do I at present. But I can't seem to find any desire. Not for her, not for anyone. I went to the Pearl the other night and even there I just couldn't muster any interest."
"Brother, I'm so sorry," Elissa murmured, wrapping her arms around his waist and hugging him. He stood there trembling with emotion for a moment, and then he hugged her back, his arms encircling her as she rested her cheek on his shoulder and held him.

They stood there together for a long, silent moment, comforting and being comforted. But, perhaps inevitably, Elissa's mind traveled back to the last time she held him like this, the day he left for Ostagar. She'd gone to his chambers to wish him farewell, and she and Oriana had pleasured him together. Strange, perhaps, to think it, but in all ways except one, Fergus had been her first lover. Her father had taught her many things about pleasing men and male responses, but he had always been her teacher. It was Fergus to whom she had turned for comfort and pleasure as she had blossomed into womanhood.

In that instant of memory, it was there, that frisson of awareness and hunger. She tensed with it, on the brink of pulling away, but before she did, she felt against her stomach the incontrovertible proof that he had shared the memory, and perhaps the impulse that accompanied it.

Without thinking she drew him down to her. "Fergus...."

He tasted of ale and home. Alistair had become home, too, but not like this, not a home filled with a lifetime of memories of loved ones and shared joys and sorrows. Even with Alistair there was not this familiarity, this understanding. She buried her hands in his soft chestnut hair and opened to his tongue, pressing against him as his hands spread across her back and pulled her in closer.

It was a long moment before he drew back, trembling. "Maker, Elissa," he breathed. "The first woman I respond to in months and it has to be you."

She kissed his brow, his cheek, the line of his jaw before resting her face in the crook of his neck. "Of course it is," she sighed. "We're Couslands."

"We can't," he said softly, rubbing his face against her hair. "We're not back in Highever anymore. You're the queen now."

"We never had the chance to mourn together," she murmured, unable to relinquish her hold upon him. "Never had the chance to comfort each other."

Fergus gave a long, slow sigh. "I know. I suppose it's inevitable we would find ourselves here."

He kissed her again before she could respond, harder, more urgently, and she pressed wantonly against him, answering his need, letting his thigh slide between hers as they yearned closer to one another. When he pulled away again, he was shaking. "We can't."

Strangely, she felt no unease, no fear. "I must speak with Alistair," she said calmly. "Stay here at the palace one more night. I'll come to you tomorrow."

"Elissa...."

She shushed him, laying her fingers upon his lips. He took her hand into both of his and pressed a kiss into her palm, bringing her wrist to his face to breathe in her scent. "I will come to you," she said again, and drew away, leaving his room.

Alistair was calmer than she had imagined he would be when Elissa told him what had happened, after she had stopped by her own bedchamber to change out of her gown and check in on Ella, asleep in her cradle in Hortense's small room off the queen's suite. He'd been calm when she had confessed what had transpired with Riordan as well, but then they had both been recovering from the
battle with the archdemon and there hadn't seemed to be enough energy for a more animated
reaction, especially given the terrible certainty of death that had hovered over them all as Grey
Wardens. Now however....

She wasn't sure exactly how she had expected him to react. That he was startled was apparent in the
way his face lost some color, making the flush of the evening's ale stand out brightly on his cheeks,
but though his mouth tightened, he said nothing until Elissa had finished speaking. Then he sat down
upon the bed in nothing but his braies and ran a hand through his hair.

"I... I knew this would come up, sooner or later," he finally said, speaking slowly and choosing his
words carefully. "I admit, I thought it would be Zevran, or maybe Teagan or, Maker, just about
anyone else, really."

Elissa sat there silently, clutching her warm dressing gown about her and watching him as thoughts
and emotions crossed his face too rapidly to be read. He had wanted all of her back, the true her, the
essential her. Now came the moment for him to decide if he could be reconciled with all that meant.

"Why?" he asked after a long moment.

"We're Couslands," she answered softly. From the clenching of his jaw she knew he wouldn't be
satisfied with that, and yet she struggled to explain it any more thoroughly. "This is what we are,
Alistair. This is what we do. We turn to sex for comfort, for security, to grieve and to celebrate.
Honestly, perhaps it's the only fitting way that we could mourn the loss of those we loved."

She rose from her chair and crossed to him, kneeling before him and taking his hands in hers. His
palms were sweating.

"As you missed me when I was having difficulty finding myself again, I miss my brother," she said.
"He's not the man he was. He's lost so much, endured so much. What I suffered at Loghain's hands
in a single day is nothing to what he went through in Howe's dungeons for months on end. There's
so little joy left in him, my love. I want my brother back. Perhaps I can help him find himself again,
as you helped me."

Alistair lifted one hand to caress her hair as she laid her head upon his knees and closed her eyes
with a sigh.

"No."

He spoke the word so softly that at first she didn't hear it over the crackling of the fire in the hearth.
Then she lifted her head and stared at him in disbelief.

"No," he said again, more firmly this time. Elissa's heart sank. She had always feared this would
happen, that Alistair would not find his capacity for tolerance to be what they had hoped it was.
What sort of future would they have together, if this became a point of contention between them?
He'd come so far in accepting the licentious side of her; perhaps she was being unreasonable to
expect that he could go any further than he already had.

"Alistair, I—"

He cut her off with a shake of his head. "Let me finish. I've never asked you to be anyone other than
who you are, love, and I knew long ago just what that might entail. But there has to be a limit, Elissa.
There just has to be. And so I'm setting it here. Consider it a royal decree, if you want to. The limit is
this: you can have your debaucheries, but they will happen here, in my bed, and nowhere else."

She blinked at him, stunned. "I'm... I'm not sure exactly what it is you're saying."
"I'm saying," Alistair grabbed her under the arms and dragged her up onto the bed, pushing her onto her back and pulling open her dressing gown. His mouth was rough against her breasts. "You'll summon Fergus here tomorrow. If you're going to fuck your brother, you'll do it in my bed."

Fuck your brother....

Perhaps hearing it put so bluntly should have appalled her, made her shrink from what she had proposed to do. Perhaps it should have made her feel wrong and wicked. It didn't. Instead, it thrilled and aroused that core of perversity deep within her. Moments later she came screaming under Alistair's mouth, with the images his word had evoked in her mind.

Fergus was gone from the palace the next day, and she feared he may have left to avoid encountering her, but his clothing and manservant were still in his rooms at the palace when she went to inform her brother of Alistair's decree, and so she was assured of his intent to return. He had not run away.

Unable to deliver her message in person, she left with Fergus's manservant a sealed missive. Mindful of the need for discretion, she worded it carefully.

Brother,

You are summoned to an audience in the king's chambers this evening after the king retires to confer on the family matter we touched upon when last we spoke.

After that, all that remained was to wait. Court was quiet that day; there was little business or politicking being conducted with most of Denerim abed and hungover. She spent the day tending to Ella, still unwilling to turn her daughter over to Hortense's care completely, despite the expectations that she should do just that.

Underneath it all, however, was a glorious tension that simmered within her. There was something delicious, she mused, about an assignation intended but not yet actualized, about the way anticipation made even mundane events throughout the day more significant as they brought to mind what would happen come nightfall. It seemed so many of her encounters had been spur-of-the-moment affairs; this was a pleasant, if sometimes maddening, change of pace.

Tonight, she would fuck her brother.

It shouldn't have seemed as strange to her as it did. After all, she'd been with him in so many other ways. She'd tasted his seed, felt his hands upon her budding breasts and his cock hard along her spine as she writhed beneath Oriana's delicate and skilled mouth.

She remembered a day when she had just turned fifteen, not long after she had finally been allowed to begin practicing some of her new skills with her mother and father and the very select handful of discreet retainers that knew the Couslands' secrets. In the wake of this new freedom, her months-long flirtation with Ser Gilmore had nearly resulted in an unintended tumble in the stables. Rory had been furious with her when she denied him, and she'd fled to Fergus and Oriana for the first time, weeping with fear and frustration.

Oriana had held her comfortingly, kissed her tenderly while Fergus had pushed back her skirts and removed her smallclothes. It did not occur to her to worry that her brother might forget himself and do more than he ought, or perhaps by that point she had simply become so weary of only her own touch for pleasure that she didn't care. But she'd watched from Oriana's arms with utter and implicit trust as Fergus's tongue darted out to taste her, the first man to ever do so.

Delicately, so very delicately, he pushed her folds apart with his thumbs and his tongue caressed the
barrier of her maidenhead. He praised her, then, with his mouth against her cunt, for her courage and
sacrifice in forestalling her own desires for the advancement of their family, and told her what a
beautiful queen she would be someday. He'd placed kisses upon the lips of her cunt, long kisses with
slow, sensual sweeps of his tongue. When he found her nub and sucked upon it, she came bucking
against him, her hands clutching soft hair that was the same color as her own.

Her brother.

No, the idea of fucking him shouldn't have seemed strange to her at all, and yet it did. And so she
forced herself to sit with it, to accept it. She made herself embrace once more the perversity that had
once seemed so natural and inherent to her but which was now so foreign.

They were Couslands, and she would fuck her brother.

Where Alistair fit into that equation, she couldn't quite be certain. Did he intend to ignore them, as
best he could? Did he intend to watch? Would he take pleasure in it as he had with Zevran, or would
this be the act which finally disgusted him?

Then she thought about his recent proposal that they invite Zevran to join them sometime, and
wondered if he might actually participate. Maker's breath! That thought had her in a constant state of
arousal throughout the day, her smallclothes so wet that they began to chafe after a while.

Fergus was not in the dining hall during supper, which was a relief, for Elissa wasn't certain she
could have looked at him and kept her composure. Alistair was there with her, however, at the high
table, acting casually, as if nothing at all unusual was to take place after they retired. She had thought
she might find him imbibing a bit more heavily than usual, but he barely touched his wine, while she
refilled her own goblet at least twice. She cursed herself for being so off-balance. It wasn't like her to
be so unsettled in the face of sex. How could Alistair, of all people, be so sanguine while she felt like
she was going to come out of her skin?

After supper there were minstrels and cards and games, with the usual rounds of courtiers coming to
discuss problems, update Alistair on the status of affairs in their bannorns, or to request favors. Elissa
thought she might scream with impatience, and finally begged Alistair to give her leave to retire,
which he did with a small smile. As she rose, he drew her hand to his lips and kissed it gallantly—he
really was getting damnably good at affecting courtly manners—and then used his hold upon it to
pull her down until she bent low. His words were barely a whisper in her ear.

"Dismiss your maids and all the servants. Leave your gown on until I arrive. I'll undress you
tonight."

Her body tightened, shuddered, and Elissa realized she was on the brink of climax on the power of
nothing more than anticipation and his words.

She could not even nurse Ella that night, unable to sit still long enough to perform that normally
peaceful task. Giving up the effort, she kissed the babe and handed her to Hortense, and informed
her maids that they would not be needed that evening. Then she made her way to Alistair's suite with
her heart hammering in her chest. She passed through the outer sitting room where she and Alistair
sometimes dined privately if they didn't wish to have supper with the rest of the court, through the
wardrobe where Alistair's attendants dressed and undressed him each day, and into the solar, with the
massive, heavily curtained bed large enough to sleep four or five people and the comfortable chairs
before the large hearth.

Never before had it occurred to her to wonder if sounds of pleasure could travel through the thick
stone walls and heavy oaken doors of three rooms to reach the guards out in the corridor, Elissa
thought nervously as she informed Alistair's attendants that they would not be needed that evening. But no, surely she was being paranoid. Just one of those thick wooden doors would be enough to dampen all but the loudest noises.

In addition, the changing of the guard at midnight would create some confusion as to how long this "family conference" had actually lasted. There would be no gossip in the barracks of the royal guard, even if the guardsmen were inclined to talk.

She wondered if Alistair had taken these details into consideration when he had issued his decree.

She paced nervously before the hearth, too fidgety to sit for long. Finally she heard Alistair enter the outer sitting room and pass through the wardrobe. His stride was casual as he came into the bedchamber. He took a long look at her and went immediately to the small table near the hearth and the flagon of wine that had been set out along with a loaf of crusty bread and a selection of cheeses before she had dismissed his servants. He poured the rich red brew into a golden chalice, but rather than quaffing it himself as she had expected, he offered it to her.

"You seem nervous, love," he observed.

"I confess I am," she sighed, accepting the wine. "And I'm rather astonished that you're so sanguine."

"I've had months to prepare myself for this," he shrugged, unfastening the toggles at the front of his doublet and stripping down to the linen undershirt beneath. He took a seat in one of the chairs before the hearth. "And then also, to be honest, I'm a little relieved to see you back to your old habits. Come here."

Elissa went to him and allowed herself to be pulled down onto his lap. She curled up against him, taking comfort in his arms surrounding her. Laying her head upon his shoulder, she asked, "What is your intention tonight, Alistair?"

"I'm not entirely certain," he said after a pause, his eyes solemn and haunted for a moment. "You know, back at Redcliffe, before the battle with the archdemon, there was a perhaps an hour between the moment when Riordan told me one of us must die and Morrigan came to me with her offer. In that time I thought about all the things that we hadn't done together, all the things we might never do together.... I swore that if we both made it through alive, I would never let convention or prudery stand in the way of anything we decided to explore. I swore I would do anything, no matter how depraved I might have once believed it to be, if it meant one more night with you. That said, however," he offered her a crooked smile, "I'm not quite as relaxed about this as I may put on, you know."

Touched by his admission, yet unwilling to let melancholy settle in and mar their mood, she giggled, wriggling her bottom on his lap. "Hmm, yes, I can tell."

"That's not what I'm referring to, you minx," he growled, nipping at her neck. "Don't think that I'm over my tendency to get jealous. The thought of you with another man—even your own brother—still drives me mad."

"Oh, but your jealousy provokes such delightful reactions," Elissa purred, shifting so that she straddled his lap. She pressed her bosom to his chest and draped her arms over his shoulders, kissing him lightly. After a moment, Alistair's hands grabbed her bottom rudely and his mouth opened, slanting hungrily across hers.

"I was right," he breathed some minutes later, kneeling her buttocks and pushing his pelvis up
against her as she undulated above him. "You are a minx."

His hands pulled at her skirts until he finally found his way underneath them, and his fingers delved between their bodies and inside her smallclothes. "Maker's breath, you're drenched!"

She twisted and whimpered when his fingertip found her clit a bit too directly. She was almost painfully sensitive after spending the entire day aroused. Her lips found his again as his finger stroked firmly along her wet slit, but he broke the kiss and commanded, "Smalls. Off. Now."

Smiling, she rose from his lap, discarded her slippers and slid her smallclothes down her legs. Then she curled up in his lap again, enjoying leisurely kisses as his hand once more crept up under her skirts and fingered her slowly, almost casually, not even for the sake of her own arousal or his, but just because she was there and she was his and he could.

She didn't mind. It was almost relaxing after spending the day taut as a bowstring with arousal.

Alistair grew very quiet and she felt him become tense, sighing as though he had something to say and wasn't sure how to say it. Just as she was about to inquire, he finally spoke.

"Fergus isn't a Grey Warden."

"Yes, I'm aware," Elissa said slowly.

His next words came out in a rush. "What I mean to say is, while not spectacularly high to begin with, your chances of getting caught with child are at least higher with someone who isn't a Grey Warden."

"Ah." She nodded, understanding what was troubling him. She swallowed hard. "I want this to be something beautiful and healing for Fergus, Alistair. I don't want to place restrictions or limitations upon it."

"I understand, but is it wise to take the chance? No one will question if you have a child who looks like a Cousland, of course, but what if—"

She cut him off, placing her hand over his mouth to still his words. "I'm still nursing Ella and my courses have not yet resumed. Alba has told me the signs to look for that my fertility may be returning and so far there have been none. Between that and my being a Grey Warden, I am as safe as a woman may be, I should imagine."

Alistair nodded. "All right, then. If you feel it's safe, I'll trust you."

"Thank you, my love."

They sat there silently until they heard the rap of the guard's fist upon the door to the outer chamber. Alistair seized Elissa when she would have risen from his lap and called loudly for Fergus to enter. It seemed to take forever for Fergus to make his way through the suite to the inner solar, but he did as Alistair bade and closed the doors in each successive room behind him.

"I was, ahem... summoned, Your Majesty?" Fergus said carefully when the door was closed securely behind him.

"Please," Alistair said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "There's wine on the table."

Elissa had thought Alistair was merely inviting Fergus to have a drink, but Fergus seemed to glean something else entirely from his husband's words. "As you wish, brother," he corrected with a nod.
It soon became apparent from Fergus's hesitation that she had worded her note poorly, for he stood stiffly, ill-at-ease and obviously expecting some sort of reproach for what had happened between them the night before and was now confused by the intimacy of the scene he entered upon.

"You may relax, Fergus. Sit. Have some wine," she said when Alistair once again refused to allow her to rise from his lap. "I apologize if my missive gave you the wrong impression. My husband has made an... unexpected decree. If we are to lie together, we must do so here."

Fergus gave Alistair a startled look, but Alistair shrugged calmly. "You said it yourself... brother. The activities of the king's bedchamber receive little scrutiny so long as certain requirements are met."

Elissa stared at her husband, taken aback by his unexpected claim of kinship to her brother as well as her sudden understanding of his motives. "Is that what this has been all about, then? Discretion?"

"What did you think it was about, wife?" he asked, his tone dropping to something low and dangerous. She squirmed upon his lap at that sound.

"I thought you were just being perverse."

"Maybe I am," Alistair acknowledged. "Maybe I want to understand exactly what it is you mean when you shrug and say 'we're Couslands' as though that explains everything. Maybe I want to see what it is that makes you desire your own brother."

With his words, something wild and proud reared up within Elissa, lifting her chin, straightening her back. By the Maker, she was Elissa Cousland, daughter of the teyrn of Highever and a whore, and she would not be ashamed or apologize for that.

"Then you shall see, husband," she declared and attempted yet again to rise from his lap. This time, he let her.

She filled a chalice for Fergus and brought it to him, her steps slow and measured, the sway of her hips calculated for Alistair's benefit. Fergus's eyes, the same sapphire hue as her own, were dark and watchful as she approached. Looking at him, Elissa forced herself to abandon her intent to play it up and put on a show for Alistair; this wasn't about him. It was about helping her brother rediscover his passion and joy. Perhaps it was even about requiting something that had existed between the two of them since long before she had met Alistair.

Standing before her brother, she took a long drink of wine and set aside the chalice, reaching for him and pulling him down to sample the wine from her lips. He was cautious at first, his eyes upon Alistair over her shoulder, but then his tongue sought hers and his eyes closed. He gave himself over to the kiss, his arms closing around her.

She took her time with it, exploring his mouth and allowing herself to be explored in return. She let herself lean back and be supported by her brother's arms as he bent over her to deepen the kiss, his tongue thrusting as her fingers combed through his fine, dark hair. He'd been letting it grow since he'd left Highever for Ostagar, and it was now long enough that he wore it in a queue at his nape. She released the thong that held it and let it flow about her fingers.

"Ah, sister...." Fergus whispered as her mouth trailed down the line of his jaw to nibble at the hard lump at the front of his throat. Something within her thrilled to be called that, to hear her brother's voice addressing her in passion in a way he'd not done for far too long, and never with such frank intent as now existed between them.
She felt Alistair's approach from the sudden tension in Fergus's body just an instant before his hands came down on her shoulders and drew her away from her brother, pulling her back against his chest.

"Alistair, what—?" she began to ask, but he cut her off.

"I did say I intended to be the one to undress you tonight," he said, his voice deep and raspy against her ear. She heard the clinking of the clasp on her gold girdle a moment before it loosened and fell to the floor, and her wide stomacher soon followed. His hands went to the laces of her bodice, the same laces which made it so easy for her to nurse Ella, and began to draw them apart, revealing breasts that strained against the fine, thin linen of her chemise. From over her shoulders he cupped them, kneaded them, lifted them out of her chemise and—Maker's breath—offered them to Fergus.

There was something almost ceremonial in that offer, she thought, though the idea was lost in her arousal. Perhaps offering her was what Alistair needed to do to be comfortable with this.

It was an offer Fergus accepted, bending to capture one of her nipples and sucking on it softly until he tasted her milk. "Mm," he sighed with pleasure, sweeping the flat of his tongue along her other breast. "I remember that taste, back when Oriana nursed Oren...."

Grief touched his features as he pulled back, and Elissa reached out to stroke his face gently with her knuckles. "I'm sorry, brother."

"I'll be all right, pup," he said, shaking himself as though to dispel the painful memories. "Let's have this be a thing of joy, shall we?"

She stretched up to kiss him again as Alistair's hands made short work of more laces. Her overgown pooled at her feet and she drew away from Fergus to allow Alistair to lift her kirtle over her head, and then her chemise. He slid her stockings down her legs, and Elissa shivered. Even with the crackling fire on the hearth, no room in the stone palace ever seemed to be truly warm in winter.

Alistair withdrew to add more wood to the fire while Elissa turned her attention to the toggles on Fergus's doublet. She unlaced the collar of his linen undershirt and slid her hands beneath it, taking pleasure both in the warmth of him and the sensation of his muscles and skin at her fingertips. She pushed his undershirt up and rubbed her face against his chest, flicking her tongue lightly over his nipple.

Above her head, Fergus spoke, but it was Alistair he addressed. "Are you still... curious about how to share your wife, brother?" he asked, his voice strained.

Elissa grew very still, a moan of desire so deep it might have been pain rising up from her throat. She wrapped her arms tightly around Fergus and shuddered, and he closed his arms around her in turn.

"I'm willing to wait," Alistair said calmly.

But Fergus seemed determined to press the point. "I wouldn't dream of usurping the royal—not to mention husbandly—prerogative."

Elissa moaned again as she understood what Fergus was getting at. He was offering to defer to Alistair so that Alistair could have her first, unsullied by another man's seed, if he desired. It was a brilliant move on Fergus's part, she thought with that small portion of her brain still capable of assessing such things, intended to let Alistair know that Fergus would take no liberties beyond those which Alistair permitted him. Knowing as she did that Alistair found comfort in having the initiative, Elissa thought there was little else Fergus might have done that would have set Alistair so at ease.

"I appreciate the thought," Alistair said after a moment, and she realized he had been considering it. "But I think my wife has other plans for this evening and I'll yield to her scheme for now."
The requirements of courtesy satisfied, Fergus's voice took on a humorous note. "And just what are these plans you've made, sister?" he asked with a smirk. The laughter in his tone was marvelously familiar. This was the Fergus she remembered.

"I intend to make love to my brother," she said calmly, drawing his undershirt over his head. She unlaced his breeches, but without kneeling on the cold stone floor she could not remove his boots, and so instead she settled for sliding her hands down over his backside, cupping him and pulling him closer. "We shall honor the lives of those we have lost and bid them farewell together."

Fergus closed his eyes with a long, solemn sigh and then swept her up in his arms, bearing her to the bed. He laid her gently upon it, kissing her again, then withdrew to remove his boots, breeches and braies. He was trembling when he crawled onto the bed, sliding his body over hers, though whether with desire or some deeper emotion she could not say. She opened her arms to him and welcomed his weight upon her.

There was no particular skill or artistry in the way they made love, though they both might have employed such things had they chosen to do so. No, it was beautiful in its simplicity, gentle kisses and caresses gradually escalating to something more intense and needful. Elissa was barely aware of Alistair moving around the bed, drawing closed the bedcurtains until only the draperies at the foot of the bed remained open, to better capture the light and warmth from the hearth. Alistair entered that semi-dark chamber with them, though he did not touch or interfere; the bed was large enough that he could sit and observe without being intrusive.

Fergus's tongue dipped into the warmth of her mouth as his hand slid down her belly, now marred by myriad silvery-white lines, and her thighs fell open. She arched and moaned as his fingers slide easily into her wet channel—the first time they had ever done so—and mewled as his thumb located her nub and began to stroke. It did not take long for her to reach completion, and she sighed her brother's name as she shuddered and clench.

His body replaced his hand between her thighs and her knees came up to embrace his hips as his cock prodded her entrance. He was shaking again, and this time she knew it was from passion and need. He buried his face in her neck, her arms tightly about his shoulders, as he surged into her, too desperate after his long abstinence to go slowly.

Maker's breath, how had she never realized how generously he was appointed? She bit her lip, stretching to accommodate him, as he kissed her sweat-dampened neck and groaned, "Andraste's mercy! Oh, my sweet sister...."

After the first few, tentative strokes he pushed his weight up on his arm and began to thrust with intent, his eyes upon her face as her fingers dug into the muscles of his upper arms and her hips lifted to meet his. It ended far too soon, for it had been too long for Fergus and his need was too great. He kissed her hand as she stroked his face, and then his eyes closed and his thrusts became rougher and less coordinated, until he shuddered and moaned above her. When he collapsed upon her, there was a wetness upon his face that she knew was not merely sweat.

Tears burned her own eyes and tenderly, insistently, she drew his face toward hers, stroking away the wet trails upon his cheeks. She kissed him, deeply, lovingly, and when she drew away again, she whispered, "For Mother."

Another kiss, lips meshing, tongues meeting, and another parting. "For Father."

A third kiss, chaste and brief. "For Oren."

A fourth, long and passionate. "For Oriana," they breathed together.
On it went, the litany of the names of those they had lost—the chaste relationships and the debauched—each one sent to their rest with a final kiss. Ser Gilmore. Dairren. Iona. Nan. Aldous.

And a final kiss, hard and demanding. "For Duncan."

Alistair made a startled sound, and in unison they turned their heads to look at him. He was watching them with something akin to wonder, or rapture, and Elissa knew he had found the beauty in what he had seen and not merely the perversion. Now he understood what it meant to be a Cousland.

Fergus moved off her as Elissa pushed herself up and crawled across the bed to Alistair straddling his thighs. "For Duncan," she repeated, kissing him. His arms closed around her and only then did she realize he had stripped entirely before joining them upon the bed. His erection was hard and insistent, trapped between their bodies, and if he objected to the seep of Fergus's seed as it trickled down onto him, he did not object.

"For Duncan," he said with a sigh when the kiss broke.

Though he was aroused, Alistair seemed content to kiss her leisurely and hold her while she and Fergus recovered from their exertions. Fergus stretched out upon his back, his softened cock resting in the nest of hair at his groin as he draped an arm casually across his stomach and folded the other behind his head. He was beautiful, Elissa thought, despite the addition of the scars his injury in the Korcari Wilds and his time in Howe's dungeon had added. He was also far more peaceful than she had seen him in months. She prayed that he had found some of the healing he needed with her.

They all three began to converse, there together in the bed with Elissa resting her head on Alistair's thigh. They shared memories and anecdotes and more tales of Elissa as a young girl than she particularly cared to have shared. More wine was poured and sipped, the fire built up again to ward off the creeping cold. Elissa had not realized the camaraderie that had sprung up between Fergus and Alistair all those weeks they were gone prior to the battle with the archdemon, but they spoke easily with one another once the inherent strangeness of their situation had faded somewhat in their minds.

Soon, however, Elissa began to grow distracted by the sight of so much nude male flesh surrounding her and the unspoken promise of more pleasures to come. Though Alistair's interest had temporarily flagged while they conversed, it quickly awoke when, without warning, she took his semi-soft cock into her mouth and began to suck. Alistair yelped in startled surprise and Fergus began to laugh as Alistair said in a strangled tone, "A little more warning before you do that, please, love?"

She released his cock as it began to grow firmer and licked slowly up its length. "Are you actually intending to complain?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," he muttered, his head falling back as her lips closed over the head of his cock again.

She had thought she would take her time with it, pleasure him slowly, but Alistair had other intentions. After only a few moments, he pushed her away and onto her back abruptly and crawled down her body. He lapped eagerly at her cunt, his tongue flicking at her nub as she moaned and writhed and arched. It wasn't until his tongue delved deep within her and she heard a definite sipping sound that she realized he was very deliberately tasting Fergus's seed upon her.

"Oh, dear Maker...." she moaned, everything within her tightening at the thought. She hadn't thought he would desire such a thing, but apparently once Alistair embraced debauchery, he did so without reservations.

Then Fergus was there before her, his eyes hot with passion and his cock standing boldly out
between his legs. He kissed her, hard and urgent, before sucking his way down her neck and shoulders.

They pleasured her together, Alistair between her legs and Fergus at her breasts. Elissa surrendered to their ministrations, to their hands and fingers, probing and pinching. Alistair's tongue wrought exquisite pleasure at her nub as Fergus nibbled delicately upon her nipples. She let herself be pampered and adored by them, until she was so overwhelmed by sensation she could hardly bear it.

Begging for a reprieve, she lay there a moment, catching her breath. Then she reached out and idly caressed Fergus's cock, the closest to hand. Fergus moaned softly as Elissa's fingers became more purposeful, stroking him.

"Suck him," Alistair growled, lifting his head from where he had laid it upon her thigh. It was not a request. He'd given her the freedom to make love to Fergus as she wished to, but now he was going to seize the initiative once more and reassert his claim in no uncertain terms.

Elissa found she was perfectly delighted with that arrangement. Fergus moved toward her face as Alistair once again thrust his tongue rudely into her channel, lapping at the cream there. And then her mouth was upon Fergus's cock, her hand pumping as she licked and sucked, her cheeks hollowing. She employed her mother's techniques to great effect feeling that soft, odd popping when the head passed into her throat. She backed off to draw a deep breath and then took him deep into her throat again as Alistair drew away.

A moment later he returned, not with his mouth but with his cock, and thrust hard into her, setting a punishing pace that left her wailing around Fergus's cock. Fergus read Alistair's mood perfectly accurately and joined in the game enthusiastically. When the pleasure of Alistair's thrusts grew so intense that she could no longer concentrate on pleasuring her brother, he took control, seizing her hair and thrusting into her mouth, choking off her cries as his cock pushed into her throat until she began pushing at him in desperate need of air.

Neither of them were gentle or careful as the urgency of passion set in, Alistair slamming into her cunt as Fergus fucked her mouth. It was perfect, to be there between them, completely at their mercy and yet completely safe. Here she could lose herself and be nothing more than a vessel they fucked. They used her roughly and she reveled in it, feeling her release looming near.

Alistair's fingers began to work her clit, circling and pressing, and Elissa screamed around Fergus's cock as she came, bucking and clawing and sobbing with pleasure. The spasms had scarcely passed when Alistair pulled out of Elissa entirely and knelt between her thighs with his hands clenched and his eyes shut, cursing as he fought for control.

"Pinch yourself, brother," she heard Fergus say, and he drew away from her. "Here."

She heard Alistair's grunt of discomfort and her entire body seized again in an echo of orgasm as she realized Fergus had taken hold of Alistair's cock and was squeezing the base hard until he had succeeded in warding off Alistair's impending release. Elissa watched them raptly as they waited together, with no room for self-consciousness as her brother held her husband's cock in his hand.

"Thank you," Alistair said after a long moment.

Fergus bowed his head with a smile, and Elissa realized that her brother wasn't entirely certain where Alistair's boundaries lay and whether he might have overstepped them. Alistair stared at Fergus's smile for a moment, something she couldn't quite read crossing his face. He looked from her brother to her and back again, and just as Elissa was about to speak, to inquire as to his comfort level, he seized the initiative again and pulled Fergus into a demanding kiss.
Elissa gave a startled gasp as they came together ferociously, grappling and groping. Fergus did not give ground as easily as Zevran had. They fought for dominance within the kiss, and Elissa feared that perhaps Alistair's approach was too aggressive after all Fergus had been through with Howe, but at last Fergus was satisfied that Alistair was worthy of yielding for and gave over gracefully. His arms came around Alistair and Alistair took Fergus's face in his hands and guided him, deepening the kiss as he willed.

It was beautiful and glorious and breathtaking. Elissa shuddered with desire and reached for them both. They separated, their chests heaving breathlessly, as her hands touched their shoulders and she rose up to move between them.

"Have we been neglecting you, sister?" Fergus asked, striving to lighten the mood as Alistair—clearly stunned at himself—gathered his thoughts.

"You have, and most shamefully," she scolded lightly. "Do not think I have forgotten the offer you made my husband?"

"You wish to be shared, then, do you?" Alistair spoke at last, his voice rough with passion.

"Yes. I want you both, the two men I love most in this world," she said with conviction. It was only then that she realized that, though she had experienced such things before, never had it been with men she loved. In fact, most often it had been under painful or horrid circumstances, such as in Lothering or at the Circle Tower. Being pressed between them, in love and pleasure, seemed so much more significant, so much more sublime, than it ever had before.

Smiling, she kissed Alistair lovingly, guiding him to lie back upon the bed as she crawled over him. She tasted Fergus's seed from his lips and she marveled that he was not more conflicted about it all. She thought about the admission he had made to her earlier, about his willingness to do anything with her, and realized he had been sincere. He had stared the dark prospect of dying, or seeing her die instead, in the face and come away determined never to miss an opportunity.

"I love you," she whispered, swiping with her tongue at a smear of her fluids mingled with Fergus's upon his chin.

Alistair smiled at her, his hands caressing her breasts, pulling gently at her nipples, as she reared up above him and slid her wet cunt up and down his shaft where it lay pressed between them.

"You'll find what you need in the trunk at the foot of the bed, brother," she said and shifted upward to take Alistair's cock in hand and guide it within her.

"Oh, Maker, yes," he moaned, his eyes closing and his jaw clenching. She made no effort to ride him vigorously, but merely stroked leisurely up and down, enjoying the sensation of him filling her, the tiny bit of pain that accompanied his skillful pinches at her nipples; he had truly become an expert at knowing just how much pain to apply to heighten pleasure, for it was a skill well in line with his own aggressive inclinations.

Fergus moved in behind her and his arms encircled her. One of his hands supplanted Alistair's upon her breast so that each of them kneaded and stroked a different breast. Fergus's fingers were a little firmer than Alistair's when he pulled at her nipple, and she whimpered and tensed above Alistair until Alistair had to choke out a request for Fergus to stop, lest the entire affair be ended too soon.

"Down, pup," Fergus said, placing a kiss on her shoulder before he pressed on her back.

She sank down upon Alistair, kissing and nuzzling his chest as Fergus's oil-slicked fingers began to
work open her rear passage. The adjustment to the intrusion made her tighten about Alistair and he groaned agreeably, his eyes looking over her shoulder at Fergus as her brother added more oil and slid a second finger into her ass.

Caught up in pleasure and the nearly overwhelming sensation of being filled front and back, Elissa nearly missed the constancy of Alistair's attention to Fergus, but finally she felt compelled to inquire about it.

"What is it you're thinking of when you look at my brother?"

She had expected a response dealing with the resemblance she and Fergus bore one another. What she did not expect was that Alistair would give a slight push to slide deeper into her as he replied simply, "Duncan."

Elissa shuddered and lost her ability to think clearly as Fergus added a third finger, twisting and wriggling until all three were seated deep within her. With Alistair's girth making her tighter, it took some effort to relax her, but Fergus was relentless.

"You were close to Duncan as well, then, brother?" Fergus asked as he worked. Elissa was spared the effort of participating in the conversation and buried her head against Alistair's chest, moaning as Fergus's fingers spread her wider.

"Not—" Alistair's words were cut off abruptly and he tensed as Elissa clenched around him again. "—Not in the way the two of you were, but yes."

Fergus hummed thoughtfully, and withdrew his fingers from Elissa's bottom, wringing from her a bereft moan. But she heard the sounds of him slicking his cock and then his body was over hers, pressing her down tighter against Alistair as his cock nudged at her relaxed entrance. He waited, hovering there a moment until the expectant tension in Elissa's body began to drain away, and then he kissed the back of her neck and began to push inside.

"Oh, sweet Andraste..." she and Alistair groaned in unison.

Fergus had been thorough; only the slightest burn marred the pleasure of his cock pushing insistently into her ass, and then the wide crown of the head was through and there was only unbearably intense pleasure.

"Oh, Maker's mercy," Elissa whimpered, rubbing her face back and forth against Alistair's chest, sweating and trembling with the effort of taking them both at once. How was it she never quite remembered just how intense this act of sharing could be?

And then Fergus was seated fully within her, his hips brushing her buttocks, and he was raining kisses across her shoulders as he stroked her back. "Are you well, sister?" he asked solicitously.

"Full," she mumbled incoherently. There was almost no pain and yet it was so overwhelming she wasn't certain she could endure it. What minuscule fragment of rational thought remained to her was consumed by the knowledge that this was her brother filling her ass until she didn't think she could bear anymore, her brother pulling her up off Alistair's chest to wrap his arms around her and cup her breasts. He withdrew slightly and then pushed in again, and Elissa cried out loudly.

"Touch her, brother," Fergus breathed beside her ear, and with his eyes raptly upon her, Alistair's fingers found her clit. Just a stroke, that was all it took and then her body went rigid, a scream parting her lips as she jerked and bucked. Alistair and Fergus both pushed harder, deeper into her in response, and another orgasm crashed through her, hard on the heels of the first.
Alistair grunted again, no doubt feeling Fergus moving. He held hard to Elissa's hips as Fergus began to thrust, but she was insensible to his response, insensible to anything but the fullness and the stretching and the endless waves of pleasure so intense she didn't think she could stand anymore.

Then they were both moving, thrusting, finding a rhythm within her that allowed them to work together rather than impede one another. Their hands were upon her, and their mouths; clutching, stroking, sucking, nibbling. And she was coming, coming, crying out for Alistair, for her brother, for the Maker's sweet mercy to deliver her.

It was Alistair who came next, not having had the prior release Fergus had enjoyed. Unable to come anymore, Elissa collapsed against his chest in exhaustion as Fergus began to thrust with greater freedom, driving her into Alistair as his cock softened inside her cunt. And then her brother was groaning her name, releasing his seed deep within her ass, and when his weight sagged upon her it was marvelous, being pressed between them so tightly, surrounded by the warmth of their bodies and the scent of their musk and the power of their arms. Surrounded by their love.

Their hands guided her down and she was too weary and spent to do anything more than lie between them, floating hazily at the edge of unconsciousness. She felt Alistair's arms around her, Fergus at her back and she drifted. How long she slept, she couldn't say, nor could she be certain whether or not Alistair and Fergus slept as well. But it was some time later when Fergus sat up and murmured something about needing to leave before it got too much later.

She wanted to protest, but she knew she should not. Despite the relative safety from scrutiny assured by the privacy of the king's bedchamber, if her brother began spending nights with them, someone was bound to notice. Still, the dejected set of Fergus's shoulders as he rose from the bed and began to search for his clothing, silhouetted by the red-gold glow of the fire, made her heart ache. He was so alone, and when he left them he would be even more so.

"Don't go, brother," she pleaded.

"I can't stay until morning, pup," he said sadly. "The excuse of a family conference will only carry us so far."

"What if we use gossip to our advantage?" she said, pushing herself up and looking not at Fergus, but at Alistair. "If rumor begins to circulate that Fergus spent the night in the king's bedchamber, who's to say it was the queen he lay with?"

Alistair stared at her in disbelief. "You mean start—or at least allow—a rumor that he's my lover?"

"Our fondness is well-known, husband, but there is also a great deal of talk that your primary purpose in marrying me was actually to adopt your brother's child as your heir, and considerable speculation as to why that might be," she said rationally. "If gossip had it that your tastes ran to men, it might explain your own inability to produce an heir without giving away Grey Warden secrets."

"Maybe your husband doesn't want a reputation for buggery, sister," Fergus said mildly, though when he turned, his profile spoke of a far more eager opinion on the subject. "Not to mention it would put a rather severe dent in any plans I may eventually have to find a wife and produce an heir for the teyrnir."

Elissa bowed her head and nodded a reluctant acknowledgment. He was right, of course. She was being irrational. It wasn't like her to be so short-sighted in matters of politics. "I can't bear the thought of you being alone, brother," she murmured sadly. "We're Couslands. We're not meant to sleep in empty beds."
His braies in his hand, Fergus came to sit on the edge of the bed, reaching across Alistair to caress her face. "This has been lovely, pup. But I must go and I must not come back. I promise you, I will not allow myself to be alone for long." He gave her a smile full of mirth, and Elissa felt her heart lighten to realize that in some respects, she had succeeded. This was the gregarious, often bawdy brother she remembered. "Maybe I'll take Alfstanna up on her offer. Or maybe I'll find some man to bugger me senseless until I'm no longer reminded of all Howe did to me."

"Like Duncan once did," she said, returning his smile.

"Hmm," Fergus grinned, lifting her hand to place a flamboyant kiss upon it. "I'm not likely to find another Duncan but perhaps the Maker will favor me with someone close enough."

She was about to move across Alistair to kiss her brother farewell when she heard her husband speak, and his words turned her head as her jaw dropped in astonishment.

"Will I do?" he asked softly.

Elissa stared at him, hardly able to believe what she had heard, and even Fergus was quite clearly taken aback. Alistair met her eyes with a smile that was shy and devastatingly sensual all at once.

"I... guess my fetish for following where Duncan led is a bit stronger than I might have assumed," he shrugged, ducking his head in embarrassment. Then he sighed and lifted it again, setting his chin with proud determination. "Besides, once you cross enough lines, the rest just seem silly and arbitrary, right?"

"Exactly so, my love," she murmured, and kissed him. She could feel the slight tremor in his body as his arms encircled her and realized he was nervous, nervous in a way he hadn't even been the first time he'd made love with her. But the hardness creating a rise beneath the bedclothes spoke of something that knew nothing of nervousness.

They turned as one to look at Fergus, who was watching them with eyes that had gone dark with desire.

"What say you, brother?" Elissa asked softly.

"Yes," Fergus agreed, dropping his braies to the floor and climbing up onto the bed. Alistair pushed himself up onto his knees to meet Fergus's mouth with that same determination with which he tackled so many things that made him feel uncertain, headlong and relentless. She watched them breathlessly, enraptured by the beauty of them as they strained together, their skin gleaming in the light of the fire, their muscles rippling. They knelt there facing each other, embracing each other. Alistair stiffed a moment when Fergus's hands slid down his spine to cup his backside and pull him closer, grinding their erections together, and then he groaned and pressed harder against Fergus's body.

Fergus let himself sink back upon the bed, bringing Alistair down above him. Alistair explored Fergus's ears and neck as Fergus's legs hooked around Alistair's and he thrust up against Alistair's cock, and Alistair rocked against him in response, the muscles of his buttocks flexing and clenching as he gave himself over to the rhythm of the simulated fucking.

When they broke apart, Alistair stared at Fergus beneath him, and then turned to look at Elissa, who was scarcely less affected by their display. He looked back and forth between them again and commented, "Maker's breath, he looks like you!"

Elissa and Fergus smiled at each other in shared memory. It wasn't the first time they'd heard such an
observation. The last time, it had been when they were both pleasuring Oriana simultaneously.

"Shall we show him just how alike we can be, sister?" Fergus proposed.

Elissa nodded eagerly and reached to pull Alistair off of Fergus. "Lay back, husband," she urged.

They pleasured him together. Elissa took the head of Alistair's cock into her mouth and sucked deeply while Fergus licked his sac, causing Alistair to stiffen and thrust up into her mouth. Their tongues slid up and down opposite sides of his cock in unison, until they met at the head and paused to exchange a kiss that tasted of Alistair's musk. Beneath their mouths and tongues, Alistair writhed and moaned and invoked the name of the Maker while they worked, until finally he gasped, "Enough!" and lay there panting and shuddering until he had regained his control.

Fergus gave Elissa another kiss and asked her to move aside, his mood suddenly sombre and perhaps a touch nervous. He retrieved the vial of oil he had set aside earlier and handed it to Alistair, who released a long, slow breath as he took it.

"I should like to face you, brother," Fergus said, lying upon his back and lifting his knees. "So that I may look up and know who is taking me."

Alistair gave a solemn nod and set himself to the task of preparing Fergus. Elissa could see his touch was gentle, cautious, his tendency toward aggression restrained in the face of the trust Fergus was placing in him after his ordeal at Howe's hands.

Fergus gasped and tensed when one of Alistair's fingers slid slowly into him, and Elissa moved to lay beside his head, caressing his face soothingly, murmuring to him and encouraging relaxation and trust as though he were new to such pleasures. Gradually Fergus began to move with the intrusion of Alistair's fingers, his body writhing sensually as he gave himself over to pleasure. Alistair was a bit startled when his fingers found the spot deep within Fergus that drew a shout from him as he jerked and tensed in pleasure.

"Oh, that's right," Elissa said with a smile. "I haven't tried that particular trick upon you, have I, my love? How very remiss of me."

"Some other time... if you will... sister," Fergus gasped, panting and groaning as Alistair continued to work his fingers in and out, twisting and massaging. Elissa was glad she had taught him about this kind of pleasure, and grateful he had taken to it so enthusiastically, to be so skilled and careful. Occasionally his eyes would move beyond Fergus to find hers, and whatever he found in her spellbound gaze urged him onward.

At length Alistair withdrew his fingers and began to slick more oil over his cock. He met Fergus's eyes as her brother stared at him with heavy-lidded eyes, and Elissa was amazed to find that for the moment, she had been forgotten and all their attention was upon one another. She could not find it within herself to mind, however. Fergus drew his knees to his chest and angled his pelvis upward. Alistair breathed deeply, closing his eyes for a long moment, then moved over Fergus's body.

"Yes, brother," Fergus murmured as Alistair began to push against him. They groaned in unison at the moment Alistair slid slowly into Fergus's body, both of them shuddering with the intensity of sensation, with restrained passion, with fears and nervousness they did not speak. Alistair pushed slowly forward until he was seated deep within and then he hung his head, trembling and waiting while Fergus adjusted.

"Oh, dear Maker...." Fergus moaned. He was still for a long moment, drawing deep, slow, deliberate breaths. Elissa wondered if perhaps Howe had done him some injury along the way to make
adapting to Alistair's cock within his more difficult, or if it was emotion which challenged her
brother. At last, Fergus's eyes opened and he released his hold on the back of his knees to reach up
and touch Alistair. Alistair met his eyes and lowered himself upon Fergus to kiss him.

They lay there entwined, Fergus's arms and legs surrounding Alistair, his hands clutching and pulling
and stroking Alistair's damp skin. One kiss stretched out into another, and another, their mouths
meshing and exploring until Fergus was pliant and relaxed beneath Alistair. Only then did Alistair
begin to move, withdrawing and then rocking his hips forward until he was fully engulfed.

"Yesss...." Fergus hissed, drawing his knees to his chest again to open himself up wider. "Yes."

Elissa was certain she would never see a more perfect and glorious sight than that of Alistair, his
fears and uncertainties and inhibitions forgotten, making love to her brother. She watched his
beautiful face as passion overcame him, listened to his low, growling sounds as he surged into
Fergus, his movements becoming more forceful and less restrained. She thrilled to hear Fergus's
moans and cries as he arched and pushed back against Alistair, begging him for more.

Her fingers parted her own folds, sliding into her slick cleft as she watched them, her body humming
with desire. Part of her wanted their attention and part of her wanted them to stay lost in one another
as she admired them together. Alistair's thrusts grew harder, drawing more intense responses from
Fergus, and then he shuddered and slowed, nearly overcome and attempting to draw himself back
from the edge.

Fergus's moan hovered somewhere between relief and disappointment as he took the moment to
collect himself as well. His gaze fell upon Elissa and her shining fingers where they rested between
her thighs, and Alistair followed the look, licking his lips as he saw the evidence of her arousal.

A look of irrepressible mischief crossed Fergus's face. "Perhaps someday I can show you another
way to share," he offered, turning his attention to Alistair.

"How?" Alistair's voice was so low with the strain of passion it was barely recognizable as being a
human voice at all.

"Imagine being the force which drives another man into your wife," Fergus said, "taking them both
by taking him as he takes her."

Alistair groaned and began to move again, slowly at first then picking up speed, and Fergus quickly
lost the capacity for speech until he slowed Alistair down again by placing his legs upon Alistair's
shoulders.

"Or imagine being the one in the middle, being filled and engulfed at the same moment with her
beautiful face beneath you," Fergus breathed.

"Oh, sweet Andraste," Alistair moaned and his control was lost. He slammed into Fergus and Fergus
welcomed him, a nearly constant moan rising up from his lips. He lowered his legs again to take his
furiously engorged cock in hand, and Elissa suddenly found herself in motion before she even
realized she intended to act. She pulled Fergus's hand away and replaced it with her mouth.

A hand fell upon the back of her head, fingers gripping her hair. Alistair, she realized with a pang of
arousal so intense it was nearly a painful cramp in her belly, clutching her head, holding her in place
as he drove Fergus into her mouth, choking her. It only took a few thrusts and then Fergus's salty
seed was spilling upon her tongue as her brother cried out his passion. She drank it down lazily as
Alistair gave a few final uncoordinated thrusts and came with a feral growl, pumping into Fergus.
Smiling, she lay with her head on her brother's chest as Alistair hovered above them, shaking with the force of his release. Only when he carefully withdrew and sank down onto the bed beside Fergus did she rise, retrieving wet linen cloths to clean them all.

At length, Fergus kissed them both and rose, dressing. Elissa lay there beside Alistair and watched him, pleased to note that despite his obvious exhaustion, there was an energy about him, a jauntiness to his movements that was marvelously familiar. Bidding them thanks and good night, he left himself out of the chamber, and Elissa rested her head upon Alistair's arm as he held her.

"Perhaps someday we might travel to Highever," she said after a long moment. "The family quarters there are arranged in such a way that the guards would be stationed outside the entire suite and no one would know who was in whose bedchamber."

"That... could be interesting," Alistair acknowledged, his words slurring with weariness.

"While we're at it, we might stop by Amaranthine and pay a visit to the new Wardens at Vigil's Keep."

"Why all this sudden interest in travel?" Alistair asked drowsily. "I would have thought after all those months on the road, you would want to settle in one place for a while."

"Because, my love," she murmured, snuggling closer to him. "There's an entire world of pleasures out there for us to discover in the years we have remaining to us. And I don't want to miss a single one."

"You won't," Alistair assured her, kissing the crown of her head as she drifted off to sleep. "I'll make certain of it."

End Notes

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