Of Mages and Monsters
by Fire_Kitten, Lady_Savannah

Summary

You know how this story starts... Elizabeth Trevelyan gets flung into the Fade by the explosion at the Conclave and returned to the waking world by a mysterious glowing woman.
But in *this* story there's another woman who falls from the Fade with her... one the world hasn't seen for some time...
Elizabeth now has to navigate her utterly fucked up life, fighting back demons, apostates and templars while somehow keeping this newly founded Inquisition from crashing and burning like the Conclave.
Thank the Maker for Tara, the strange mage who fights by her side and tries to reassure her that the Hero doesn't always have to die at the end of the story...

Notes

*high-pitched squeals of anxiety*
I'm finally starting the Inquisition continuation to The Best Laid Plans!! Welcome! I'm still
not entirely sure what the hell I'm doing so bear with me if I'm sloppy as heck while I get into the groove of writing this fic. It's potentially going to be long, judging from how many pages of notes I have so far but who doesn't love an obnoxiously long Inquisition fic?? I hope people like this! Oh god I hope somebody likes this.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Elizabeth Trevelyan had had better days. She couldn’t remember one at the present moment what with the intense ringing in her ears, but she felt certain that her whole life couldn’t possibly have been as f**ked up as it seemed right now.

Where in Thedas even was she? How the void had she gotten here? Wherever here was.

She was surrounded by green. Nothing living or plant-like but rocks and water and air that were saturated in an eerie green hue that almost felt familiar but deeply unnatural at the same time. Was she dreaming?

“Oh you’re gonna wish you were my little mage-muffin.”

Elizabeth whipped her head in the direction of the voice, her neck muscles yelping at the sudden wrench. Her magic flared, hands lifting to cast… something. She barely knew any offensive spells, Maker alone knew whether they’d even be of any use against who or whatever had answered the question she hadn’t realised she’d asked aloud.

“Easy there,” the voice soothed. “I’m not gonna hurt you. I know it’s disorientating getting tossed into the Fade ass over tea-kettle but I promise you I’m not what you think.”

It was a woman, standing several yards away from Elizabeth, hands held up so it was clear they were empty although there were two dagger hilts visible behind both of the woman’s shoulders. Elizabeth tilted her head to one side, brow wrinkling as she struggled to comprehend what she was seeing. The woman seemed to be quite young, if older than Liz’s own 25 years, but the two stripes of pure white hair that ran from her temples into the scruffy knot at the back of her head, painted a more ambiguous picture of her age.

She wasn’t a particularly pretty woman. At least not in the conventional way that Elizabeth had observed back in the Circle. The apprentices who tended to garner the most attention often had delicate, heart-shaped faces, button noses and rose-bud lips. This strange woman staring at her had none of those features.

She had a strong, square jaw and high, broad cheekbones. Her nose was long and a tad crooked like it had been broken more than once. A scar cut through her left eyebrow, skipping over her eye to gouge as far as the ridge of her cheek. It was deep but silvered and long since healed.

It was the woman’s eyes that drew Elizabeth’s gaze. Focused and intelligent but shining with a warmth that was echoed in the faintly upturned corners of her full lips. Their colour melted from a deep brown at the edge of her irises to almost golden amber circling the pupils.

Not pretty but certainly striking - Liz could recognise that much. She was tall too, possibly a couple of inches shy of six feet. There’d likely be two hand-spans difference between their heights if Liz wasn’t sprawled out on the ground.

She really ought to stand up and put her hands down. Dropping them into her lap Liz turned them palms up and gasped. Her left palm had a pulsing green gash cut across it, the light accompanied by a peculiar crackling sensation that jolted up her whole arm now she had noticed it.

“What in Andraste’s name is this?” Liz gaped at her hand, then looking up at the woman hoping
she had the answers.

“Fucked if I know,” the woman replied with a shrug. “Although based on the colour and the fact that you got flung here a few seconds after something ripped the Fade a shiny, new arsehole I’d stick my coin on it being connected somehow.” She tapped a finger against her lips thoughtfully.

“What? I’m— in the **Fade**!”

“Shit, was I not clear about that? Sorry it’s not like I get many, heck *any* meat visitors to the Fade. It’s usually just me, spirits, the odd dreaming mage and the demons.”

“Are you not… of of those three groups?” Liz tensed, hands prickling again as her magic readied itself.

“That sounds like a polite way of asking if I’m a demon. It’s fine though, I’d probably think the same if some woman just strolled up to me as I was taking a nap in the Fade.”

“So… you’re a spirit? Forgive me but you’re nothing like any of the spirits I’ve met before. They’re normally less—”

“Chatty than me?” The woman grinned, looking years younger for a moment. “Spirits generally are more stoic, the older ones tend to have a bit more personality to them and they’re more aware of shit that goes on outside the Fade. Your everyday spirits milling about are generally just their purest essence and not much else. How many spirits have you met?”

“I’ve worked with several different ones - I’m a Spirit Healer?”

“Really? That’s fucking fantastic, there’s never enough healers. I can barely heal a damn papercut but I could freeze half an army solid if I fancied.” She looked mildly peeved, waving a dismissive hand.

“That’s pretty impressive. Have you ever…?”

“Actually frozen an army? Nah, not a human one at least. I never liked being seen as scary when I busted out the ice and lightning. I’d have given Maferath’s left testicle for the tiniest smidgen of healing talent. I had to rely on herbalism and hope my poultices were enough for whatever shit I was invariably going to lead us into.”

“You don’t seem all that scary to me,” Liz smiled.

“That’s possibly the nicest thing anyone’s said to me in years. What’s your name anyway? I need a friend who isn’t the spiritual embodiment of an ideal.”

“Ah, I’m Liz Trevelyan.” Despite the absurdity of the situation she still found herself offering the other woman her hand to shake.

“Great to meet you Liz,” the woman replied, taking Liz’s hand and yanking her up onto her feet. “You should probably call me Tara, to cut down on confusion in these already bewildering times.”

Liz brushed down her robes once she was steady on her feet, looking back to Tara with a slightly confused frown. “You make it sound like that’s not actually your name.”

Tara shrugged. “It’s part of my name. Telling you the whole thing is a bit much right now, we have bigger things to worry about.” Her face paled. “Like what the fuck those creatures are and why they’re running at us!”
Whirling to face where Tara was pointing, Liz felt her jaw drop. They didn’t look quite like spiders but whatever they were, they had a lot of legs and were skittering towards them horrifically fast.

“Shit. You didn’t happen to see where I entered the Fade did you?” Liz asked.

“It was somewhere back that way,” Tara gestured over her shoulder, mercifully in the opposite direction of the fade creatures. “Some kind of tear in the Veil, those bastards tend to stay open spewing demons and other unholy shit until you force enough magic into them to close. I’d bet we’ve got a good chance of getting you back to the Meat world - provided you can run damn fast.”

A hideous screeching sound pitched over the clicking of claws on rocks grew ever louder. Liz didn’t wait to look back and bolted, Tara outstripping her in moments with her longer legs. They raced across the strange, craggy landscape towards a rocky prominence that jutted up at a steep angle.

At the top of the mount was a jagged hole, edged in the same green that blazed in Liz’s left fist. Next to the rift stood a glowing figure, it’s arms outstretched as if imploring them to take shelter within their embrace.

They reached the base of the rocks and started to climb, hands scrambling to pull themselves up as there came an awful shriek close behind them. Tara ripped her daggers free of their sheaths and paused.

“Keep going! I’ll be right behind you!”

“No! I’m not leaving you to die here!” Liz shouted.

Tara looked back over her shoulder and laughed. “How do you think I ended up here in the first place?”

Before Liz could muster a response a pulse of force magic shoved her further up the rock face as Tara lunged to engage the creatures, slashing at them with blades that crackled with lightning. Resisting the urge to keep looking back, Liz climbed, her hands starting to ache and blister from the exertion. Several screeches cut off abruptly and Liz could only hope that meant Tara was holding her own.

The closer Liz got to the top, the brighter the golden figure seemed to become, the only discernible feature was that the figure was a woman. She was waving frantically, ushering them towards her, the only apparent source of safety to be found in the Fade.

“Take my hand,” the figure spoke with a smooth, almost musical voice that Liz found remarkably soothing given the situation.

Instinctively she reached out with her left hand, the strange green mark flaring alarmingly bright as her fingers brushed the golden woman's. Sudden pressure built in her ears like a deafening sound she couldn’t hear. The edges of her vision grew fuzzy and sharp, biting knives of pain raked down her body until she screamed.

For a long moment everything stopped.

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The world came back with a bone-shaking crash and a blast of icy wind.

Liz cried out as her knees cracked against the hard ground, her body crumpling into a heap of limbs.
she was too exhausted to move. She couldn’t fight her eyes open to see where she had fallen but the bitter kiss of winter against her skin was a pretty good sign that she was no longer in the Fade. How that had happened was a puzzle to be solved when she didn’t feel like sleeping for an Age.

“Oww! Fuck a nug!” A familiar voice wheezed next to Liz, startling a faint noise from her aching chest. Tara was here too?!

“Shit this is bad. I am *not* meant to be on the meat side of the Veil! What the fuck did that— oh Maker’s balls this is really, really bad.”

Liz heard a shuffling that sounded as if Tara had sunk down onto the floor beside her.

Shouts came from somewhere nearby, growing louder as footsteps thundered closer.

The fuzziness was slowly carrying her away again, the pain and cold fading until the last thing she remembered was Tara’s remark to whoever had found them.

“The Archdemon better be fucking dead or I’m lodging a complaint.”
Chapter Two - Old Friends, New Surprises

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Two chapters in two days?! I wouldn't get used to it folks, I happened to have 10k of pure dialogue already written so a lot of the "writing" of this chapter was filling in the gaps between all the talking :P Eventually I will run out of pre-written stuff, but I think it'll be around chapter 4 or 5 before I do. Holler if you see any glaring spelling/grammar errors, the longer I stare at my writing the less likely I am to still like it.
I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Sister Nightingale, one of the prisoners is awake!"

Leliana glanced up from the table of notes she’d spent much of the last day poring over as her agent sprinted into the tent. Since the catastrophe at the Conclave she’d spent every waking moment hunting for answers about how it happened, how to stop the flood of demons pouring from the rifts that had appeared around the remains of the Temple and how the two women who were seen falling from the Fade into the devastation were connected to it all.

There had been no time to give that aching stone of grief weighing down her chest any thought, mourning Justinia would have to wait until her murderers were brought to justice.

For now she had to be the Nightingale, cool, collected and willing to do whatever had to be done to end this madness. Cassandra was doing what she did best by killing demons up on the mountain, Leliana would do what she did best - get the information she needed by whatever means necessary.

"Which one is awake?" she demanded. "The mage with the strange mark?" Leliana had not yet been to the dungeons to see this mark for herself but those that had seen it had reported it was nothing like any magic they’d seen before - something unnatural.

"No ser, the other woman,” the agent replied, voice wobbling slightly. “She's, ah making the guards nervous..."

"Is she a threat?"

"I'm not sure ser. She's...singing bawdy tavern songs like you’d hear on the Denerim docks - quite loudly. There's also lots of muttering of what sounds like nonsense. But she’s not made any attempts to escape or threatened anyone."

Leliana sighed, stepping away from the table. "It seems I had better talk with the prisoner and see if we have a madwoman or simply a murderer on our hands." She headed into the Chantry, leaving the agent to stand guard over the tent.

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As she descended the stairs into the dungeon below the Haven’s Chantry, Leliana could hear a
muffled voice belting a tune that was amusingly familiar. It was not a song she’d have dared sing sober, much less inside a Chantry given the crude lyrics.

Several of the guards she passed seemed to be caught between laughter and horror at the situation. They evidently needed to remember that the woman singing so brashly was also likely responsible for the atrocity that had just occurred, not someone to be amused by.

Leliana neared the end of the corridor of cells where the prisoners had been locked away and the voice became much clearer. Her heart stumbled a beat and a fearful chill trilled down her spine. It was impossible that she was hearing *that* voice, here, now. Quickening her steps, Leliana gestured for the guard outside the cell to open it and step away.

Standing on the threshold, Leliana stared into the dimly lit cell at the woman sprawled on her back with her bare feet propped up on the damp wall. Her shackled hands were laced beneath her head and her eyes were shut as she sang. While her posture tried to appear relaxed and unconcerned, Leliana’s shrewd gaze could see the tension quivering in the woman’s body.

At the sound of the cell door scraping open, and someone entering the woman stopped singing. She opened her eyes and tilted her head back until she spotted Leliana.

"Ooh am I getting visitors?" She began before sucking in a sudden breath. “Fuck. A. Nug… *Leli*?"

At the utterance of the nickname she hadn’t heard in almost as long as it’d been since it had been said by that voice, Leliana darted forward spitting her fury at the creature before her.

"What manner of demon are you?! How dare you wear her face!"

The woman froze as Leliana pressed the flat of her boot knife to her throat.

"Shit, I should have expected this. Leli-" The blade pressed a fraction harder “Sorry - Leliana. Can't be getting too familiar with the lady holding a knife to your throat, it's a very pretty blade-sorry! Not helping matters.” The woman sighed. “I'm making a mess of this."

"You have very little time left to convince me not to destroy you where you lie, demon."

"That fucking witch has so much to answer for,” the woman muttered. “Ugh, right. Long story short; Morrigan's ritual sent my soul on a slight detour into the Fade rather than the Void, or the Maker's pillowy bosom or whatever. So I apparently spent the last decade traipsing the Fade, I heard whispers through the spirit grapevine about a Conclave being called - don't give me that look - they're the most ridiculous gossips. So I thought I'd swing by the area, y'know *watch* an historical event take place rather than be the one making it happen. But of course some fucker decided to rip a dirty great big hole in the Veil and ruin everything."

"That does not explain how you came to be here," Leliana said slowly.

"You've not stabbed me yet so I'll take that as a good sign,” she flashed Leliana a cheeky grin that made her heart flutter.

"You see, I ran into that poor lass, who's probably locked up next door, utterly unaware that she was in the Fade. I like her, she didn't straight out assume I was a demon - but I get it, she doesn't know who I am.” She shrugs before continuing.

“So I offer to help her get back to the meat world. We get chased by some fucking freaky-looking spider things to a rocky hill where some bright, glowing lady was stood by a tear in the Veil. She chucks Liz through while I’m stopping the Void critters from following her. Next thing I know, I'm
landing on my ass in the real world which was a tad fucking scary since I didn't know how that would work what with me being DEAD and all." The woman shuddered slightly, her throat bobbing beneath the dagger.

Leliana took several seconds to process everything she’d heard before speaking. "Am I supposed to just believe you? You do realise how insane your story sounds?"

"Of course I do, but when you consider what our lives have been like, does it really sound beyond what's possible, Leli? I mean really? Does it sound any more ridiculous than half the shit we had to deal with during the Blight? We fought fucking talking werewolves but a soul can't get kicked out the Fade after being dead for ten years?"

A quiet chuff of laughter escaped her before she could catch it. "When you put it like that I can see where you're coming from. Still doesn't change the fact that you're wearing the face of my dead friend," Leliana said grimly.

"Friend? That wounds me Leli, you once called me sister."

Something in Leliana’s hardened resolve cracked and fell away. A sense of anticipation and desperate hope like she hadn't felt in years bloomed where icy numbness once lived.

"The night before we fought the Archdemon you told me you'd have followed me vision or no vision, I obviously said you were all fucking nuts to hang around with me, did you not see the shit situations I led us into?"

"But you got us all out alive every single time," Leliana whispered.

"Not that last time did I?" She gave a sad smile, eyes now glassy. "I should have said how honoured I was that you all had so much faith in me, that you were willing to die alongside me for a cause that wasn't yours. That year we spent fighting the Blight was hellish beyond belief but Maker take me it was one of the best years of my life. I found a family that was dysfunctional as fuck but I loved every one of you idiots more than I ever did my own flesh and blood family. I will gladly spend the next decade begging your forgiveness for leaving you the way I did, believe me it was not the way I thought it would go."

"Kat..." Leliana couldn't hold back the emotion in her voice any more than she could deny the truth she felt ringing through her soul.

A relieved smile burst across Kat’s face as a tear slipped free. "Oh Leli, you have no idea how long I have waited to hear another being say my name."

"Would you believe that every fucking spirit I know insists on calling me 'The Hero'?" Kat scrunched up her nose in disgust. "Do you know how irritating that is? I sure as fuck didn't sign up to be known for all eternity as The Hero of Fucking Ferelden. I'm not even Ferelden!"

"Yes that did cause much amusement amongst those of us who knew you," Leliana smirked. "Weren’t you born in the Free Marches?"

"Fuck if I can remember anymore. I spent two thirds of my life at Kinloch, everything before that is pretty fuzzy. Well I suppose being the Hero of Ferelden isn't the worst thing I could be. I could be Orlesian."

"Hey!"

"Oh hush with the false indignation Leli, you and I know full well you're more Ferelden than I
"Maker's breath I have missed you Kat."

"You really believe me? Fuck that is such a relief I can't tell you. Can we dispense with the dagger to the throat gambit now then?"

"Oh!" Leliana hurriedly snatched the dagger back and returned it to her boot. She pulled out a handkerchief and blotted the few drops of blood on Kat’s neck. "Would you like me to fetch a potion to heal that?"

"Nah it'll heal on its own. I still can’t do healing magic although I did learn a nifty null shield so those nervy Templars you have down the corridor wouldn't sense me casting any spells even if they were in here with me."

To prove her point Kat shrugged off her shackles, unlocked with a burst of force magic and sat up. When no shout of outrage came from outside the cell Leliana smiled at her dearest friend.

"Even while dead you can't resist learning new spells? Kat, only you could be so ridiculous."

"What? I like knowing shit. I talked a spirit of Valor into teaching me how to use a sword and shield when I got bored somewhere around 9:33. Currently I’m partial to dual-wielding daggers with foci in the hilts so I can wield magic with them. Where is my gear by the way? I'm gonna need that shit back- I spent a fucking lot of time and energy manipulating the Fade into creating what I wanted."

Leliana outright laughed at the serious expression on Kat’s face. "Okay now I truly am convinced, I've never met anyone more possessive of their weapons and I know how much Zev loves his daggers."

"You try growing up forbidden personal belongings beyond whatever trinkets you could hide when the Templars spot checked the dormitories fives time in a month," she retorted. “I bet someone squirreled all my stuff away into some kind of memorial within a week of me biting the dust eh?"

"Ah...Queen Anora tried. She was vehemently denied access by...the Wardens." At the careful omission Leliana suddenly realised just how much more complicated this mess had become. Would she be able to find him? Would he believe them?

Kat smiled reassuringly. "Leli, it's alright you can say Alistair told her to fuck off to the Void. I'm not going to dissolve into tears at the mere mention of his name. Got that out of my system three years ago, the emptiness does still linger a bit though.” Her face dropped as she sighed heavily.

"Andraste's Ass, dying does make things so much more awkward. I can hardly send him a message saying 'Sorry about breaking your beautiful little heart into a thousand tiny pieces ten years ago by dying on you without warning, but don't worry I'm somehow mysteriously alive again. Want to catch up over cheese and crackers?' Ugh Leli what do I do??"

"First I think we should relocate you to somewhere more hospitable than Haven's dungeon."

"Fuck! We're in Haven?! No wonder the Veil is giving me the crawlies even without the massive hole torn through it! I didn't like being here the last time, it better not look as damn spooky as it did during the Blight."

"Oh don't worry we put rugs over the worst of the bloodstains, you'd never even know there was a murderous, dragon-worshipping cult here before," Leliana said airily.
"Har-fucking-Har Leli, I'm not too old to be above hiding frogs in your sheets you know."

"Remember how Morrigan screeched whenever Ser Barkly left dead fennecs in her bedroll?"

"Fuck yes, that was hilarious - she's definitely getting frogged if I ever find her - that fucking ritual. That's another thing on the endless list of shit I need to apologise to Alistair for. What happened to Barkly? I...heard he stayed with the Wardens?"

"I'm not going to ask how you heard that right now, but yes he did go with Alistair to Amaranthine when he was made Warden Commander. I know he fought bravely against the hordes sent by the Mother but I've not heard anything for several years. There's been some troubling rumours about the Wardens in recent months..."

"That's another problem for another time." Kat scrambled to her feet and dusted down her clothes. "I want to discover what a real honest-to-Andraste bed feels like. Also food. Fuck I should make a list: All the meat-person experiences that I need to have for the first time since not being dead anymore."

"You might not want to leave such a list lying around, my agents would probably find it rather alarming."

"Oooh don't you sound swanky with your agents, finally Mistress of your own spy network eh?"


"I have been told! Speaking of new names, I told your little Fade refugee to call me Tara. It seemed dangerous to start flinging around the name Katarina, don't want to scare people needlessly. I'm fairly certain there won't be many people I might run into who have a long enough memory to recognise my face so I should be okay on that front. I imagine I don't look quite as youthful as I did before my untimely demise?"

"Oh I don't know, you have a faintly ethereal look that makes it hard to say exactly how old you are. The white stripes in your hair and the shadows in your eyes definitely give the impression that you've seen more of the world than you'd expect."

Leliana felt an uneasy pang seeing the changes the Fade had wrought on her friend's face, perhaps one day Kat would tell the tale of her time there. Hopefully it wouldn’t break her heart all over again.

"What can I say, the Fade doesn't get much sun," Kat shrugged. “I bet the 'ethereal' look as you so kindly called it will turn back into a fucking tan like I had during the Blight before too long."

"I certainly hope so, it will bring joy to my heart to see you smiling as you once did sister mine."

"Oh come now Leli, I'm too new to this meat business to deal with tears and shit. Give me at least a week to settle in before I have an emotional meltdown."

"Very well... Tara. I will have to practice calling you that, I would not want to slip up around untrustworthy ears." Which could be everywhere in these troubled times.

"I'll have to practice as well, I've gotten into the terrible habit of talking to myself when there’s no spirits around." Kat stretched her arms above her head as Leliana straightened from her crouch.

"Now which would you like first? A bath, food or a bed?
"Can't I eat while in the bath then go to bed? Or do I savour the new experiences? Hmmm, so many decisions. I'll go for bath, I'll probably require some help to wrangle my hair back into a fit state to be seen."

"So you don't want to keep the Witch of the Wilds style you have going?"

"Fuck you Leli."

"I missed you too my sweet."

Chapter End Notes

*jazz hands*

See if you've read the single chapter story "The Best laid Plans", suddenly everything makes a bit more sense. At some point I do want to write some short bits about Kat's life during the Blight but do I post them separately to this story or weave them in as flashbacks? Bah I need to not get ahead of myself. Anyways... next time Leli and Tara wander about Haven and have a run-in with a certain former Templar...

Any Kudos and Comments will make my week ^_^
As Leliana stepped out of the cell, the guard who had been stood half-way down the corridor hurried back, looking faintly alarmed at the sight of Tara following her. The man’s hand drifted towards the hilt of his sword.

“Nightingale, why is the prisoner unshackled? The Lady Seeker ordered that neither prisoner be moved until she was present—”

“Stand down soldier,” Leliana replied her voice returning to the icy tones of the spymaster. “I will personally vouch for her should Seeker Cassandra ask. She is not being set free, merely relocated upstairs. At this current time she is not a suspect of the destruction of the Conclave and poses no threat to Haven.”

She turned to Tara, looking over her clothes. “Did you have boots when you… arrived?”

Tara took a moment to stare at her bare feet, wiggling her toes and chuckling under her breath before answering. “You know, I’m not sure. Can’t say I’ve thought too hard about my appearance in recent years. I don’t even know when I got this outfit, it’s just what I happened to put on one day. It didn’t really matter before.”

“Very well, I shall lend you my spare pair of boots. Our feet were of a similar size when we last travelled together.”

“So long as the buckles aren’t bejewelled or some other Orlesian nonsense, that’s fine. My sense of shoe fashion isn’t as refined as yours Leli dear,” Tara winked.

Leliana simply glared back.

The guard had to work hard to suppress his shock at hearing someone who was until very recently a prisoner refer to the Nightingale by a nickname and tease her without getting stabbed. He wisely chose not to comment on it and instead saluted them both as they headed back towards the stairs.

"There are a few empty cabins near the Chantry where you could stay but until the immediate
outrage surrounding the Divine’s death calms somewhat, it would be best if you stayed in the room I share with Cassandra. I’ll arrange for a bath to be drawn up in there. I’m not going to be needing the bed for some time and with Cassandra up at the Temple there will be no one to disturb you.”

"That's music to my ears Leli. Have the bath drawn cold and I'll heat it myself, it’ll be good for me to test my magic on little things now I’m back. Do we have time for a quick tour for old times sake?" Tara pleaded.

"I think we manage that. Let me fetch you a cloak and boots, Haven clings onto winter with some vigour." Leliana left Tara standing in the nave of the Chantry while she dashed into the side room that had been outfitted as the Hands’ bedchamber.

As she returned, Leliana waved over a passing servant and directed them to have a bathing tub brought to her quarters as well as some drying cloths and fresh clothes. The servant bobbed a nervous curtsy to the Nightingale as she handed the items to Tara, giving them both a curious look before hurrying off.

Tara plopped herself onto the floor, pulling on the socks that Leliana had tucked inside the boots before lacing them onto her feet. Standing up, she froze, tilting her head as something occurred to her.

“What’s the date?” She asked Leliana. “I lost track of time and honestly couldn’t tell you even what year it is.”

“It’s 2 Guardian, 9:41 Dragon. Justinia wanted the Conclave to commence right after Wintersend to celebrate the possible end of the mage-templar war as well as the change of the season,” Leliana sighed.

Tara swept the cloak around her shoulders and fastened it in place. “Damn that means I turned thirty barely a fortnight ago. I’m gonna need a cake Leli, doesn’t have to be a big one but I can’t let it go uncelebrated.”

“I’m sure I can persuade one of the cooks to oblige me with something suitable. It’s unfortunate that it would be impractical to order cakes from Val Royeaux. You never had the opportunity to try Orlesian patisseries, they are sinfully delicious and you will adore them.”

“Maybe sometime in the near future once all this insanity has been calmed I’ll have the time to travel to Orlais although I’ll be fucking damned if I wear one of those ridiculous masks.”

“Quite right, it would be almost criminal to hide your cheekbones beneath a mask,” said Leliana with a sly smile.

Tara preened and giggled. “Perhaps I can cut a swathe through Orlesian society with them?”

“In time, perhaps. Now we should have enough time to take a quick stroll around the village before your bath is ready.”

The pair made their way to the towering Chantry doors. With a swift tug Leliana opened one far enough for them to step through and preceded Tara outside, glancing around to ensure no one noted the unfamiliar woman exiting the Chantry.

Tara’s eyes flew wide as she took in the roiling, green chaos in the sky, her steps faltering as she missed the slight drop from the threshold. She hissed out a sharp breath that whistled between her teeth.
"Maferath's balls that is fucking hideous. I can honestly say I've never wanted to know what it would look like if someone tore the Fade a literal arsehole. How the fuck are we meant to fix that?"

"Our Elven fade expert has some theories on that front I should hope. He has been tending to the other prisoner - the strange mark she bears is apparently causing her no small amount of harm. It appears to be linked to the Breach somehow, but we will not know for sure until she wakes whether the prisoner caused the explosion." Leliana’s mouth twisted into a hard line. Just because Tara was cleared of blame didn’t mean the other woman was to be exonerated without question.

"You have a Fade Expert?" Tara queried as they walked. “I'm going to need to pick their brain when we get a moment to breathe. Wait am I technically a Fade Expert now? I don't know all the hows and whys of the Fade but void, I'm probably the only person in Thedas to have literally lived there.”

She shook her head. “But I don’t believe Liz was the cause of all this chaos, I’ve met some pretty tricksy demons who try to act innocent and she’s nothing like them. She was genuinely confused as to what had happened.”

"I trust your insight but I'm sure Cassandra will need more convincing," Leliana replied. “She is feeling the loss of the Divine most keenly and as yet has no one to bring to justice for her murder. The prisoner is lucky that she is unconscious or Cassandra would be focusing the rage she is currently venting on the demons pouring from the rifts, onto her.”

Tara winced. “I’d say I’d be excited to meet the famed Cassandra Pentaghast if I wasn’t half-convinced she’d try to sunder me in two the moment she knew how I got here. Devout Chantry types are not exactly known for their tolerance of Fade-born entities.”

They followed a path that wound through haphazard clusters of wooden huts that were grouped around communal fire-pits, the anxious residents darting about their daily tasks with the occasional fearful glance at the sky. The air hummed with tension like a plucked lute string strung too tightly. Tara shuddered, it felt altogether too familiar for her liking. Nothing like looming disaster to bring back memories of Denerim.

Descending a flight of stone steps, they passed through a gateway into a wide, open area that led down to a large, frozen lake. Rows of canvas tents filled a quarter of the snow-strewn ground, their occupants - soldiers, green ones at that - sparred in pairs across much of the remaining space. The clashing clamour of swords was a notable difference from the fraught hush that reigned behind the wooden bailey.

Tara stopped to observe. Turning to Leliana she asked, "Was the village this big when we were here? I remember it being much pokier.”

"It became a place for pilgrims after the Blight," Leliana replied, folding her arms as she eyed up the recruits. “I believe the original encircling walls were torn down to accommodate the new huts built to shelter worshippers wishing to visit the Temple. For weeks leading up to the Conclave the village was teeming, now it's almost reminiscent of the ghost town we found all those years ago.”

"Is it known how many were lost in the Temple?" Tara murmured. “It makes my chest ache to think how many souls were sacrificed while I was deemed worthy to return from death.” She swallowed hard, clenching her fists beneath her cloak.

"We have no clear number yet, there are many wounded who could still perish, but it's possible that at least a few hundred mages, templars and chantry clerics were inside when the explosion
"Maker save us. Peace seems so very far away right now doesn't it?"

"We must endeavour to keep moving forward," Leliana declared. "If we stop to mourn before the Breach is dealt with we will be overrun with no chance of recovery."

"Well I'm more than willing to fight back demons just as soon as I've remembered how to human," Tara gave her a quick grin.

"I am very glad to hear that."

"As am I, we need all the able fighters we can muster," said a deep, male voice suddenly, from the other side of Leliana.

Tara caught herself before she physically leapt back like a startled fennec, her heart galloping against her ribcage. Why did that voice make her stomach flutter like an apprentice?

Carefully twitching the hood of her cloak lower on her forehead, she peered around Leliana to see a tall, broad, unfairly handsome blond man dressed in full armour and a furry mantle that many a bear would envy.

"Oh Commander!" Leliana said brightly. "Please allow me to introduce my dear friend Tara, a former mercenary from the Free Marches. She very recently arrived in Haven and has pledged her help to our cause."

"A pleasure, Serrah." He gave Tara a polite smile, drawing her eyes to the scar that carved a deep line from below his right nostril into his top lip. That wasn't there the last time she saw that face.

"Tara, this is Commander Cullen Rutherford, he's in charge of the military forces in Haven."

Leliana had an amused gleam in her eyes as she made the introduction earning her an incredulous stare from Tara.

Cullen hadn't noticed the looks the women exchanged as he glanced over at the soldiers training. "Such as they are. I'll be setting off up the mountain with several squads to relieve Seeker Cassandra shortly if you wish to join us my lady?"

Tara gave a strangled laugh. "Oh fuck, I'm no lady Commander, please call me Tara. My journey here was unexpectedly… long and tiring so Leliana has very kindly offered me somewhere to rest a while after a much-needed bath. But as soon as I've gotten a few hours sleep under my belt I'll certainly join the effort to defend Haven."

"Very well. I look forward to seeing you again soon. Sister Leliana."

"Commander." Leliana inclined her head regally.

Cullen saluted them both before turning back towards the tents. The moment he was out of hearing range, Tara pounced on her friend, steering her back to the gate with a hand clamped around the shorter woman’s bicep as she hissed through clenched teeth.

"Leli, you didn't fucking tell me that Curly Cutie Cullen was here?! Fuck a nug did that tall drink of honey mead age well." She peeked over her shoulder for another appreciative look, almost bumping into another armoured man coming in the other direction. "Shit how did you prise him out of his Templar skirts?"
"Cullen was until recently the Knight-Commander of Kirkwall, working to rebuild the city after the disaster at the Chantry. He told Cassandra he felt he could do more good here than with the Order."

"Oh void, even I heard about that through the spirit gossip vine. What a shitstorm that must have been to clear up after. Kirkwall was said to be the harshest of the Circles back when I was still a mageling. I can't imagine how fucking awful it must have gotten to lead to a war breaking out between mages and templars."

"The war was started by an apostate," Leliana pointed out.

"Yeah I've got a lot of questions about that for whoever might know the answers. The Anders I knew was not the kind of person who'd blow up a chantry just to stick it to a corrupt system. Not on his own anyway. The stories that filtered into the Fade are a muddle of contradictions that I don't entirely buy."

"You're in luck, Cassandra brought the author of the so-called official tale of what happened in Kirkwall here to speak at the Conclave. Unfortunately they arrived only an hour before everything went to the void. He's probably hiding in the tavern hoping that Cassandra doesn't stab any more of his books."

Tara yanked Leliana to a halt. "No fucking way. You're telling me that Varric fucking Tethras is in Haven? That's incredible!"

"You will need to be careful around that dwarf Tara, he can sniff out a mystery from a mile away and you will be prime fodder for a new book if he learns who you are."

"Damn it that's a good point. I'll do my best to seem as boring and benign as I know how." Tara feigned a dull expression that quivered into laughter as Leliana raised an eyebrow at her.

"When have you ever been boring, sister dear? You trip over adventure every time you turn around."

"You got me there," she conceded with a sigh. "I'll just avoid the dwarf until things get less crazy around here."

"That will be the best plan, we must limit the number of people who know who you are to only the essential few who will need to know. Let’s get back to the Chantry, you’re looking rather chilled."

"That’s because it’s bloody freezing Leli," Tara snarked as they resumed walking back through the village. "Maker I did not miss snow. Give me sweltering hot summers any day."

"I do seem to recall you took great amusement in making Alistair blush by wearing naught but your smalls around the campsite when it was particularly warm."

"What beautiful memories," Tara sighed happily. "I had to make sure he knew what he was missing during those weeks he was being awfully dense about my flirting. He definitely paid me back for all that teasing. Fuck that's another thing for the Meat Experience list."

"Flirting?"

"And the rest. Shit is this body technically a virgin? I don't want to deal with that crap for a second time.” Tara wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Ugh, problems to ponder later. You know the Chantry looks much...nicer than the last time I saw it. I mean it's a still a fucking Chantry so it's not like I'm a fan but the lack of blood and cultists is always a positive." She cast a dark look up at the
imposing structure before they went inside.

"We lost almost every Revered Mother and many Lay Sisters at the Conclave so currently the Chantry is serving more as a storage and logistical hub,” Leliana explained. “The remaining clerics are either acting as healers or trying to soothe the panic in the village."

"Chantry clerics actually helping people? How novel."

"I know you have good reason to be bitter about the Chantry sister, but I truly believe you would have approved of what Divine Justinia was trying to do here." There was a wistfulness to Leliana’s voice that made Tara wonder about the woman that could inspire such loyalty in her friend.

She refrained from further sarcastic comments as Leliana opened the door to the bedchamber at the back of the Chantry. There were three beds inside but only two looked occupied. A large wooden bathtub had been placed near the fireplace at the far end of the room and a small table next to it had bottles and soaps for washing. Tara groaned, the anticipation of actually having a hot bath was almost palpable.

Strolling over to the tub and sticking her arm into the frigid water, Tara reached for her magic and slowly sketched a heating rune onto the bottom. It was a thrill to see the rune glowing as the water grew hotter until licks of steam curled off the surface. Grinning at Leliana, she shucked off the cloak and laid it on the nearest bed before setting to the interesting task of removing the outfit that had fell out of the Fade with her.

“There are clean clothes you can wear just here,” Leliana gestured. Do you want me to stay or come back in a little while?"

Tara flushed slightly. "Stay? Please? Could you wash my hair like you used to? It always relaxed the shit out of me and I think I need that right now."

“Of course my dear. It would be my pleasure.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter - there's going to be some rather interesting surprises for various people :P And a new POV! I can't wait!

Thank you for reading! Any kudos and comments will make my whole week ^_^
Chapter Four - Second Favourite Ex-Templars

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Happy Valentine's Day folks! Since we're a looooong way off from any serious romantic bits of this story (that reminds me I probably should chuck in a slow burn tag), you're gonna just have to make do with a hefty dose of everyone's favourite Commander :P
I'm deliberately leaving out the other romantic relationship tags for now until we start meeting those characters, gotta keep a hint of mystery y'know?
It's becoming rather apparent to me that this is going to be a pretty dialogue-heavy story, since these characters just want to natter at me all day and then I forget to actually write about the action and the settings and shit *sigh*.
Hope you enjoy this new chapter! ^_^

Cullen had barely been back in his tent a full two minutes before Rylen swept through the open canvas flaps. Having his quarters be a part of his command office had seemed like a good idea when he arrived in Haven, Cullen not wanting to set himself above and apart from the men and women he’d be commanding. However he’d realised in recent days that his tent was large enough to be seen over the tops of the rest and every maker-blessed soul with a problem knew that he could be found there at almost any given time of the day.

A few minutes of peace and quiet were becoming a fever dream. And he was having more than a few of those anyway since quitting lyrium. Cullen suppressed a wince as his temples throbbed suddenly. Speak of the demon and he shall answer…

"Who was the tall lass with Sister Leliana just now?" Rylen asked, his Starkhaven brogue providing a nice counterpoint to the sharp pains assaulting Cullen’s skull. “No’ seen her around before.”

Cullen looked up from the heap of papers on his desk. "Apparently she's a friend of Leliana's - ex-mercenary or something. Tara, she said her name was. Did you need something Rylen?"

"You don't know her then?" Rylen asked with a frown. “Cos from what I heard her whisper to the Nightingale as they passed me on the stairs, it rather sounded like she knew you."

"I don't recall ever meeting any mercenaries called Tara," Cullen said with a shrug. “Although she did seem somewhat familiar. What did she say?"

"Oh it was something like 'You didn't tell me Curly Cutie Cullen was here' followed by something about mead that I didn't quite catch. That’s why I guessed she’d met you before since no one here has seen what that mop of yours looks like in its natural state." Rylen chuckled until he caught sight of Cullen’s face.

At the mention of the intensely unique epithet, Cullen’s entire body had gone rigid in his chair. His mind was racing as rapidly as his heart, trying to stave off a sudden and overwhelming panic. It
was impossible that a strange mercenary from the Free Marches would know *that* nickname, it had been left behind once he left Ferelden a decade ago. The sole person who used it with any regularity had been dead almost as long, there was no possible way…

Cullen stood abruptly, dropping the papers that he’d crumpled in his panic back onto the desk. He wiped his suddenly clammy hands against his mantle, his left hand gripping the hilt of his sword to still the trembling in his fingers.

"Commander? Are y’alright? Where are you goin’?"

"I-I forgot something I needed to speak with Leliana about before we head up the mountain,“ Cullen stammered as he strode for the tent’s opening. “Excuse me Rylen."

*

It would not be seemly for the Commander to sprint through Haven as if demons were on his heels. Not to mention it would likely cause a panic amongst the civilian population. When the Leaders lose their cool something truly terrible must have happened. Cullen took particular care to look unhurried as he marched towards the Chantry, pausing now and again to nod in acknowledgement at people who recognised him.

When he reached the Chantry itself, Cullen pulled up short at the door to Leliana and Cassandra’s room. The anxious driving instinct almost had him flinging the door wide and bellowing for an explanation but a sliver of common sense reminded him that this woman Tara had been planning to bathe shortly after their conversation. If his paranoid fear was misplaced, Cullen could be about to burst in on a naked woman in the bath, flinging all sorts of insane accusations at her. But what if he wasn’t wrong? That could almost be worse…

Settling for the sensible course of action, Cullen briskly rapped his knuckles against the door three times and tried to wait patiently. As soon as the door cracked open and Leliana’s vibrant red hair came into view, words burst from Cullen’s mouth.

"Leliana! I have an urgent matter I need to discuss with you!” He tried to keep his voice from cracking but there was an edge to it that belied his anxiety.

"Hello again Commander, what can I do for you?” Leliana took his sudden appearance with suspicious equanimity and stepped out into the nave, locking the door behind her. “Shall we head to the War Room? Tara just drifted off in the bath and I would really hate to wake her. Maker knows she needs to sleep.” She gestured for Cullen to follow her to the adjacent door.

"Yes...it is best we don't discuss this out here." Cullen clenched his fists and relaxed them a few times before stepping into the War Room.

"You seem quite distressed Commander, what has happened?” Leliana’s tone was so mild it grated against Cullen’s already fraught nerves.

"I think you're probably the one who should be explaining to *me* what has happened,“ he snapped. “Rylen just mentioned that he overheard this Tara referring to me as 'Curly Cutie Cullen'? Now I confess, I thought I'd gone insane for a moment because I could've sworn that only one person in Thedas used that nickname and last I heard, that person was a decade dead! So unless you have been divulging details from a time I wish I could forget to all and sundry, it makes me wonder just who the void is snoozing in your bathtub!” Cullen was near shouting by the time he finished, jabbing an accusatory finger in the direction of the bedroom.
Leliana’s expression morphed from one of bland concern to one of pure exasperation as she sighed. "Maker that mouth of hers never stops landing us in trouble. I can assure you Commander that I have never discussed what I know of you from during the Blight with anyone. I had quite honestly forgotten her old nickname for you, it didn't occur to me that she wouldn't have."

"I can't help but notice you're skirting the important question Leliana,” said Cullen. “Is the bloody Hero of Ferelden in your room at this very moment or not?"

The spymaster’s face looked surprisingly vulnerable for a moment before she replied with a quiet-"Yes. Don't ask me how, because I don't fully understand it myself. But it is Kat. The Maker must have felt our need and sent her to us in this darkest hour.

"Maker's Breath! How did she get here?” Cullen paused, frowning. “No, wait, didn't two women fall out of the Fade up at the Temple? Was she the other prisoner?” At Leliana’s sheepish nod his voice shot back up to a near shout. “Bloody hell Leliana it could be a demon for all we know! Have any of the templars tested her? Why did you let her out of her cell? You might have jeopardised the safety of every soul in Haven!"

"Commander, while you may no longer be a templar, surely you would have been able to sense if there was something demonic about her?” Leliana pointed out. “So far she has not acted in any way that would give me reason to suspect her to be anyone but my dearest Kat. From what she has told me it seems that she has been a lost soul wandering the Fade since slaying the Archdemon. By some magic I cannot comprehend she returned to this world as a real, living person which is equally as bewildering for her as it is for you and me."

"Could that not all be the work of a very clever demon? Desire demons are entirely capable of appearing as whoever you want to see once you are under their thrall." It was hardly the first time Cullen had met Desire demons pretending to be Kat Amell.

"How then has she appeared as the same woman to everyone who has seen her?” countered Leliana. “Someone would have mentioned if her form was strange, and surely no demon is powerful enough to enthrall so many people without being noticed by either templars or mages?"

Cullen rubbed a shaky hand over the back of his neck. "I...I suppose not. But if it is truly the Hero, what do we tell people? What would dwelling in the Fade even do to a soul? She could be dangerously unstable and susceptible to possession at any moment." The thought of what a catastrophe it would be if the Hero of Ferelden became an abomination made his stomach lurch.

"I would think that if she hasn't given in to any demons after a decade living in the realm where they have the most power, she certainly isn't feeble-minded," said Leliana, folding her arms across her chest. “I have not yet seen whether her magic is fully functioning on this side of the Veil. I felt she needed to acclimate to be a living person again first. That is why I didn't have templars test her straight away as we can't know what their abilities would do to a soul that until very recently only existed in the Fade - severing her connection in any way could prove fatal."

"That is a fair point I'll grant you. The Katarina Amell I knew was always strong-willed and she did pass her Harrowing in record time, demons would probably have quite the fight on their hands to gain control of her mind." Cullen grinned slightly, remembering more than one occasion when he’d come up against Kat’s stubborn streak in the Circle.

"I shall see about having the elven mage examine her once he has finished stabilising the other prisoner. He might be able to shed some light onto how such a thing was able to come about."

Cullen nodded his agreement. "That seems like the wisest course of action at this point. I shall
refrain from any further supposition until we know more. The people are still in shock but soon the anger will return when they hear about the two who fell from the Fade, particularly if it becomes known that one of them was set free."

"Until we can verify her identity to everyone's satisfaction, I told her she will need to stay in my quarters, to which she readily agreed. To that end I think I should check on her, and see that she eats. She has been compiling a mental list of all the things she needs to experience again now she’s back," Leliana smirked.

"Really?" Cullen’s eyebrows shot towards his hairline. "That's...unusual."

"It's a very Kat thing to do actually, I’m surprised you don’t know. During the Blight her pack had a whole pouch full of lists; tasks we had to complete, items she wanted to find, people she needed to speak to, foods she wanted to try, places she wanted to visit, skills she wanted to learn. I'm sure there's more I am forgetting, I looked through them all after Denerim.” A sad smile crept onto her face. “I think Alistair kept them along with a journal I hadn't realised she had."

"The Hero wrote a journal?" How had Cullen never known that? "I'm surprised the Queen didn't have it copied and sold, surely an account of the Blight from her own hand would out-sell anything even Genitivi or Tethras could write."

Leliana shook her head. "Alistair wouldn't hear of it. He didn't want all her private writings and thoughts being known to all of Thedas, plus the journal we found was only an incomplete volume that covered from the Landsmeet until the night before the Archdemon fell. We think she had been hiding each volume as she finished it somewhere along the road, there were coded instructions inside the cover that probably led to the previous volume's location. I never asked Alistair if he found any more of them."

Speaking of the Warden-Commander… "Will you tell Alistair about what's happened? He needs to know surely?" Cullen asked.

"I'd have to find him first.” Leliana scowled, evidently frustrated at not already knowing the Warden’s whereabouts. “But since we are not going to be announcing that the Hero of Ferelden is back from the dead - please endeavour to only call her Tara. Informing Alistair about her is currently not the priority while we have the Breach to deal with."

"Understood. Could I...speak with her a moment?" He felt his cheeks flush as if he was still the green Templar recruit with a crush.

"Let me make sure she's awake and at least somewhat clothed first."

"Oh! Yes please, that will be preferable.” Cullen didn’t need to mention to Leliana that he’d had the mortification of walking in on Kat while partially unclothed once before. In fact that was probably what prompted her to start calling him by that wretched nickname…

*

When Leliana re-entered her quarters it took her a moment to locate Tara, perched on a stool in front of the fireplace, which was burning higher than when she left. At the sound of the door opening, Tara looked over her shoulder and burst into a wide smile.

"Leli! I wondered when you'd be back. I actually slept!! In the waking world! Not for very long though, I didn't even enter the Fade, I think my body decided nothing but pure unconsciousness would do. I do feel strangely exhausted now, I'll nap again soon I think. The clothes fit pretty well
although the breeches are a tad short.” Tara stuck out a leg showing how the trousers ended at least a hand-span above her ankle, prompting a giggle from Leliana.

“I gave the fire a boost as it was getting cold again,” Tara gestured. “Good news is that my magic works okay, there’s a bit of resistance now I’m on the other side of the Veil but I think I’ll be able to compensate for that once I’ve had chance to practise a bit.” She paused, swivelling round to face Leliana. “You’ve got that look, what’s wrong?”

"You have a visitor,” Leliana replied, tapping her knuckles on the door behind her. “You can come in."

"Who...?" Tara began as the door swung open.

When the tall figure stepped close enough for the firelight to hit his face, her jaw fell open and she leapt off the stool as if electrocuted.

“Oh! Fuck a nug! That’s the face of a man who knows shit he didn't want to.” Tara laughs shakily, giving him an awkward wave before clasping her hands behind her back. “Hi Cullen, long time no see? I’m guessing you probably have questions and a yearning to drop a few Smites right about now. Can I please request that you wait until I’ve been alive for at least a day first?” As Tara babbled, pacing back and forth on the hearth rug, a tiny smile started quirking the corner of Cullen’s mouth.

Tara flung her hands up raking them through her wet hair as she spoke faster. “I know I’m probably sounding like a demon at the moment, ugh fuck this is probably bringing back all the worst memories for you. I’m really, really sorry about everything that happened at Kinloch you know, I’d planned to check on you once all the Blight shit was sorted to make sure that you were doing better. It was on a list and everything!” Her voice began to quaver as frustrated tears gathered in her eyes.

Cullen couldn’t bear to see her so distressed on his behalf. "Maker's Breath Kat, would you shut up for a moment?” He cut in with an exasperated laugh. “I’m not going to smite you."

She staggered to a standstill, her brow wrinkling in confusion. "You're not? That's...not what I expected. Actually I expected far more angry sword flailing, this is by comparison very pleasant.” Tara still held herself carefully as if bracing for a sudden violent outburst from him.

"I can understand why you’d expect that from me, after our last encounter,” Cullen said, rubbing at the back of his neck. “It ought to be me apologising for the awful way I treated you, especially since you’d just saved my life. I was anything but grateful, so blinded by my fear and hate as I was. For many years after Kinloch I had very strong feelings against mages which were only exacerbated by serving in Kirkwall. Since the disaster at the Chantry I have...tried to do better, tried to be better. While I am still trying to wrap my head around how this is even possible-"

"You and me both-"

"-I trust Leliana's judgement and will refrain from jumping to the worst possible conclusion.” Cullen smiled reassuringly.

"That's remarkably generous of you,” Tara said, tentatively returning the smile. “It's not like Leliana wouldn't hesitate to acquaint me with a dagger if I suddenly turned monstrous, but I'm very grateful to have even a little bit of your trust Cullen. You don't need to apologise to me for anything."
"I do," Cullen stressed. "I also need apologise in advance for any potential hostility you might face stemming from your arrival in proximity to the Breach. It would be safer for you to remain inside the Chantry for now until the general populace calms and we've been able to speak to the other prisoner. Would you be willing to be examined by a mage who can confirm that you are free of any demonic influence?"

"Leli mentioned you have a 'Fade Expert'?

"Yes, an elven apostate who arrived in Haven shortly after the Breach opened offering his aid. He's been down in the dungeon tending to the other woman."

"-Elizabeth," Tara interrupted.

"I'm sorry?"

"The woman who took a brief tour of the Fade with me," Tara explained. "Her name's Elizabeth. She seems pretty nice and she didn't think I was a demon when I started talking to her."

"Is that your new standard for judging the people you meet, whether or not they assume that you're a demon?" Cullen smirked.

Tara laughed. "I mean it's not the worst method to choose...wait was that something like a joke I just heard from you Cullen? I didn't realise you knew the concept."

"This is what happens when you die Kat, you miss out on people acquiring a sense of humour. I can actually get through whole conversations without stuttering or blushing I'll have you know." At least he could with people he didn't once have ridiculous crushes on.

"Can you now? I'm very happy for you. Although now of course I can't resist the challenge to see what it takes to get you to blush as prettily as I know you can." Tara gave him a slow, teasing grin that sent a horribly familiar rush of heat to his cheeks.

"Ah...damn. I didn't think this through."

"Indeed not Commander," Leliana chuckled from the doorway where she’d been observing the conversation. "But I'm sure Tara can control herself enough not to tease you too much at inappropriate times."

Rolling her eyes like an aggrieved apprentice, Tara groaned. "Ugh fine Mother I'll be good and hold off from teasing the poor Commander, at least until the next time he says something particularly pompous and templar-y"

"I suppose I can be satisfied with that. Despite the strangeness of the circumstances, might I say that it is an honour to have you back amongst us Kat- ah damn - Tara. While I understand that we cannot announce your return to the world at large, I'm sure there are some old friends who would be very glad to hear of this miracle." How many of her companions would come running to Haven if they knew?

"You're very kind to say so," Tara started to say before a huge yawn shook her whole body. She swayed on her feet and Cullen took a step forward to steady her before thinking better of actually touching her.

"I think we'd best let you rest some more. I will ask the elven mage to come check over you when he can," Leliana crossed the room and guided Tara to one of the beds, carefully folding back the blankets and arranging them over her once Tara had laid down.
Cullen had to bite back laughter at the sight of the fearsome Sister Nightingale tucking the Hero of Ferelden into bed like a child. He started making his way to the door, feeling an odd pang of emotion as Leliana leaned down to press a brief kiss to Tara’s forehead. He deliberately averted his gaze when Leliana stepped away from the bed quickly brushing her fingers beneath her eyes.

"See you later Commander, take care up on the mountain," Tara called to him, voice slurring as she swiftly fell asleep. “Don’t go letting my second-favourite ex-templar get killed.”

Chapter End Notes

I seem to have a tendency to pick serious-sounding fic titles and then make the chapter titles jokey as hell. Believe me I'm trying really hard to hold off from shoe-horning Vine references into this damn thing for my own amusement. I could get away with that nonsense in a Modern AU maybe...

I don't quite know why I ramble about such odd shit in these notes, but hopefully y'all don't hate it.

Next time - A disgruntled Seeker returns. Also an Egg! :P
(I promise I am trying to get to The Wrath of Heaven before this story reaches 20k XD)
Chapter Five - Have I mentioned that I'm not a Demon?

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Hey folks! Hope you're having a good Sunday, I had hoped to get this chapter up yesterday but spending the entire afternoon at the cinema kinda ate all my writing time. I probably won't be able to get the next chapter up by Wednesday either since I'm not going to be able to work on it much today.

Buuuut you can enjoy this one in the meantime!

A massive thank you to the lovely, lovely people who've left comments and kudos so far <3 Seriously can't overstate how much I appreciate them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a bell after sunset when Leliana heard the trumpet call heralding the return of Cassandra and some of the soldiers. She anticipated that it would not take Cassandra long to hear about what had happened while she was up the mountain. Less than half an hour depending on whether or not she stopped at the bathhouse to clean up after nearly a solid day of fighting demons.

Hiding a smile from the agent that stood guard at the entrance to her tent, Leliana continued working until the inevitable shouting began. It was barely ten minutes until Cassandra stormed up the path, hair damp and armour dripping as if she'd done nothing more than up-end several buckets of water over her head to sluice off the worst of the gore.

Her face was a maelstrom of fury, jaw clenched tight as her eyes narrowed sharply on Leliana, her hand gripping the hilt of her sword hard so hard her gauntlet creaked. The agent very wisely found somewhere else to be as the Seeker strode into the tent to vent her displeasure. Leliana turned to face her friend, feet planted and arms folded loosely across her chest.

"Where is she, Leliana?" Cassandra started at a bellow. "Where is the other prisoner? Why is she not in her cell like her companion? The guards tell me she woke up and was causing a disturbance until you went to see her then it seems you released her?"

"Keep your voice down Cassandra, I have been trying to avoid starting a panic," Leliana replied calmly. "I know exactly where she is - asleep in my bed where she's been since this morning. I probably ought to wake her so she can eat something." The last bit was murmured as an aside that Cassandra did not hear as several scandalised squawks issued from her mouth.

"Why in the void is the woman who possibly murdered the Divine sleeping in your bed?! Have you gone utterly mad?!"

"She had nothing to do with the explosion at the conclave, she wasn't even there when it happened," Leliana made every effort to keep a neutral tone in the face of Cassandra’s affronted disbelief.
"No? Then explain how she happened to emerge from the Fade with the woman bearing the mark."

"Simple, she was already in the Fade and came back through by accident." Leliana mentally crossed her fingers.

Cassandra sucked in a breath, eyes wide in horror as she began to draw her sword.

"So she's a demon!?

"Oh she's going to be so disappointed you jumped straight to that conclusion."

Cassandra glared at her flippancy, posture stiff as she turned towards the Chantry "Take me to her. Immediately."

"I need to find the elven mage," Leliana said, forgiving the rudeness which would have garnered a severe reprimand if coming from anyone else. Cassandra was afraid so it was understandable. “I promised Cullen that I would get him to examine Tara so we could be certain there was nothing untoward about her."

"Tara? You speak of her with some familiarity, just who is she?" Curiosity tempered the rage for half a moment.

"That, is a very complicated question to answer and should be done away from curious ears," Leliana responded, leading the way inside.

* *

They found the elven mage in the dungeon, emerging from the cell next to the one Tara had occupied. Leliana approached slowly, leaving Cassandra silently fuming by the stairs. Hearing the footsteps the elf looked up, straightening to his full height, tilting his bald head slightly as he clasped his hands behind his back.

"Ah Messere Solas, there you are, how is the prisoner doing?" Leliana asked.

"She is as well as can be expected," Solas replied. “I have managed to stabilise the mark somewhat but it is slowly killing her.” He let out a quiet sigh. “Hopefully my actions will keep her alive until she can wake, giving us the chance to test my hypothesis about the connection between the mark and the Breach."

"Thank you, we appreciate your efforts in such difficult circumstances."

Solas inclined his head. "I am glad to be of assistance. Was there something else you needed?"

"Yes, if you have some time now I would like you to examine the other woman who was found with the prisoner. The conditions of her arrival are considerably different and we need to be sure that she poses no threat to anyone. She is currently in my quarters."

"I am at your disposal Sister Leliana. If I might ask, why is this woman not considered as an accomplice to the prisoner here? They emerged from the rift together, did they not?" Solas asked, his face showing only the merest sign of a frown.

"This is true,” Leliana confirmed. “However I know for a fact that she was not in the Temple when the explosion occurred. It is impossible that she had anything to do with it."

Cassandra made a disgruntled sound behind her that Solas noted with a raised eyebrow. He
focused back on Leliana.

"You are certain of this? How then did she end up in the Fade?" The mystery was piquing his interest it seemed.

"She was already there," Leliana said with a slight shrug.

Solas’ eyebrows shot upwards. "I beg your pardon?"

"It will be easier to explain once you've seen her."

Gesturing for Solas to follow, Leliana returned to the stairs and led them both to the door at the back of the Chantry, which had been locked since Leliana left that morning. Before entering the room she gave both Cassandra and Solas a stern look.

“I would like you to refrain from immediately dismissing the woman you are about to meet as nothing more than a demon or some other monster to be feared. She has travelled an unimaginable distance to be here but she still remains her own person. Please keep an open mind.”

Cassandra sighed. “I will endeavour to do as you ask Leliana. But know that if I see any sign of demonic presence I will act without hesitation.”

“Understood,” Leliana nodded. “Solas?”

“I am quite intrigued to meet this woman, if her origin is as you say. I will not dismiss her without first making my own observations,” Solas stated.

Satisfied, Leliana unlocked the door and ushered the other two inside. The fire had long since burned itself to embers, their slight glow casting just enough light for her to make her way to the bed where Tara slept. As she crossed the room, several spheres of soft light winked into being, she nodded her thanks to Solas and sat on the edge of the bed.

Tara was curled up on her side, the blankets tucked right up under her chin as her dark hair spilled across the pillow. Her expression was soft and peaceful in a way that made Leliana’s heart clench painfully. She remembered the last time Tara had looked like she was merely sleeping, it was only the subtle movement of her shoulders that kept Leliana from feeling all the terror she felt that day in Denerim.

She never wished to see her friend lying so unnaturally still ever again. Not while she had breath in her body to prevent it. Mourning Tara once had been hard enough.

Leliana trailed a gentle hand down Tara’s cheek, smoothing back the strands of hair which had fallen onto her face. She leaned over and spoke softly near Tara’s ear, hoping she wouldn’t startle her into lashing out.

"Tara, cherie? Wake up sleepyhead, you've got some more visitors."

It took a few moments for Tara to stir, her face scrunching up as she tried to burrow further into the blankets. Leliana placed her hand on Tara’s cheek and waited for her eyes to flutter open. A smile bloomed on her face as Leliana watched her friend come back to wakefulness, blinking owlishly up at her.

"Leli?” Her voice was rough with sleep as she groaned. “Oh Andraste's ass, I'd forgotten how much I love sleeping. Your bed is very comfy, thank you for that. What time is it?"
Leliana laughed, "About an hour after sunset, you've been asleep nearly 9 hours."

"Shit really? Well it makes sense, my body is still adjusting to being an actual meat-person again. I reckon I could still sleep a lot longer. Who's here?" Tara yawned, stretching her legs beneath the blankets before pushing herself upright.

Waving the others closer, Leliana began the introductions. "Tara, this is Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast, Right Hand of the Divine and Solas, our Fade Expert."

Tara gave a strange half-bow to each from her seated position. "Pleasure to meet you both. I do hope you're not planning on poking me anywhere delicate with that sword you're gripping so tightly Lady Cassandra?" She glanced at Leliana, "She went straight for demon didn't she?"

"I'm afraid so," Leliana patted Tara’s hand, giving her a sympathetic smile.

"Damn. Well I can't win 'em all over."

"Excuse me, my lady?" Solas stepped round to the other side of the bed, eyes alight with curiosity.

"Shit I'm no lady, Solas. Call me Tara."

"Very well, Tara. You are a mage yes?" Solas asked. "Your aura is unlike any I have seen; Sister Leliana said that you were already in the Fade when the Breach opened?"

"I'm not surprised my aura looks odd, it's been steeped in the Fade for the last decade. I really hope all the magic I learnt there will still work this side of the Veil." Tara stared at her hands and the fine network of scars that branched up her forearms.

"Have you been living in the Fade for ten years?!" Solas exclaimed. "That is not possible."

Tara rubbed a hand over her face. "I wouldn't say living; existing is a better word since I wasn't alive when I got flung into the Fade."

"Under what circumstances would a soul enter the Fade instead of passing to the Beyond after death?" Cassandra spoke up, her arms now hanging by her sides.

Raising an eyebrow and smiling Tara said, "I don't know how it would happen for anyone else, Lady Cassandra, but in my case it came down to a fucking Witch and an Archdemon."

"You're the Hero of Ferelden?!" Solas was certainly quick to extrapolate from so few scraps of information.

"Right you are Solas," Tara grinned. "I'm not technically allowed to talk about Warden secrets pertaining to the slaying of Archdemons so let's just say that I hadn't expected to die that day and I'm still pretty fucking pissed off about it. It messed up a lot of plans I had spent a lot of time thinking through." The grin faded until Leliana gave her hand another squeeze.

Solas started to pace the area in front of the fire. "This is...unprecedented. I have never heard of a soul being able to travel out of the Fade and manifest a physical form like the one they previously had. Spirits on occasion have been known to do so but they will have spent considerably longer in the Fade than you have and their manifested forms don't generally function quite like living beings. They would not need to eat or sleep like we would."

"I would definitely say that I need to sleep," Tara said, stifling a sudden yawn. "I didn't dream but considering how long I spent as a Dreamer it might take a while for my mind to adjust to only..."
"That is a very astute assessment," Solas remarked. "It is possible that the process of crossing the Veil drew a considerable amount of magical energy and you are now feeling the backlash of that. Have you eaten anything since you left the Fade?"

"Nope. I don't feel hungry but I'm guessing that as soon as I eat so much as a grape my body will suddenly remember all the food that I've fantasised about for the last ten years," Tara giggled. "You'll have to place guards outside the kitchen to keep me from raiding it at all hours."

"Hopefully that will not be the case, perhaps we can arrange to keep you supplied with a steady stream of small nibbles?" A chuckle accompanied the smirk on Solas's face.

"If we're arranging nibbles there had better be tiny cakes. There was a distinct lack of tiny cakes in the Fade, I'd like to file a complaint." Tara's serious tone was belied by the dancing amusement in her eyes.

"I can pass on your displeasure to the relevant spirit when I next dream if that would suffice?"

"You're speaking my language Solas."

"As riveting as this line of conversation is, can we be certain that she is not a demon?" Cassandra sounded faintly annoyed, but her expression implied that it was perhaps because she could not yet allow herself to be charmed by Tara.

"Lady Cassandra, from the moment I entered the room and felt Tara's magical aura I knew that she was no spirit or demon," Solas stated. "Beings of the Fade could not behave so coherently in the waking world after crossing the Veil. A demon would have to be incredibly powerful to appear as believably human which I would have been able to sense. Tara's magic has been augmented and enhanced by her time in the Fade but her soul is still entirely her own, a remarkable feat that I daresay will never be repeated. She is who she appears to be."

"Thank the Maker," Leliana muttered.

"I will accept your assessment, however I would still request that we do not permit her to leave Haven just yet," said Cassandra.

"She wasn't planning to leave in any case," Leliana pointed out. "She has offered to join our cause, not under her true name of course, but she would be a great asset."

Cassandra gave a stiff nod. "Very well, I will also be speaking to Cullen about his thoughts on this matter when he returns."

Tara cleared her throat noisily. "If we're done discussing whether I'm a real person or not, can we see about food? I want to know if I still hate carrots."

Leliana rolled her eyes and shoved her friend off the bed. "Brat."

Chapter End Notes

Well the Egg is pretty impressed even if the Seeker still has some reservations... :P
Next time: Our sleeping beauty wakes and gets dragged up a mountain. Our wayward dreamer joins the Egg and everyone's favourite crossbow-toting dwarf for a spot of demon culling.

Hope you enjoyed!
Chapter Six - Wakey Wakey, Time to Heal the Breach!

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Howdy everyone! I was slightly worried for a bit that I wasn't going to be able to get this chapter finished to post today cos I'm currently stuffed up to the gills with a cold and my brain hasn't been able to word for most of the week. But I got there in the end which I'm pretty proud of, although any general loopiness in this chapter can be attributed to the fact that half my brain cells have been blown out my nose with ten gallons of snot. What a lovely image that is XD

Anyway... we're finally at the Breach! I hope you all enjoy!

Slipping through the empty Chantry, Solas let himself into the Hands’ bedchamber where Tara still slept, so deeply that the heavy thud of the door closing did little to rouse her. Exhaustion had quickly caught back up to Tara last night after she managed to eat the odd array of foods that Sister Leliana had arranged to be brought to them rather than risk letting Tara be seen in Haven’s tavern.

Solas had stayed to observe her interactions with Leliana, trying to gain some insight into how this woman had somehow survived in the Fade for so long and returned to the Waking world with her mind intact. So many questions clamouring to be answered but having no clue where to begin asking. What could she know? What would he risk in discussing the Fade with Tara?

Regardless of his curiosity, he was here serving a different purpose. He approached the bed, indulging in a brief smile at the sight of the famed Hero of Ferelden curled up in a tight ball beneath the blankets like a child. In sleep, Solas could almost see the young woman Tara had been before the Blight, her face unburdened save for the few scars that marked her skin.

It was a shame he had to spoil that peace. Solas reached to gently shake her shoulder.

"Tara? Wake up da'len," he said softly.

Her face twitched into a frown before she peeled open one eye. "I think I'm a little too old to be called a child Solas," she grumbled.

"You know some of the elvhen language?" Solas replied, one eyebrow lifting slightly. "I wonder how many more surprises you contain."

Tara flashed him a sleepy grin. "Just enough to keep people guessing. What time is it?" Unfurling herself from her sleeping position, she stretched out her long limbs with all the slow grace of a mountain cat.

"It is a little after the 9th bell," said Solas stepping back from the bed. "You slept deeply again, I tried to locate you in the Fade but had no success."

Flinging back the blankets, Tara swung her legs out of bed and perched on the edge of the mattress,
rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "Damn I will need to dream soon, there are folk who will be
wondering where I went," she groaned.

"You have friends among the spirits?" asked Solas.

"A few. They’re a little odd but I imagine that is more a reflection on me being the kind of person
that attracts the quirkier kinds of spirit." Tara shrugged, pushing herself to her feet and padding
over to the chair where some fresh clothes were laid out.

Solas hesitated before making a careful response. "Indeed."

"That's a very polite way of avoiding agreeing with me," Tara laughed.

"I do not know you well enough to judge what you would consider to be an insult," Solas said
mildly.

She waved a hand dismissively. "Oh don't worry Solas, it takes a very determined type of asshole
to really piss me off. I've heard enough people question my sanity to find it more funny than
anything else."

"I shall remember that," he chuckled. "Now I came here to enquire as to whether you would like to
accompany myself and Master Tethras up the mountain to clear some of the obstacles. It is likely
that the prisoner will wake today so Seeker Cassandra will be eager to test whether the mark on the
prisoner's hand can affect the rifts or not."

"So we'd be clearing a safe path so Liz doesn't have to deal with fighting a shit-load of demons
after being unconscious for three days?" Tara said, picking up some of the clothing from the chair.

"That is the intention, yes."

"I'm in. I haven't had much opportunity to stretch my legs since I arrived and I want to see whether
all my fighting skills have transferred. Also is it weird that I'm excited to meet Varric fucking
Tethras?"

Before Solas could respond, Tara began removing the nightshirt she wore, tossing it onto the bed
leaving her stood in only her smalls. The elf hurriedly turned his back with a mostly muffled
exclamation, a flush pinking the tips of his pointed ears.

It took him a moment to compose himself, had Tara always been this unselfconscious or was it due
to her time living only around spirits? They didn't generally care about flesh-forms and whether
they were naked or not. It would be fascinating to discuss once the shock wore off.

In a impressively neutral tone, Solas said "I imagine Varric will be immensely amused that the
Hero of Ferelden is a fan of his. Did you come across his work in the Fade?"

There was some rustling and a grunt or two behind him as Tara dressed. Solas straightened his
back and kept facing the door.

"A few odd snippets made it into memories, but it's more his proximity to the Champion of
Kirkwall that got the spirits excited. Although Curiosity had a lot of questions about his chest
hair," she admitted with a laugh. "Leli told me I'm not to tell him who I am though."

"I would wager that he will not remain ignorant of your identity for long," Solas remarked.

"Oh shit I know that, I actually want to see how long it'll take him to figure it out. A sovereign says
he'll have it cracked within half a day."

Footsteps approached, Solas turned to find Tara flexing her feet in her boots as she pulled some of her hair into a knot to keep it off her face. He hadn’t realised before that Tara was actually a few inches taller than him although she didn’t tower in the way that many human men did with elves.

"Do you have the coin to wager?" Solas smirked.

"I'll borrow it from Leliana," Tara grinned. “Now I have to see where they hid my daggers and hunt up some armour."

Solas tilted his head. "You do not use a staff?"

"I did before, but once I got Fade-side I fancied trying other methods of combat. Currently I use dual daggers but with an unexpected twist," Tara winked.

"I look forward to observing your technique then."

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A few hours later Varric Tethras looked to his two, new companions on another venture of dubious fucking sanity and couldn’t avoid making light conversation.

"So I hate to be the one to break such a comfortable silence but are we really not going to talk about what happened back there? Was I the only one to see the lightning that came from Sparky's daggers?"

The woman shot him an incredulous look. "Is that the best nickname you can come up with Varric? I'm disappointed." She then smiled rather creepily. “Do my daggers unnerve you?"

"That depends, is the lightning coming from runes?"

"Do you want me to lie to you?"

Varric stumbled slightly. "Well shit. You're a mage then? I've never seen a mage fight without a staff and still wield magic at the same time."

"I picked up some odd skills in weird places. I like learning stuff and I had a lot of free time on my hands," she shrugged.

"Were you in a Circle before you came to Haven? You seem rather at ease fighting demons. Most Circle mages I've met tend to have fits of the vapours when a shadow looks at them wrong."

The woman’s face darkened. "I've not been in a Circle for ten years and I'm sure as fuck not going back to one without a fight."

"So what's your story then, Sparky? Left the Circle ten years ago, how have you avoided Templars all that time? There's not many places apostates can hide without someone noticing they occasionally break out in magic."

"Let's just say I wandered a long time in a place where Templars couldn’t go and only very recently returned," she said in a lofty voice before striding ahead.

"Oh come on!” Varric shouted after her. “You can't just say mysterious shit like that and walk off!"

"I think she just did Master Tethras," Solas quipped.
"You know I think I've figured out why you seem so familiar Sparky," Varric huffed after a pitched skirmish with several shades and half a dozen of those damn wraiths.

"Oh really? I'm sure you would've remembered meeting me before," was her nonchalant reply as she wiped demon ichor off her blades.

"You bear a striking resemblance to Bethany Hawke," Varric explained. "Your eyes are different but the bone structure and hair colour are almost identical. What did you say your name was? I think I must have missed it before the lightning started flying."

"Tara, just Tara. But I'll take the comparison as quite the compliment." She slipped her daggers back into their sheaths and took a swig from the waterskin hanging from her belt.

"Alright don't tell me then," Varric grumbled as they carried on walking. "Sunshine is a mage too, damn scary one with her nightmare spells. She looked like butter wouldn't melt but if you got on her wrong side she'd have you writhing on the floor."

"She sounds like my kind of girl. Is she up in Kirkwall?"

"Nah, Sunshine has been with the Wardens since our expedition in the Deep Roads back in 9:32. It was a damn good thing Blondie was with us or Hawke would've lost her only a year after their brother died. Last I heard she was stationed in Amaranthine with the Ferelden Wardens."

Tara stiffened. "Shit that's rough. Does she write you often?"

Varric shrugged. "She's a much better correspondent than most of my asshole friends. It's not like they're overrun with darkspawn these days so they mostly just patrol the region and train villagers to defend themselves."

"Damn I'm jealous, that sounds positively relaxing."

"The way Sunshine tells it, the Warden-Commander is a right grumpy bastard but he seemed alright when I travelled with him a few years back."

"You travelled with Alistair? Where did you go?" Tara spun round, eyes wild.

"That's a rather involved story that I'd rather be drunk for. How do you know Alistair?" Varric narrowed his eyes at her.

"Ahh...fuck it's...complicated." Tara looked very intently at the bracers on her forearms, twiddling with the straps and buckles.

Varric raised his eyebrows. "Hmm, you know he said something similar when I asked why he kept reaching for his throat like he expected to find a necklace there. Looked real fucking sad every time he did it too."

Tara looked up at that, face paling. "Oh. He did?"

She took a shaky breath and faced back up the path towards where muffled screams and an unearthly shriek echoed.

"Aaaand she's walking off again. What did I say?" Varric unholstered Bianca once more, following after Tara.
Solas replied solemnly, "I am not quite sure that it was anything you did, Master Tethras."

* 

The seemingly endless waves of demons finally stopped when the weird fucking rift was closed by the other young woman that suddenly appeared on the tail of Varric’s least favourite Seeker. Not that Varric knew more than one Seeker, but Cassandra was vitriolic enough for all of them.

He looked instead for Tara, who’d started looking pretty peaky after the first few waves of void-taken demons. It took him a good fifteen seconds to locate her, bent double behind a rock, rinsing her mouth out with water.

"You feeling okay Sparky? That was quite a hit you took," asked Varric as she straightened and staggered back towards the others congregating where the rift used to be.

The new woman gasped, rushing over to Tara and carelessly dropping the shabby staff she’d been carrying.

"Tara?! What are you doing up here? I thought you'd be locked away in some cell like I was. Are you hurt?" Her eyes tracked up and down the taller woman’s body, looking for any sign of blood or injury. Not waiting for an answer she cast a rippling blue spell that returned the greyish cast of Tara’s face to a more healthy colour.

"Liz? Thank the fucking Maker," Tara sighed with relief. "I’ve really missed having friends who are dab hands with healing spells. Glad to see you made it here in one piece."

Varric stared at them both. "When did you meet Sparky?" He said to the woman Tara had called Liz. "Haven't you been unconscious since you stepped out of the Fade?"

Liz picked at a thread on the sleeve of her robe. "I, er met her in the Fade? She helped me back to the rift and fell through herself." She shot a grin at Tara, "I'm surprised they let you roam about without a hoard of Templars to watch you."

Tara stuck out her tongue in reply.

Varric was surely losing his mind. "Wait, Sparky was in the Fade? Doing what?"

"Minding my own fucking business until someone tore open the Veil," she retorted.

"So you're a spirit?" That would be just his luck.

"Do I seem like a spirit to you Varric?" Tara held his gaze all too calmly.

"Then how did you end up in the Fade?"

"I had a really shitty day in 9:31," she deadpanned.

"Okay now you're messing with me right? Are you seriously telling me you were in the Fade for ten years?"

"When you say it like that, of course it sounds insane."

"I've been around a lot of insane in my life Sparky, this just sounds impossible."

"I'm standing here aren't I? Impossible or not, it happened."
Varric jerked a thumb at Liz. "If it took an explosion that levelled half the mountain to send her into the Fade what the void did it take to send you?"

"If it lessens the level of cataclysm required, I ought to point out that my physical body didn't make the trip," Tara sighed.

"Your physical body? What does that mean?" Varric seriously wished he had a flask of something strong right about now.

"It means it was just her soul, right?" Liz murmured.

Tara smiled, giving the other woman’s hand a quick squeeze. "Right you are Liz."

Varric frowned. "Souls don't tend to go for a jaunt without their bodies though, surely you have to be kinda dead for that to happen?"

"Oh Varric, I really thought you'd be quicker on the uptake." Tara rolled her eyes while Liz stifled a giggle.

"So you died in some cataclysm ten years ago that sent your soul into the Fade? A lot of people died that year, there was a Blight going on you know."

"You don't fucking say, I did wonder why I kept running into Darkspawn everywhere I turned that year," Tara drawled.

"Surely the idea would've been to run away from the Darkspawn?"

She threw up her hands with a disgusted sound. "Fuck a nug. This is getting ridiculous, let's keep moving the Breach ain't getting any smaller."

Varric couldn’t help feeling like he was missing out some joke that everyone else was in on. Chuckles definitely knew about it if the smirk he was trying to hide was any indication.

* 

After all an all-too shouty debate about whether they were all doomed with the Chantry’s most pompous cleric still breathing in Ferelden, Liz had suggested that she take Cassandra and Solas up through the mountain pass to find the missing scouts while Tara and Varric joined the soldiers in the valley to cut a path through the bulk of the demons.

For all his curiosity about the woman who was apparently the only means of closing the rifts, Varric was immensely grateful that he didn’t have to haul himself up a dozen or more rickety ladders on the sheer side of a mountain.

Once the majority of the demons in the valley were dead everyone could take a moment to breathe. Varric watched with some confusion as Tara bounded over to a very familiar Templar-shaped human.

"Commander Curly! You still in one piece?" Tara gave him a blindingly cheeky smile.

Cullen rolled his eyes and sighed. "Really...Tara? It's bad enough that Varric calls me Curly, must you add to the torment as well?"

Varric had clearly missed a whole lot these past few days. Apparently the tavern was not the place to hear all the interesting stories. And he didn’t even have any paper with him to make notes.
"Wait? Sparky knows you too? When did that happen?"

Cullen looked askance at Tara "Doesn't he...?"

"Nope, razor-wit Tethras here still hasn't figured it out," Tara laughed. "Did you know I bear a striking resemblance to Bethany Hawke?"

Cocking his to one side, Cullen squinted at her. "Oh? Actually now you mention it I can see that. The dark hair does come from her mother's side I believe. She's a Warden Mage as well isn't she?"

Varric was more than a little unnerved by the undercurrent of amusement in Cullen’s voice, in all the years he’d known the Knight-Captain it had never been apparent that he could remove the righteous stick up his ass. What the fuck was he missing here?

"So I hear. Small world eh?"

"Small indeed. The way to the Temple should now be clear, the others will be waiting. You can continue teasing the dwarf when that thing is dealt with."

"Aye Commander," Tara saluted him with one of her daggers. “Maker watch over you.”

*

It was far harder to think about weird mages and the weird shit they did with magic when there was a hulking Pride Demon trying to kill everyone in sight. Varric was cursing up a storm, rolling clear of one of the demon’s damned lightning lashes when he heard something altogether more worrisome.

"Liz, can you keep a barrier on me?" Tara called, settling her daggers in her hands, looking poised to run. “I'm going to do something stupid. Be ready to slam that rift shut when the demon falls."

"What are you going to do?" Liz slammed a barrier into place, looking a tad bit alarmed.

Tara rolled her shoulders and cracked her neck. "A move that got me killed last time I tried it. Here goes nothing!"

Everyone froze as Tara sprinted at the Pride demon’s back, launching herself off the ground with a burst of magic and sinking her daggers into its hide. The demon bellowed as the mage climbed up to its shoulders, plunging both blades into its neck and blasting pure ice through the metal.

"What the fuck is she doing?" Varric stared aghast as the demon staggered, dropping to one knee.

"Killing the demon it seems," Solas replied.

"NOW LIZ!" Tara screamed.

Liz lifted her left hand towards the rift overhead, grimacing as the mark connected to it through whatever void-taken magic it used. A hum grew louder and louder as the rift began to contract and convulse. Just as the pressure became unbearable Liz clenched her hand with a yell, yanking her arm back as the rift collapsed.

A shockwave ripped through the ruins of the Temple, throwing everyone off their feet. Somewhat dazed, Varric hauled himself to his feet after checking that Bianca was still intact. He looked about for the others, Liz had crumpled into a heap but he wasn’t close enough to see if she was still breathing. Maker he hoped she was.
"Everyone else alright?" he called out. "Chuckles? Seeker? Anyone seen Sparky?"

A strangled noise came from the Nightingale, of all people, as she barrelled down from the upper level where she’d stood with the other archers. Her hood fell back from her fiery hair as she looked about frantically.

"Where is she? Tara! Damn it where is— There! By those rocks!" She jabbed a finger and started running. "Bring me any health potions we have left!"

Varric jogged over with Solas, both digging into pockets for any vials left unused. They found Leliana knelt on the floor with Tara’s head cradled in her lap. For all he’d only met the Nightingale a handful of times he’d never seen the much-feared woman look as distraught as she did now. Somehow that was all the more terrifying.

Solas swept his hands over Tara, pale green flickering faintly on his fingers. "She appears to be alive. Knocked unconscious by the blast most likely, although I do not have enough mana at the moment to check if she has deeper injuries." He rocked back on his haunches, casting a scowl at the ground.

Leliana nodded. "Thank you Solas, hopefully potions will suffice for now. She may need healing later after I'm through with her however."

She uncorked one of the potions handed to her and tipped the contents into Tara’s mouth. There was a tense moment before the woman reflexively swallowed and colour returned to her ashen cheeks. They all let out a collective sigh of relief.

Tara coughed and spluttered as her eyes flickered open. "wuh-what...oh. Fuck. Leli - I'm in a lot of trouble aren't I?"

"Soooo much trouble," Leliana cooed down at her. "Maker I could shake you right now! What were you thinking?!"

Tara winced. "That the move worked last time so why not try it again??"

Leliana made several indignant squawks before she managed to find words again. "You...infuriating woman! My heart almost stopped, the Maker only just brought you back to me and I thought I was going to lose you in the exact same, idiotic way!" She punctuated each of the last four words with a sharp jab to Tara’s forehead.

"Hey, be fair!" Tara protested. "That pride demon was tiny compared to the Archdemon, and I'm fine!"

Bending over until her forehead rested against Tara’s, Leliana muttered just loud enough for Varric and Solas to hear. "I swear by all that's Holy, if you ever do that again, there won't be anywhere in Thedas or the Fade where you can hide from me, Katarina Amell. Do you understand?"

Tara tilted her head back further to press a kiss to Leliana’s cheek. "I hear you Leli. I promise to leave the world-saving heroics to someone else this time."

"You had better," Leliana said darkly. "Or I'll lock you back in the dungeon for your own safety!"

"Katarina Amell?" Varric began. "But wasn't she the Hero of Ferelden— Andraste's Ass you're the Hero of Ferelden?!"

"Thank the fucking Maker, he finally got it!"
"I believe you owe me a sovereign, Tara."

"Piss off Solas."

Chapter End Notes

So I didn't fancy writing all the Wrath of Heaven stuff verbatim from the game, but you can pretty much assume that Liz got the whole Cassandra bad cop routine before getting hauled up the mountain :P

Varric is never usually this dense I know but I thought it'd be hella funny if the obvious just kept swooping over his head. He doesn't like it when Curly is in on the joke and he's not.

I'm nearly all out of the dialogue I binge-wrote last year so I'm gonna have to do some serious chunks of planning and writing asap so I can keep up some kind of upload schedule.

Thank you again for reading and I would be super grateful for any kudos or comments! Also THANK YOU to the folk who've actually *subscribed* to this story! My flabber was properly gasted when I saw that in my stats. <3
Chapter Seven - Nobody Expects the Thedasian Inquisition!

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Argh I really kinda cut this fine, I have pretty much ran out entirely of pre-written stuff now and unless I pull my act together this week and draft dialogue for the next few chapters, getting a chapter out next weekend is going to be unlikely. *sigh*

But at least I’ve got something for you guys right? Our sleeping Herald awakes!

I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waking up this time wasn’t nearly so uncomfortable as it was in the dungeon. While still bewildering to find herself somewhere she didn’t recognise, Liz was at least content that her hand didn’t hurt like before and that she wasn’t cold and in shackles. Being in a bed was a vast upgrade from damp flagstone floors.

Levering herself out of the bed Liz took a moment to investigate the cabin she’d been brought to - it was cosy with a fire burning merrily in the stone fireplace built into the wall adjacent to her. Oddly there was a second bed against the opposite wall that looked rumpled enough to give her the impression that she had a roommate. Who would have chosen to sleep in a room with a suspected murderer of hundreds?

The rest of the cabin was mostly unkempt as though it had rather hurriedly been cleared for habitation. Piles of miscellaneous clutter sat either side of the door, likely waiting to be removed at later time. A desk sat in a corner, covered in various empty potion bottles and pages of scribbled notes. Liz picked up the top sheet and found a log of symptoms and observations with the note of ‘Day 3’ in the top corner. Had she been out of it that long?

Mercifully there was a chest at the foot of her bed which had several outfits inside that Liz picked from to layer over the basic shirt and breeches she’d woken up in. A quick glance through the narrow windows gave her only a view of a wooden encircling wall and a few trees, she couldn’t be sure of the weather but chances were that it was still going to be snowy and damn cold.

Just as she finished lacing her feet into supple leather boots, the door opened startling Liz into a yelp, which in turn caused the elven woman walking into the hut to drop the small crate she carried with a crash.

“Creators! I didn’t know you were awake!” The elf dropped to her knees, half bowing and half attempting to scrape up the contents of the crate before giving it up as lost. “Forgive me my Lady!”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Liz soothed. “Please stand up, I’m not someone worth bowing to.”

“But they said you stopped the Breach growing! That’s all anyone’s talked about for days!” The elf’s eyes were wide as her voice trembled.

“So I only half-succeeded,” Liz sighed. “But people are happy with me? That’s a bit of a turnabout
from the last time I was conscious.”

“I’m just a servant my Lady, I don’t know what the folk up at the Chantry think, but I know that
the sky isn’t raining demons anymore thanks to you.”

“That’s very kind of you to say, I had quite a bit of help so I hardly deserve all the credit.” Liz held
out her hand to the elven woman. “Let’s get you up, don’t worry about the box, I’ll tidy it up
later.”

“But the apothecary will be furious I dropped his herbs! He shouts all the time about how little we
have,” the elf cautiously took Liz’s hand and scrambled to her feet.

“Then I shall speak to the apothecary and let him know it was my fault that these got a little
battered. What’s your name?” Liz smiled.

“Niara, my lady,” was the stammered reply. “I should inform Lady Cassandra that you’re awake.
‘At once’ she said.” She started to back away towards the door.

“Where is the Lady Seeker, Niara?”

“In the Chantry, my Lady. I must go!”

Liz watched, more than a little puzzled as Niara bolted outside, letting the door swing wide
revealing the crowd of people gathered some distance from the cabin. With no small amount of
trepidation Liz stepped out onto the snow-dusted porch, closing the door behind her.

Waves of whispers built and washed over her as she followed the path through the village. She
could make out the reverent tones and the frequent mention of ‘Herald’ and ‘Andraste’. Liz was
honestly more relieved that no one seemed to be seething with anger and ready to pelt her with
rocks like they had been when Cassandra marched her out of Haven with her hands bound.

It took several deep breaths to summon the courage to open the door at the back of the Chantry
after overhearing the blazing argument between Chancellor Roderick and Cassandra from halfway
down the nave. Liz was stunned to hear Cassandra actually defending her, considering how
vehement she had been before that Liz was responsible for the explosion.

“Come on Liz,” she muttered to herself. “Just open the door, it can’t possibly be as bad as getting
interrogated in a dungeon.”

* 

The Herald of fucking Andraste?? She was wrong, this was so much worse. Liz barely looked
where she was going as she stormed through the Chantry, leaving Cassandra and Leliana to
proceed with their declaration of the reborn Inquisition. Fuck, she’d read enough Chantry history to
know about its origins and the first Inquisition that gave birth to the Templar order and the
Seekers. Bringing it back now when the Templars were at war with the mages they had been
charged to protect for hundreds of years was going to be far more divisive than it was unifying. But
if Cassandra was sincere in her determination to act against the threat posed by the Breach then it
might not be all bad.

But still, why in the fucking Void did someone need to go and dub her as Andraste’s Herald? She’d
liked been almost unknown in the Ostwick Circle, you’d have been hard pressed to find more than
three people who could describe what she looked like amongst the mages and none of the
Templars ever looked her in the face. Now she was going to be lauded across half of Thedas as
some divinely-chosen saviour?
Fuck that. With a fucking knobbly stick. She didn’t voice that opinion back in the Chantry, but oh how she wanted to, these people had only just changed their minds about her so it wasn’t wise to fling it back in their faces. She needed to find Tara. Of all the people in Haven right now, Tara would be the one who understood how she felt. But first she needed to make some apologies before she forgot.

Thankfully Liz remembered where the apothecary’s cabin was from when she’d first arrived in Haven, before everything got blown to shit. She’d attempted to offer her healing skills both magical and mundane but was rather brusquely denied by an old bearded man who’d claimed there was going to be no wounded at a peaceful Conclave. Liz wondered if the old man had survived and whether he’d change his tune if she asked now.

As she opened the door to the cabin, the overpowering smell of elfroot wafted out along with an eye-watering mix of other herbs and potion ingredients. It was swelteringly hot inside with two fireplaces burning, cauldrons hanging over the flames their contents bubbling away. Several worktables were stationed around the cabin, each littered with the tools of a different branch of alchemy and herbalism.

Hunched over one table was a man in singed robes reminiscent of those Liz had seen Tranquil wearing in the Circle. She couldn’t sense a magical aura but the string of muttered curses she could hear confirmed that he was no Tranquil. Nor was he the older man who’d turned her away before.

“Excuse me,” she cleared her throat loud enough to make the man turn. “Are you the apothecary? I need to recompense you for some herbs that I, ah inadvertently rendered useless.”

The new apothecary - as it appeared he was - was considerably younger than his predecessor although still some fifteen or so years older than Liz if the slight feathering of grey at his temples and through his close-trimmed beard were any indication. His square face bore rather a grumpy expression that gave credence to Niara’s assertion that he might have yelled at her about ruined supplies. He crossed his arms across his chest and gave her a slow once-over.

“You’re looking much better now you’re not dying,” he said gruffly.

"Erm...thank you? I think?” Apparently the apothecary knew who she was?

“Yeah, well you’re welcome,” was the grumbled reply. “The name’s Adan. I’ve probably aged ten years these last few days trying to keep 

"you

alive as well as keep this mess of a village supplied with potions. I might have gone completely grey if not for that madwoman with the magic daggers.”

"You mean Tara? So she didn't do the whole three day nap like I did?” Liz huffed out a faintly envious sigh.

"Nope. I heard they carried her down the mountain and she was happily chatting to the Nightingale as if she wasn't the most terrifying woman in Thedas.” Liz stifled a giggle at Adan’s apt description of Leliana.

"The next morning she bounced in here offering to help with whatever she can. I sent her off to hunt for old Master Taigen's notes on healing potions and she didn't come back until supper.” Adan shook his head as he laughed to himself. “I think she picked every scrap of elfroot within a mile of Haven. I watched her haul a whole damn bale of the stuff up the path and drop it on my doorstep, with a huge grin like a mabari who’d somehow caught a druffalo. Utterly barmy woman but I think I like her."
Liz grinned, easily picturing Tara’s face. "She has that effect on a lot of people I think. Did she find the notes?"

"Oh yeah, she spent the whole next day reading them and brewing up potions from the instructions. You were the test subject for a couple of them so some of the credit for your recovery lies with her."

"Really? I’ll be sure to thank her when I find her. I’m sure she was pleased to be able to aid with the healing in some way, she hates that she can't do any healing spells."

"I do recall her muttering angrily about something to that effect," Adan tilted his head, frowning. "She's a mage too? I hadn't realised."

"She's not going out of her way to make it obvious, people are jumpy enough around the mages that are known in the village, I'm sure she doesn't want to add to the worry." Hopefully Adan would keep the knowledge to himself.

"You and her old friends then?"

"Maker, no. We literally only met after the explosion. But we have a surprising amount in common, and she's been an enormous help." It felt odd to be saying it to a complete stranger but it was remarkably true. Liz had barely spent a day with Tara but every conversation they’d had so far had felt more comfortable than any she’d had in years. There could be a solid friend in the older woman if she felt the same about the Liz.

"That's nice, in mad times like these, when the world is looking to you for answers, you need people who support and understand you."

Liz swallowed thickly. "That's exactly it. Now I've surely taken up enough of your time Adan. I'll swing by when I can to pay you back for the supplies I ruined if that's alright? I can help with whatever healing that might need doing as well as brew potions."

"Sure thing, I won't turn away a willing pair of competent hands. It'll mean I can go back to focusing more on my alchemy projects." Adan waved her off and turned his attention back to his workstation. As Liz unlatched the door he called out, “Oh your friend should be outside, round the back of the cabin. She found it too hot to work in here and said she’d sit in the snow. Odd woman.”

Chuckling, Liz nodded her thanks and turned left between the cabin and its neighbour until she saw ten bare toes curled into the snow. The majority of the feet they were attached to were wrapped in leather strips, like the Dalish wore, except Liz could see several types of runes tooled into the leather that seemed to be protecting their wearer from frostbite and other injuries. It took only a brief glance upwards to verify that the owner of the bizarre footwear was indeed Tara. Liz paused a few feet away from her and waited for her to look up from the pile of elfroot in her lap.

Tara’s face lit up. "Liz! You're awake! Come take a seat. How you feeling?"

Liz plonked herself on the bench and leaned back against the cabin wall. "My hand doesn't feel like it's trying to kill me anymore. Apparently I'm also no longer the suspect for the murder of the Divine and I heard something about it being Andraste who tossed us out of the Fade?"

Dropping the elfroot plant she’d started to strip of its leaves, Tara swivelled to stare at Liz. "What the shit? I didn't get a good look at the glowy lady's face but I'm not putting coin on it being Andraste herself. Why would she personally boot me out of the Fade?"

Snorting, Liz replied airily, "Oh I don't know, maybe she thought the world could find a use for the
Hero of Ferelden during a crisis?

“Liz you sly git!” Tara nudged her with an elbow. “You figured me out and never said a word! When did you guess?”

"Something Cassandra mentioned while she was taking me up to the Temple made me wonder, and while you were talking to Varric it started to piece together. But it was actually you cursing that made me certain. 'Fuck a nug' is a very distinctive turn of phrase." Liz winked.

Dropping her head into her hands, Tara groaned. "Oh please don't tell me that my enduring legacy is my foul mouth. Did that make it into the songs or something?"

"Nothing so terrible, don't worry," Liz assured her. "There was a mage in Ostwick's circle who got transferred from Kinloch after the Blight who loved telling stories about how the mighty Hero of Ferelden used to be a gangly girl in lightning-singed robes who spent all her time in the library, either studying or kissing girls behind the shelves. He told a particularly hysterical story about how the supposedly well-mannered apprentice told the Knight-Commander to go 'fuck a nug' when he found her lying along the top of a bookcase reading and demanded she get down."

Tara dissolved into laughter until tears streamed down her face. "Shit I'd forgotten about that! Oh the colours Greagoir's face turned were spectacular." She wiped the back of her hand across her cheeks. “I normally had the policy to not swear at the Enchanters or the templars but I'm pretty sure that day I’d started my monthlies and the cramps were a bitch so I had no patience for being bossed about. It just sort of slipped out. I got an impressive lecture from First Enchanter Irving but since he was smirking the whole time I rather got the impression that he had often considered saying something similar to Greagoir every day of the fucking year."

"I did always wonder how much patience it took for a First Enchanter to run a Circle when you had the Templars breathing down your neck, waiting for the slightest hint of a mage going 'bad.'"

"Considerably more patience than I could ever possess I'm sure," Tara said. "The downside to my little snark outburst at Greagoir is that he started keeping a closer eye on me since he knew I wasn't as meek and mild-mannered as I'd tried to pretend. Being so close with Anders didn't help me any, although no one ever did find out that I helped him escape on at least three of his attempts." She grinned smugly.

"Anders? The apostate who destroyed the Kirkwall Chantry?" Liz hadn’t known that the Hero had been at the Circle with the infamous mage.

"Yeah I need to have a chat with Varric about that,” Tara muttered. “Because I really don't buy the whole 'murderous abomination plotted in secret and fooled even the Champion of Kirkwall' spin. While you were recovering I finally got to read the whole damn book and fucking void I have questions.” She gave the basket at her feet a sullen kick.

“The Anders I grew up with? Could barely plan an escape from his own clothes without getting himself in a mess. And he couldn’t lie for shit to his friends, that's why a lot of the other apprentices liked him - he was honestly and unapologetically himself. I've not met Justice but I find it really fucking unlikely that his mere presence was able to bestow my dumb-ass brother with the logistical and deception skills required to pull off what happened.”

Liz was surprised at the vehemence in Tara’s voice and the fond exasperation in the way she claimed him as a brother. "You don't think he did it? But half the Gallows saw him confess?"

"I believe that he stood up and did the dramatic 'There can be no compromise' spiel to keep the
suspicion on him, but I cannot believe that none of those daft bastards he calls friends never *once* suspected he was planning anything on that scale."

"Are you including the Champion amongst the 'daft bastards'?"

"You're damn fucking right I am. The man managed to find more trouble than I ever did. Since we're apparently related I'm allowed to call him a daft bastard straight to his face when I get the chance."

"I would pay good money to see that, Tara."

"I'm sure I can persuade Varric to sell tickets."

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Chapter End Notes

I'll confess it now, I've never actually *played* DA2 so my versions of Hawke, Anders and the gang are mostly grown from how I've come to think of them through reading a boatload of wiki stuff and fics plus watching some YT play-throughs. I gots some *feelings* about Anders so... I guess that's all I'll say for now :P

I'm not entirely happy with this chapter but since I'm trying to be low-pressure on myself I'm posting it anyway. Hopefully it's not all boring filler before we get to start fixing shit in the Hinterlands. If all goes to plan we'll be hitting the road next time ;) Please leave a comment if you like and kudos are always appreciated ^_^ Thanks for reading!
The rest of Liz’s day was spent with Tara, chatting and laughing while working their way through several baskets of elfroot, stripping the leaves from the stems and preparing both for their different uses in healing poultices and potions. Between them, they replenished Haven’s healing supplies to almost four times what they were before the Conclave. Adan almost smiled when they carried the crates of full bottles and jars back into the apothecary several hours later. He shooed them out again quickly before he accidentally had another emotion in public.

Picking up dinner from the mess hall, the pair retreated to Liz’s cabin which was also Tara’s as Liz had discovered that afternoon to her pleasant surprise. Rather than put anyone to the trouble of preparing another cabin just for Tara, she’d volunteered to share with Liz since neither of them were strangers to having roommates from their youths spent in Circles.

Liz felt a peculiar pang of nostalgia as she was sat on her bed, watching Tara bank the fire for the night. It had been several years since she’d had somewhere relatively safe to sleep and longer still since she’d shared a room with someone she actually felt comfortable around. She’d never truly been friends with any of the girls she’d bunked with as an apprentice, most of them thought she was a snobby noble too proud to be friends with normal people when in reality it was the rejection from her family that made her painfully shy and cautious to open herself up only to be hurt again.

By comparison Tara was quickly becoming the closest friend she’d ever had after her twin, Henry. Liz hadn’t so much as exchanged a letter with her brother for fifteen years until the Circles fell and she was finally able to get a message to him where he was studying in Denerim. Since then they’d been able to correspond semi-regularly, sending lengthy letters catching each other up on the vast portion of their lives that they’d been forbidden any contact. She hoped fiercely that one day she’d finally be able to see him again, but the Inquisition was now a pretty severe obstacle to that goal.

Until then, having Tara as a friend would be an unexpected joy amidst all this insanity.

*
Cassandra caught up to them both as they were leaving the bathhouse the next morning. Liz couldn’t even feel annoyed, she was so relaxed from finally getting the hot bath she’d been dreaming about since falling through the rift. While someone had been trying to keep her clean during her post-breach convalescence it was nothing compared to the feeling of being able to scrub the grimy sensation from her own skin.

"Ah, Herald there you are,” Cassandra called as she strode over, dressed in full armour even at the early hour. “Would you follow me? There are some people who I need to introduce you to." She pivoted on her heel, not waiting for Liz’s response.

"Is it an official Inquisition-y meeting?” Liz asked, her question stopping Cassandra in her tracks before she’d made it ten paces. “Can Tara come too?”

Glancing back over her shoulder Cassandra nodded slowly. "It would make sense if...Tara joined us as well. She will need to be introduced to the ambassador at some point."

Tara grinned at the Seeker. "Don't think I didn't notice you make the effort to hold back on 'Lady Tara-ing' me Cassandra. I appreciate it."

"You are welcome Tara." A slight blush rose on Cassandra’s cheeks before she turned away and resumed walking.

Following the Seeker through Haven was an interesting experience for Liz as it was tricky keeping up with her long strides without practically jogging. Tara was snickering the entire time, being of a height with Cassandra meant she could take one step for every two that Liz had to take.

They arrived at the room at the back of the Chantry where Liz had been summoned yesterday. As they entered the three people already present paused their conversation and faced the door from the other side of the massive table that filled half the room. Liz vaguely recognised the blond man as Cullen from Tara’s descriptions in her stories from when she was in the Circle. The brunette, dark-skinned woman in an impressively elegant dress stood next to him was unfamiliar, she held a portable writing desk with the ease of much practice in not spilling either ink or candle wax.

Leliana was stood closest and smiled as Tara shut the door behind her. "Good, you found them Cassandra. We can begin."

"Herald, you already know Sister Leliana of course-"

Liz cut in before she lost her nerve. "Can we dispense with all the Herald nonsense? At least in private? I understand that for morale purposes it serves the Inquisition to use a title out there.” She gestured towards the door. “But in here I'd like to feel like I'm still a person. Tara has called me Liz from the moment I asked her to, if that is too informal for you all, then Elizabeth is fine."

"I can understand that desire, Elizabeth. I know Tara is not one for fancy titles," Leliana replied, her mouth twitching up at the corners.

Tara scowled at her friend. "You're damn fucking right Leli, don't you smirk at me. You're not going to get away with that nonsense even if nearly everyone in this room does get the joke."

Pretending as though Tara hadn’t just swore at her Leliana continued, "On that note I should introduce you both to our Ambassador Lady Josephine Montilyet. She's an old friend and the former Antivan ambassador to Orlais. Josie, this is Elizabeth Trevelyan of the Ostwick Trevelyans, Enchanter of the Ostwick Circle and currently known to many as the Herald of Andraste.” She threw a shameless wink at Liz.
The Ambassador inclined her head gracefully. "A pleasure to meet you Lady Elizabeth."

Liz couldn’t be sure but there might have been a sliver of mischief in the Antivan’s eyes. "And you, Lady Josephine."

Leliana cleared her throat. "Now Josie, this is Tara. That is the name she will be going by during her time with the Inquisition. But you should know that she is also known by another name which must not become public knowledge."

"I am guessing from your serious expression that it is a name I will already know?"

"Oh certainly, yes."

While Cullen had stood quietly during the introduction of the Ambassador, he now appeared to be struggling to contain his amusement. The furry collar of his coat quivered as his shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

Tara shot him a glare before sighing. "What Leli is taking a dramatically long time to say is that I'm Katarina Amell. I'm slightly famous for having died killing the Archdemon."

Liz couldn’t help the snort that escaped her. "Oh Maker that's a way to put it. I'm going to tell Varric you said that," she wheezed.

"Don't you dare Liz," Tara shot her a horrified look before jabbing a finger across the table. "You can stop hiding that damn grin too Cullen or I'm telling Varric every ridiculous pre-Blight story about you that I can remember. Also Liz, since you've not been formally introduced - this is Commander Cullen Rutherford who magically grew a sense of humour since I last saw him."

"Lovely to make your acquaintance," Liz spluttered between laughs as Cullen’s hand lifted to rub at the back of his neck, poorly distracting from the embarrassment pinking his cheeks.

Josephine looked around the room at the others' faces trying to gauge whether or not they were pranking her. "I must confess, I am rather confused. You are truly Katarina Amell? The Hero of Ferelden?"

"As I live and breathe," Tara replied. "Again. To be quite honest, I'm still confused about it. I'd explain how it happened if I knew myself."

"I am to assume that everyone here is certain of your identity? It is rather miraculous is it not?"

Tara flushed slightly, casting a slightly nervous look to where the Seeker stood at the far end of the table. "There was a worrying time when I thought Cassandra might run me through for being a demon. And I think there’ll be more testing with Solas and maybe a Templar at some point to answer any lingering questions people might have. But for the most part, the people that know are remarkably accepting of the fact that I'm no longer dead. Which I’m mightily grateful for as you might imagine," she grinned widely at the Ambassador.

"Well I must say it is a great honour to meet you...Tara. I am guessing that part of why you have revealed yourself to me is so that I may better be able to dismiss any rumours about your identity that might arise during your time here?"

"That's certainly the intention yes. While having more than a small handful of people aware of the truth does increase the likelihood of it becoming more widely known, it's necessary that someone with your social clout knows in order to make the idea that the Hero of Ferelden is alive, seem utterly laughable and fit only for bedtime stories."
"You do not wish for the world to know of your return? Ever?"

"I'm not saying never," Tara shrugged. "But I'd like the chance to be my own person for a time, not beholden to the memory of the 20 year old I once was. So few people truly knew Katarina and they definitely don't know Tara. I kind of like that idea."

"Very well, I will endeavour to ensure your identity remains known to only those who you wish to know."

"You have my deepest gratitude Lady Josephine," Tara said with more seriousness than Liz had yet heard.

"Right, now that we have the introductions out of the way, we ought to proceed with the meeting proper," Cullen coughed, straightening up now his face had returned to its normal colour. "Since the Inquisition was declared two days ago we have already had word that the Chantry has denounced us and Elizabeth specifically as heretical."

"I will choose to ignore that remark about geese Tara," Leliana said mildly. "While you may be right that we may be more effective without having to answer to Chantry bureaucracy we are also severely disadvantaged without their support. We desperately need allies and funds in order to stand a chance at tackling the Breach and currently neither the Templars or the Rebel Mages will even consider talking to us."

"So what can we do?" Liz asked, stepping closer to the table which was covered in maps detailing all of Southern Thedas. "How can we start proving ourselves to be an organisation worthy of trust and support?"

Josephine consulted her stack of notes. "The first most pressing issue is the rifts that opened at the same time as the Breach. As you are the only person capable of closing them, there is much demand for you to travel to all the places that we have received word from so far. The nearest region which has reported many rifts and much unrest is the Hinterlands, south of Redcliffe."

"I...should probably not be dropping by Redcliffe any time soon," Tara admitted. "High chance of someone with a decent memory seeing my face and putting the pieces together."

Leliana shook her head, giving Tara a reassuring smile. "You won't be going there just yet. Redcliffe is where Grand Enchanter Fiona is holed up with the Rebel Mages so it's unlikely the Inquisition would be welcome there."

"Grand Enchanter Fiona? She was a Warden once wasn’t she?" Tara scrunched up her face, trying to place the memory.

"What do you know about her?" asked Leliana.

"I know some things from the Fade- Fuck!"

Tara dug a small stitched journal from her belt pouch then somehow plucked a pencil from the mass of hair piled atop her head. She scribbled a brief note onto a page that already had several lines of cramped script on it, before tucking both items away again. Without explanation she continued speaking as if she hadn’t stopped mid-expletive.
“Yeah I’d like to speak to Fiona eventually. But what I know isn't currently relevant to getting the Inquisition off the ground."

"One day you will have to tell me just how much you know of goings-on outside the Fade from your time there," Leliana remarked with a wry smile.

"It'll probably take more than a day and far more alcohol than you think Leli," was Tara’s deadpan response.

Repressing a rather exasperated noise, Cassandra spoke up. "We are getting off-topic. Leliana, what about the message we received from the Crossroads?"

"Ah yes, a Revered Mother Giselle reached out to us, requesting to meet with the Herald - Elizabeth. Considering the rest of the Chantry's views on the Inquisition right now, it is curious that she is willing to speak to us so I feel it would be foolish of us to ignore this opportunity."

Liz folded her arms across her chest, shrugging her shoulders as she said, "I can't imagine how impressive I'm going to be. But I'm certainly happy to at least speak to the Revered Mother, provided she doesn't expect me to be a pious, true believer."

"Do you not believe in the Maker?" asked Cassandra, her voice somewhat incredulous.

"That's a tricky question to answer," Liz replied. “It's not so much that I don't believe in Him; more that I don't have a lot of faith in what the Chantry professes His plan to be for me and my fellow mages. After everything I've lived through over the last few years I've got a rather dim view of the Chantry and the Maker's involvement in my life."

The Seeker nodded. "That is a understandable stance given the upheavals in the Circles. I respect your honesty in this matter Elizabeth."

"Thank you Cassandra," Liz smiled before returning to a more business-like tone. “So how soon should we be heading out to the Hinterlands? Who will be coming with me? How are we fixed for supplies? I'm pretty sure my travel gear is not going to withstand all the use it's surely going to see over the next few months at least."

Allowing herself a small grin at the sudden litany of questions, Leliana explained. "Our scouts are currently on their way to the Hinterlands to get a base camp established, so if we plan for you and your team to leave in a week that should allow enough time to get everyone's gear and equipment sorted. As for who will go with you - I know Cassandra will wish to join you, the roads will likely be dangerous the further from Haven you travel so her sword will be needed."

Tara slung her arm around Liz’s shoulders with a grin. "Obviously I'm coming with you Liz. You're not going off on an adventure to fix everyone's shit without the Queen of Ridiculous Fetch-quests.” She preened as the others laughed. “Someone wants you to find their lost baby goat? I can plan a route that will find not only the goat, but at least three other knick-knacks that someone's-mother's-brother's-second cousin once-removed begged you to hunt down."

Wrapping her own arm around Tara’s waist, Liz looked up fondly at the taller woman. "That's a logistical gift I'm almost envious of - I will be more than happy to have you with me, in fact I insist upon it. You've got the most experience with this kind of nonsense, your presence will be invaluable."

"Not to mention, I'm simply a delight to be around."

Liz expected the laughter from the others, but everyone was startled by the sudden spluttering
coming from Leliana. She appeared to be holding off from collapsing into a full fit of the giggles through sheer willpower alone. It took almost a minute for her to regain some semblance of composure before pointing an accusatory finger at Tara.

"I distinctly recall you threatening Zev with icicles somewhere sensitive when he woke you for watch duty on many occasions," Leliana gasped.

"Why did I end up with the last watch of the night so often then?" Tara retorted. "If you didn't want a grumpy Warden then why wake her several hours before the ass-crack of dawn to sit listening to all you lucky gits who were still happily snoring away?"

She let out a dramatic sigh, slipping her arm off Liz's shoulders. “Alistair was the morning bunny not me, it would've been infuriating if he wasn't so damn adorable when he brought me a cup of tea before we broke camp each morning. Oh fuck--" Snatching up her journal again, Tara scribbled another note, taking a shaky breath as she clutched the book in white-knuckled hands.

Liz was starting to get an idea of what the journal was being used for, her heart ached for her friend and she wished she knew how to help. In a casual voice she said, "So Tara is on first watch every night when we travel, that's fine with me. I'm sure Varric would like to avoid getting iced if possible."

"Surely you cannot intend to bring the dwarf to the Hinterlands Hera- Elizabeth?" Cassandra exclaimed.

"Varric is more than capable of looking after himself in a fight and I'm sure that crossbow of his will come in handy if we run into trouble," Liz pointed out. "Same goes for Solas- having an additional mage is always useful and he knows more offensive magic than I do. I can stick to barriers and healing if Solas and Tara are in the travel party plus Tara can offer close-range support with her daggers."

Cullen gave her a look that was both surprised and impressed. "You appear to have given this quite a bit of thought Elizabeth. Your tactical reasoning is remarkably sound."

"Thank you Commander. While I have no real battle training, I did read a few books on strategy during my time in the Circle. There was a lot of discussion about having diverse array of fighting styles in small units. It makes sense to apply that philosophy where possible even if the books never considered having mages be a part of a military squad."

With a thoughtful nod Cullen remarked, "That might be something we ought to try incorporating into our forces, provided the mages we have within the Inquisition are able to handle the stress." His expression grew distracted as he pondered the idea.

"I think the bigger issue will be getting your normal soldiers to tolerate working alongside the people they've been taught to fear and vilify their whole lives, Cullen," Tara cut in. "A lot of mages may jump at the chance to learn how to defend themselves and survive outside of the Circles without jumping straight to the worst options. But their willingness to integrate will mean nothing if every other person they meet is constantly expecting them to break out in demons or blood magic. Contrary to something very stupid you once said, mages are still just people who deserve the chance to live their lives like everybody else." She raised an eyebrow giving Cullen a very pointed look.

"Maker's Breath, you read Varric's book didn't you?" The blush returned in full force as Cullen’s hand shot to the back of his neck again.
"I had time the last few days while Liz was napping. I am so sorry that you got thrown into that cesspool of a Circle so soon after Kinloch," Tara ducked her head quickly losing the stern expression to a shame that she couldn’t escape.

Cullen glared across the table at her. "Damn it Tara will you stop apologising to me! It's bad enough that you now know how much of an ass I became without you taking the blame onto yourself! It was not your fault, you didn't send me there."

"Doesn't mean I can't feel bad about it," she muttered.

"Well perhaps you'd like to help me train the troops to fight alongside mages?" Cullen offered. "When you return from the Hinterlands of course."

Tara looked up, a tentative smile growing across her face. "I would really like that Cullen."

"I shall start making plans for changes to the training drills then," he replied with a grin.

Exhaling a relieved breath, Liz looked to the leaders of the Inquisition and felt oddly proud to be in such company. "Was there anything else that needed discussing? I don't know about anyone else but I'm starving. Tara you coming to the tavern?"

Shaking off whatever thoughts were clouding her attention, Tara replied "Maker, yes. I think I forgot to eat breakfast."

"I think we have gone over everything we needed your input on Elizabeth," confirmed Leliana with a nod. Dropping her gaze to the maps on the table she continued, "When you get chance please introduce yourself to the Quartermaster, Forge Master and the Creature Researcher. They will likely have requests for items that you might come across while on the road and they will be able to provide assistance in preparing your supplies. Minaeve works from Josie's office next door, Threnn works next to my tent outside the Chantry and Harritt's forge is down next to the training ground."

"Sure thing Leliana, I can speak to at least one of them on my way to the tavern."

"It was lovely to meet you both," Josephine smiled, taking up her quill, no doubt to write up all they had discussed during the meeting.

"And you, Lady Josephine. Hopefully we'll get the chance to talk more later," Liz replied. She met Cullen’s gaze and nodded a silent goodbye before turning to the door.

Tara magically lifted the latch with a flick of her left hand, throwing her right arm around Liz’s shoulders once more.

"Come on, let's start fixing everyone's shit."

Chapter End Notes

Are you sure that was a good idea Leliana?? Think about who you just sent to speak to Threnn and let me know how you think that will go...
*digs a bunker* *braces for the inevitable*

Hopefully the gang will finally get on the road by the end of the next chapter. I'm
never quite sure just how long it'll take me to cover what I think needs to happen but so long as folk don't mind kinda dialogue-heavy chapters then I'll keep churning them out ^_^

Thanks for reading! If you liked this chapter then a kudo or comment would make this Kitty very very happy so please leave me one! Only if you really want to obvs, I'm not gonna twist your arm :P
Chapter Nine - Mages are People. Dangerous People, but still...

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Bugger the schedule, I'm posting this next chapter today. I did want to get it done at the weekend but social obligations stole both evenings from my writing time. Why must I interact with other humans when I want to live on the internet?

There's actually canon dialogue in this, albeit only a little to lead into the more dramatic bit :P

I hope you enjoy, it was pretty fun writing this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Leliana only realised the severity of her mistake, several minutes later when the markers on the war table started clattering to the floor.

* 

The sun was high overhead as Liz and Tara emerged blinking from the dim Chantry. Once their eyes had adjusted to the brightness it was easy to spot the group of people milling around the worktables set up near to the tent that served as the Nightingale’s office. Liz headed towards a woman in scout leathers with the Inquisition emblem stitched onto the jerkin. She had the authoritative stance of being the person in charge; being the only one stood still, not anxiously looking through sheafs of paper and making notes.

An elf in Tranquil robes approached the woman just as they walked outside. Soon they were close enough to hear their conversation. The lifeless, monotone voice of the Tranquil woman had both Liz and Tara shuddering slightly, the ingrained fear of mages in the Circle triggering a shameful sense of revulsion.

Tranquils were the ever-present threat of what could happen to a mage yet they were still treated appallingly by everyone with and without magic. Liz made a mental note to ask Leliana about how many Tranquil had been displaced by the war and where they all were. Someone needed to at least think to check up on them.

“Researcher Minaeve sent me to inquire as to when she will receive the supplies she requested,” the elf intoned. “When may that be?”

“When they're ready. Piss off!” The Inquisition woman snapped shooing the Tranquil away with an irritated flap of her hand.

The Tranquil nodded placidly and walked back to the Chantry. Liz watched her leave until the low utterance of “-damn idiot rabbits” had her head whipping back round to the woman who was very likely the person they’d been told to talk to. She caught sight of Liz, straightening her back, face smoothing into a more neutral expression but still with the hint of a sneer.

Out of the corner of her eye, Liz watched a eerily cold look replace the wry grin she had begun to
consider Tara’s default. Something like fear shivered down her spine, it was not a reassuring sight.

The woman gave Liz a faintly disdainful look up and down, then sighed. “No my lady, I don't know where the other nobles are, you'd be better off asking Lady Montilyet.”

Liz raised her eyebrows at Tara, “I don’t look *that* much like a noble do I? I’ve been living on the road for the last year.”

“Nah, you look like people. I wouldn’t worry about it.” Tara’s voice was deceptively calm but the air began to thrum around her. Did she not realise what she was doing? It wouldn’t help to draw attention to the fact that Tara was a mage by telling her to quit pulling energy.

As Liz tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear distractedly, the mark on her left palm flared, catching the woman’s attention. Her eyes finally lit with recognition.

“Oh! You're her,” she said with no real enthusiasm. “I’m Threnn, Inquisition Quartermaster. I'm doing what I can to supply this mess. If you find what I need to fill one of my requisitions, I'd appreciate you bringing it in.”

“Requisitions?” Liz only half-heard what was said, mind racing through ways to keep anyone from noticing the magic building around them. From how far away could Templars sense magic?

In a deadpan stage-whisper Tara explained, “The time-honoured art of taking any shit that isn’t explicitly claimed by anyone else and saying it’s yours. Or taking shit that *is* someone else’s but saying it’s now yours for the Greater Good of the Cause.” The last bit was said with mimed air quotes.

Liz nodded sagely, flashing a quick wink at her.

Threnn’s lips thinned at Tara’s description. “I'm making this Inquisition run with what we have, but we're not a real army. We're stretched thin on materials, so I've put up requisition lists for anything that could help our people.”

“Right, that makes sense,” Liz smiled blandly. “We're good at working through lists, got the Queen of Fetch Quests on my side. Besides making lists of requisitions—”

“And being rude to both elves and Tranquil” Tara muttered under her breath.

“-What do you do here?” Liz finished, smothering the snort that threatened to crack her serious Herald demeanour. Tara’s running snark commentary was going to get them into trouble before long.

“I make sure the Inquisition troops have food in their bellies and iron in their hands. Both are important. Lots of people expecting us to be heroes, marching all day to fight the demons. Turns out heroes need to dig latrines, just like everyone else.”

“Far more often that you might think,” quipped Tara.

“How does someone end up as Quartermaster for the Inquisition?” Liz asked politely.

“I served Ferelden under Teryn Loghain Mac Tir, best commanding officer this world has ever seen.” Threnn sounded very proud of that declaration even as it damned her.

*Fuck.* The tingling of magic intensified so sharply Liz had to bite back a gasp. Little eddies of snow begin to swirl around their feet and a faint rumble vibrated up through her boots. Tara was stood
rigid beside her, glaring murder at Threnn who was still talking, oblivious to the fury she was stoking.

“-after they all turned on him at Denerim though, there wasn’t much use for people who held that opinion. Queen Anora offered my services to the Inquisition, it was a kindness. She knew I supported her father and got me away from the political garbage.”

As much as Liz wanted to shout down the Quartermaster, one of them had to remain calm, it was only a matter of time before Tara’s temper reached boiling point and Maker only knew how fucked they were at that point. “Loghain Mac Tir betrayed the Grey Wardens and his King.” Liz gritted out.

“Were you there at Ostagar? I was,” Threnn threw out. “King Cailan overextended his position and the Grey Wardens were too late lighting the signal!”

“You try lighting a beacon on time when you have to fight your way up a tower that’s overrun with darkspawn,” said Tara, dangerously quiet.

“What use were the Grey Wardens then, if they couldn’t handle a few darkspawn?” Threnn countered, voice wavering slightly, finally twigging to the precarious position she was in.

“It was a fucking Blight, it was hardly a ‘few darkspawn!’” Tara spat, her hands fisted clenched at her sides as tiny sparks danced across her knuckles.

Drawing on her own mana, Liz readied to cast the strongest barrier she knew. Who she’d cast it on, she wasn’t sure but it was going to be needed all too soon.

Threnn didn’t know when to stop digging a hole. “Blight or not, following the original plan would’ve gotten everyone killed! Teryn Loghain made the right decision!”

The shaking in the ground beneath them increased. The requisitions table beside Threnn rattled and the papers spread across it were flung into the air by an icy blast of wind that lashed out from nowhere. Liz watched in horror as Tara took a step closer to Threnn, her eyes flashing with the same lightning that crackled over her skin.

“Teryn Loghain left his King to die and deprived Ferelden of all but two Grey Wardens,” Tara hissed. “They were the only people who could stop a Blight and Loghain made damn sure they had to fight every step of the way to even stand a chance of defeating the Archdemon without it costing thousands of lives. He declared them traitors. He closed the borders and prevented any Orlesian Wardens coming to their aid. He arranged to have Arl Eamon poisoned by a fucking blood mage to keep him from opposing him in the Landsmeet!” She took a shaky breath before continuing in the same terrifying whisper.

“He allowed Rendon Howe to murder almost all the Couslands as well as the Arl of Denerim. He sold dozens of Denerim elves to Tevinter slavers under the pretense of a plague and locked down the Alienage for months! No matter how strategically justified Loghain might have been in abandoning the battlefield at Ostagar, there is no forgiveness for every other atrocity he brought down on Ferelden during a time when we needed to band together against the Blight. If not for the Wardens, Loghain would have sat idly by while darkspawn consumed Ferelden. He deserved the traitor’s death he got.” Tara’s voice escalated to a shout by the time she finished, chest heaving in her breathless rage.

Threnn stood there, pole-axed, gaping at the wild-eyed woman who’d just verbally eviscerated the memory of the man she idolised. Several times her mouth opened but nothing came out beyond
strangled noises.

For half a moment Liz had hope that the woman would realise how futile it was to keep arguing in the face of such implacable opposition and back off.

Then that hope died.

“Th—that’s not true,” Threnn stammered. “That’s just what that bitch Warden told everyone after she let the Bastard Would-Be-King murder Loghain.”

It felt like all the air crystallised, they were stood in the eye of a tempest about to unleash itself. Tara’s face had stilled into a blank mask that frightened Liz more than the Tranquil. In that brief spell of utter silence, she saw the undeniable evidence that Katarina Amell was a truly dangerous person to anger.

Tara closed her eyes and inhaled slowly. She let the breath go.

Then lashed out her fist, striking Threnn in the jaw with enough force to send the woman sprawling on the ground.

Liz threw a barrier over the Quartermaster, who looked on the edge of consciousness, blood dribbling from a cut on her cheekbone, eyes dazed and unfocused.

Letting out a frustrated scream, Tara slammed both fists against the barrier repeatedly, the shimmering blue magic flickering dimmer with each impact. Panicked, Liz looked around for anyone who could possibly help and by the Maker’s blessing found three-quarters of the Inquisition council stood in front of the Chantry doors.

At her nod, Cullen dashed forward, focusing his will on Tara and beginning to drain the enormous quantity of mana she possessed. Feeling the Templar power tugging on her magic, Tara whipped to face its source, hands lifting as if preparing to launch a spell at her attacker. Cullen paled but did not falter.

A flash of blue streaked across the snow and Solas suddenly appeared next to Tara. In the blink of an eye he’d pressed two fingers wreathed in green magic to her temple and then she crumpled, Solas lifting her into his arms with surprising ease. Before anyone else could think to speak he walked off around the side of the Chantry, carrying Tara away from prying eyes.

Torn between her healer’s instinct to check on Threnn and the desire to make sure her friend was alright, Liz couldn’t move until Cullen approached and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Go to Tara,” he murmured. “She will need you when she wakes up. I will see that the Quartermaster is tended to, and knows to keep her mouth shut in future.” A dark look flits across his face that promises more uncomfortable conversations for Threnn.

“If there is no one else who could fill her post at this time, please don’t dismiss her,” Liz asked. “I wouldn’t want the Inquisition to be weakened by unwise words to the wrong ears.”

Cullen nodded curtly. “I believe the person who will need to be convinced of that will be Leliana and right now I think she’s likely to feel that anything less than dismemberment is too light a punishment. But I will do my best.”

“That’s all I can ask I suppose,” Liz replied with a helpless shrug. “I’m going to find Solas.”

“Maker go with you.”
Solas had carefully laid Tara on top of a wood-pile that had been stacked to form a flat surface and was checking over her with his magic when the Herald came running up to them. She smoothed a hand over Tara’s hair, the distress and worry evident on the younger woman’s face. For all they had only known each other for a few days, Solas could see the bond that had formed between the two women, both of them burdened with responsibilities beyond their years.

“Is she alright?” Elizabeth whispered. “Has all the magic dissipated safely? I’ve never felt a mana pool that deep in any mage I’ve met before.” There was a mix of disbelief and awe in her tone. “Was that a Fade Step you did to get to her without her seeing you?”

Solas nodded, still focusing on his examination. “I was stood near the apothecary’s cabin and only Stepped in when I felt she might do harm to the Commander. It was merely a sleep spell I used although I had to suppress her aura at the same time to keep her from lashing out unconsciously.”

He sighed, feeling an unworthy flicker of envy in his chest. “It has been a very long time since I encountered a mage of Tara’s calibre. I felt the disturbance in the Fade during my meditation and came as quickly as I could. She was simultaneously drawing on three different schools of magic with minimal visible manifestation while maintaining almost perfect control.” He rubbed a hand over his forehead and gave a derisive huff of laughter. “Most mages would have spiralled into a mana imbalance or lost themselves entirely to demons if they were even capable of doing what she did in the first place.”

Elizabeth gasped, “I heard she was powerful in both Storm & Ice magic but the tremors were Force magic weren’t they? They rarely teach that in Circles, could she have learnt it during her time as a Warden?”

Solas shook his head, gesticulating slightly as he spoke. “I would imagine it was one of the various magical skills she acquired during her time in the Fade. There are far less limitations on what a mage can do in that realm with magic and sufficient imagination. Tara may be able to do things most Circle mages would not even recognise as magic - but that is hardly new.”

His lip curled up into a sneer. “Mages in communities like the Chasind and Avvar use their power in ways wholly unknown to the Chantry which often leads to misunderstandings and unnecessary fear.”

“I know I’m eager to know what unusual magics she’s learnt, to the void with the Chantry and their paranoia of the unknown,” Elizabeth grinned.

“As am I,” Solas agreed. “Perhaps she will be amenable to giving us a demonstration - away from Haven of course.” Too much magical excitement in the village would cause the clerics to have a conniption.

Elizabeth nodded vigorously. “I’ll ask her once we’re on the road. Oh, speaking of travelling, would you be willing to join us on a trip to the Hinterlands? There’s a Chantry mother who has requested to speak to the Herald,” she paused, wrinkling her nose. “-please only call me that if there’s fancy folk who need to hear it, Liz or Elizabeth is preferred the rest of the time.”

She took a breath, “So I need to find this Mother Giselle. There’s also many rifts that need closing as well as violent unrest between the rogue mages and templars in the region. I could use another mage with offensive skills offset my mainly defensive spells. What do you think?”

With a polite incline of his head Solas replied, “I would be happy to accompany you Elizabeth. I
am guessing that Tara will be part of the group?”

“As well as Cassandra and Varric, if he’s willing to come along.”

“Oh I am sure he would hate to miss an opportunity to be amidst the action and adventure,” Solas chuckled.

“Very true, I think it would be a safe bet that his next book is going to heavily feature the Inquisition, we can hardly deny him the first-hand experience of it all.”

Satisfied that his rather haphazard manner of subduing Tara hadn’t done her any noticeable physical harm Solas unravelled the spell keeping her magic restrained. It would be better to move her somewhere quieter before waking her up again, it would entirely defeat the purpose of removing her from the altercation if she had to walk past the Quartermaster in order to return to her cabin.

Prompted by that thought, Solas turned to Elizabeth. “If I might ask, Tara mentioned when we met that it takes a particularly determined sort of person to make her truly angry. I would say that today was at least a clear loss of temper if not a full expression of rage. What did the unfortunate Quartermaster say to trigger such a response?”

Elizabeth sighed heavily, dragging a hand through her hair. “Well, she started off poorly by calling a Tranquil Elf an ‘idiot rabbit’ in our hearing. Then she made the extremely unwise choice to praise Loghain Mac Tir as the best commanding officer the world had ever known.”

Solas blinked. “Ah, I see. Unwise indeed. I presume that was not sufficient provocation for Tara to assault her?”

“Oh no, it got much worse. There was the accusation that King Cailan was too ambitious at Ostagar and that the Grey Wardens were too late lighting the signal that was meant to tell Loghain to bring the reinforcements.”

“She told the Hero of Ferelden that it was her fault the battle of Ostagar was lost to her face and that wasn’t the worst thing she could have said??” Solas said, eyebrows shooting up.

“I wish it was,” Elizabeth lamented, pinching the bridge of her nose and exhaling. “Let’s just cut to the chase. Threnn swore that every awful thing Tara said that Loghain did that year, was in fact a lie cooked up by the ‘Bitch Warden after she let the Bastard Would-Be-King murder him.’”

“I am quite surprised the Quartermaster still lives after such a declaration. I certainly would not have forgiven an insult so vile,” Solas stated after several seconds of stunned silence.

“I feared for a moment that Tara was going to scorch her where she stood,” admitted Elizabeth, laughing nervously. “It was a near miss for sure. I’m also half-certain that Tara only threw the punch because Threnn insulted Alistair, not for calling her a bitch by proxy. She strikes me as the kind of person who shrugs off almost all personal attacks as jokes but won't tolerate those she loves to be maligned whether they are present or not.”

“An admirable quality, if somewhat unpredictable for others to navigate in situations such as this,” Solas remarked with a slightly crooked smile.

“While I’m almost disappointed that Threnn will not understand how badly she erred today, I imagine Tara would have regretted it more if we hadn’t stopped her.” Elizabeth frowned, her expression bearing much of the same frustration Solas felt.
The Elvhen had a saying for people like the Quartermaster - *Dirth’ala ma*. May she learn the error of her ignorance and come to understand her good fortune in still being in possession of her life. While Solas would not have thought less of Tara had she killed the human, he found himself respecting her more for the mercy she’d shown to someone so utterly undeserving of it.

Hers was a rare soul indeed, to keep surprising him at every turn. Solas was almost envious of the former Warden Mage for having experienced things he could literally only dream about. But he had hope that Tara’s thirst for knowledge would compel her to share what she knew with him and learn more from him in return.

Provided that Tara could withstand the pressures of walking in the Waking World once more.

Chapter End Notes

Should I be slightly concerned that I'm nearly 30k into this story and we've not even made it to the Hinterlands yet??

Ah I'll worry about that if we've not made it to Adamant before 2020 :P

The dash of Elvhen I used was taken from Project Elvhen by FenxShiral - I haven't had chance to properly look through everything that is available but my language-loving self is super excited to read it all at some point even if I've got no place to use most of it yet XD

Let me know what you think of the chapter, the story, whatever you like, I'm a chatty Kitty in the comments ^_^

Until next time folks!
Liz wasn’t quite sure how long she’d been sat with her head in her hands when Varric wandered up to her cabin and cleared his throat. Lifting her head slowly she propped her chin on the tops of her fists and stared blankly at the dwarf until he decided to finally speak.

"So...I hear they’re calling you the Herald of Andraste?"

"Oh Maker not you too,” Liz groaned, dragging her hands over her face and burying them in her hair. “At least Tara knows better than to refer to me by a title I never asked for.” There was more than little bitterness in her voice.

Varric winced. “Ouch, okay so we’re not using the title then.”

Sighing, Liz gestured for Varric to sit next to her on the cabin steps. “I can tolerate it if it’s for official situations or whatever, but not on a daily basis from people I’d like to call friends eventually.”

"Fair enough, kid. I got no problem with coming up with a better nickname for you,” Varric shrugged before his expression shifted to something like concern. “Say, how are you holding up? You’ve had a pretty rough week all things considered, most people would have some serious whiplash going from being Prime Suspect for the Murder of the Divine to the supposed Herald of Andraste - sent to save us all from the Breach.” He made little dramatic hand waves as he said it, making Liz giggle.

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falls within my skill set. I’m no Hero.”

Varric pointedly ignored Liz’s self-deprecation as he remarked, "I bet Sparky is glad only a handful of people know who she is so she doesn't have to deal with all that shit. Again."

"Yes and I'll not spoil that peace for her,” Liz stated. She then sighed heavily. “Although after the incident this morning, who the void knows if that peace hasn’t already been shattered."

What would it do Tara if the secret got out so quickly? She had barely even had time to adjust to wearing shoes let alone the emotional burden of simply being alive. If anyone figured out why the strange mercenary woman had gotten so furious at the Quartermaster for talking about Ostagar then it would likely not take long for the news to spread if Leliana didn’t stop it. The worry of hurting her new friend was a dull ache in her chest.

Varric’s dry drawl cut through her ruminations. “Ah. Yes. I did hear a whisper or two of a commotion up outside the Chantry earlier. What happened?”


“Shit, say no more,” Varric let out a low whistle. “I’m guessing Threnn was lucky to only be walking away with bruises? I did wonder why Curly was quick-marching her through the village as if he was about to hold a court-marshal.”

“It could have been a lot worse than it was.” Liz knew it could have been catastrophically worse if any Templars other than Cullen had been close enough to sense what Tara was doing. “I just stood there like an idiot, not doing anything to calm Tara down. It took Cullen and Solas stepping in to diffuse the situation.” She lifted her feet to a higher step and wrapped her arms around her knees, hiding her face from Varric’s shrewd gaze.

“Where is she now? I was guessing there had to be a reason you’re sat on your porch looking miserable.” And of course the dwarf instantly cuts to the heart of the problem.

“I don’t know Varric,” Liz said plaintively. “We carried her back here, undid the sleep spell Solas put on her and then I left to go fetch some food for us. I came back to find her gone and just a note saying she ‘Needed to get some air. Be back later.’”

She wrinkled her nose, shaking her head. “Leliana said not to worry - apparently Tara likes to be alone for a while when she needs to calm down.”

The spymaster was a little startled when Liz had ran into her tent, breathlessly demanding to know if she’d seen Tara. The long, quiet look Leliana gave her felt heavy, as if Liz was being considered and judged by some unfathomable standard. It had been impossible to tell what Leliana was thinking as she’d replied, but Liz thought that she didn’t look quite as forbidding as she did before.

Varric tilted his head to one side. “Well, if the Nightingale isn’t concerned, I’d say you’ll be alright just getting on with whatever else you had planned for today. Tara’s a big, strong woman, she can handle herself.”

“I know, I just- fuck!” Liz knocked her forehead against her knees a few times before continuing. “It’s my fault she was even there and I asked Threnn about how she ended up in Haven.”

“Did you force Threnn to start spouting her dubious opinions to people she’d never met before? Did you force Tara to come with you to speak to her?” Varric sounded so serious that Liz turned to face him.
“Er, no?”

“Then it wasn’t your fault,” Varric replied. “Simple as that. Both Tara and Threnn had a choice about what they said or did and you had no hand in what that choice was for either of them.” His voice softened. “Something you’re gonna learn very quickly once this Inquisition starts gaining momentum, is that you only have the power to control the words and actions of just one person and that is you and no one else. Blaming yourself for shit other people did all by themselves without any influence from you is a very easy way to lose yourself completely.”

Liz felt the urge to ask, “Did Hawke ever blame himself for stuff he couldn’t fix?”

“Of course he fucking did,” Varric laughed. “Carver’s death, Leandra’s death, heck I reckon on really bad days he even blamed himself for his father’s death. Or at least felt guilty that he wasn’t able to live up to the imaginary expectations of Malcolm Hawke in keeping his family safe once he was gone.” Varric sighed. “However Hawke isn’t you. It usually took a few flagons of the fucking vile piss-water Corff flogged as ale to have Garrett feeling much of anything beyond a desire to have a laugh, but deep down under all the bluff and sarcasm he does carry the weight of what he sees as his failures.”

“So what do I do when I fail?” It was a soft, desperate whisper, Liz needed someone to reassure her, she was not delusional enough to believe it wasn’t an inevitability.

“You find the way to deal with that failure which helps you move on. Get blind-drunk like Garrett, go blast small rodents with magic like Tara or find another outlet that doesn’t leave you stewing in your own head.” Varric poked her in the temple with a calloused finger and smiled as he said it.

“When I was a little girl I used to tell Henry all my worries, then he’d hug me and tell me everything was going to be alright.” Her eyes pricked as she wrestled back the wave of longing at speaking the memory aloud.

“I’m guessing Henry wasn’t your cat?” Liz could hear the the careful tone in Varric’s voice, not wanting to barrel through a sensitive topic with jokes.

“No, he’s my twin,” Liz smiled. “Younger by twenty minutes despite what he likes to tell people.”

Chuckling, Varric said, “That sounds like what Hawke says his brother Carver used to be like. Always miffed to be the baby of the family so he’d tell everyone he met that he was actually the oldest of him and Bethy.” He paused to take a breath, “So… is Henry…”

“Alive?” Liz finished for him. “Yes, I was very lucky in that I was only separated from him by distance and not death. But it has been sixteen years since I’ve seen Henry and we had no contact at all from the day I was taken to the Circle until last year when Ostwick fell and I was finally able to send him a letter.”

She’d sobbed for nearly an hour when she’d received Henry’s reply, it had been like finding the piece of herself she hadn’t known was lost for so long. The loneliness of all her years locked in the Circle had melted away reading her brother’s letters. Maker she needed to check they were still safe in her packs.

“Shit that’s rough. Where is he now?” Varric asked.

“He was in Denerim last time I wrote to him, letting him know I was going to the Conclave.” Liz bit her lip, “I really should tell him I’m still alive, I can’t imagine the stories that are reaching Denerim are going to be good ones.”
Varric raised his eyebrows and gave her a crooked smile. “I’d maybe get on with sending that letter otherwise we’re going to have another Trevelyan barrelling into Haven looking for a sister he last saw as a child.”

Liz clapped her hand over her mouth as the realisation hit her. “Oh Maker you’re right. I have no clue what my own twin even looks like anymore! He could be taller than me, or have redder hair. Void take me I’ll be so annoyed if he ended up really tall, I was the taller of the two of us when we were ten.” She pouted, prompting a loud bark of laughter from Varric.

“I think it’ll be a damn funny sight to see you and your brother reunited. Then afterwards you can off-load whatever worries you’ve not been able to tell him for fifteen years and hope his head doesn’t explode.”

“We’ve already caught up on a lot through letters over the last few months,” Liz said with a grin. “Cost a fair bit in messengers and paper though.”

“That’s good to hear, I was almost worried for second there.” Varric said it like he was joking but Liz was beginning to sense that for all his dry quips and feigned nonchalance, he actually cared quite a bit underneath.

Standing up from her tightly furled seating position, Liz stretched her arms over her head, groaning at the pops running down her spine. “I should probably get moving. I have several people I’m meant to meet before we leave for the Hinterlands at the end of the week.”

“Hitting the road to start saving the world?” Varric levered himself back to his feet.

“Something like that maybe,” Liz shrugged. “I don’t suppose you’d fancy coming with us? Bianca might like to get out of Haven.”

Varric grinned at her offer. “Sure! She’s always game for an adventure so I’d hate to disappoint her.”

“Fantastic, I’m sure you’re far more knowledgeable about what stuff you need to do before going off on a journey. I’ll see you later at the tavern?” Liz gave him a brief wave before heading off to find the forge. She needed to get a new staff since Maker alone knows what happened to her last one.

“Absolutely kid,” Varric called after her.

That better not stick as a nickname.

*

Cullen hadn’t planned on still being awake when the midnight bell rang out softly from the watch tower that night. He didn’t intend to sit working until the small hours of the morning most nights but it invariably kept happening. Headaches and dark dreams were hardly conducive to restful nights so it made sense that he’d use the time for something productive rather than just stare up at the tent ceiling.

He’d at least gotten some progress made on the new training programs for when they’d start bringing in mages to join the regular soldiers. It might be several weeks before they’d be able to begin the training since Tara would be away in the Hinterlands with the Herald but Cullen was surprised to find himself looking forward to seeing how such an experiment would work. Would his recruits be open to working alongside mages? Could Tara help at least some of them overcome the inherent distrust of magic that the Chantry had instilled in them? Time would tell, he supposed.
“Ser?” A runner poked her head inside the tent flap.

“Yes? What is it?” Cullen looked up from the papers on his desk. A message coming in at this time of night wasn’t going to be good news.

“Watch Captain reports there’s some strange light flickering on the other side of the lake.”

“Do we know what’s causing it? Is it a threat?” Standing up, Cullen picked up his sword to buckle it back around his waist.

The runner shook her head. “No Ser, the Nightingale requests that you bring her in however.”

“Her? Who is out— never mind, I know who it is. I’ll go fetch her. Did Sister Leliana have any other requests?”

“She, er said to tell her ‘Come see me when you’re done cooking nugs and cursing.’ I’m hoping that make more sense to you ser?”

Cullen coughed to disguise the laugh that bubbled up in his throat. “Not particularly but I’m sure the message will make sense to it’s recipient. Thank you, you may go.”

With a quick salute, the runner ducked out of the tent and disappeared into the night. Cullen leaned over his desk to pinch out the candle before making his way outside. Haven was far more peaceful at this hour, Cullen could actually walk through the village without seeing another soul nor being pulled one way or another to fix an issue that someone brought to his attention. Not that he minded helping but sometimes it was just satisfying to be alone with his thoughts without interruption for a while.

Picking his way through the rows of tents on the training ground, Cullen ambled slowly to the edge of the frozen lake and gazed across into the darkness. They were faint and oddly obscured but crackles of purple light danced in the air on the opposite bank. Without knowing that there was actually a woman sat there conjuring the sparks Cullen could understand why the Watch would have thought it was something sinister. Thank the Maker, Leliana had kept track of where Tara was all day or they might have woken the entire village in alarm.

It took him a few minutes to stomp his way through the snow around the lake’s edge to the short pier where Tara was probably sat. While he’d heard that the water was frozen solid and safe to walk on, he didn’t wish to test that claim while wearing full armour in the middle of the night.

Once he was close enough to make out Tara’s silhouette, he was struck by the realisation that the damn fool woman was sat at the end of the pier with her bare feet dangling out over the lake. To make matters worse she wore only a short-sleeved tunic with no other kind of shirt or coat to cover her arms.

“Maker’s breath Tara, how are you not cold?!” Cullen hissed, startling both himself and Tara with the sudden noise.

The lightning in her hands sparked brighter as she jolted in surprise but settled quickly once she’d recognised who it was. Heaving out a gasp, Tara clapped a hand to her chest.

“Fucking hell Cullen, I didn’t want to know what it’d feel like to have my heart try to climb out my chest!” Her voice was ragged and hoarse, had she been crying out here? He wished he’d thought to bring a waterskin or something for her.

“I’m sorry,” Cullen muttered, hurrying to walk round to the pier so he wasn’t talking up at her from
Tara bent forward over the edge of the pier to examine her feet. She wriggled her toes vigourously before straightening up. “Void if I know. I can still feel them fine and I don’t feel cold. But then I don’t remember if I used to feel the cold before, after all I am an ice mage.”

“Very true,” Cullen chuckled. He came to a stop next to Tara and gestured awkwardly at the space beside her. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“Feel free,” she replied with a shrug. “What brings you out here to my frosty perch, Commander?”

Lowering himself to sit on the edge of the wooden pier was a delicate balance of strength and dexterity to ensure he didn’t topple face-first down onto the ice. He winced as his armour clattered loudly and Tara smothered a giggle. This close the lightning still flickering on Tara’s arms was a little disconcerting as he wasn’t sure if being sat in so much metal was the best idea he’d ever had.

Cullen glanced over at Tara, trying to search her face for any sign of the fury that had been present when he’d faced her that morning. In the meagre light it was hard to know if her eyes were reddened, but her expression was tight as though she was exerting energy to keep it neutral.

“If you must know, I’m here because you’re scaring my Watch Captain,” he teased. “Strange lights floating out in the dark tend to make ordinary people nervous.”

“Oh shit, it’s nighttime?” Tara snuffed out the sparks and summoned a softer yellow light that she cupped between her palms on her lap. “Sorry I didn’t mean to scare folk.”

Cullen frowned. “Didn’t you notice the light disappearing? You’ve been out here nearly twelve hours.”

“I have?” Tara’s brow furrowed before her mouth dropped open. “Oh Maker, that’ll explain why I feel so shaky, I’ve not eaten all day. I was going to get lunch with Liz before… you know, everything went to shit.” Bitterness seeped into her voice as she hissed the last word.

“Tara…” Cullen trailed off, unsure of what words he could even say in this situation that wouldn’t be a hypocrisy. He could hardly scold her for forgetting to eat or take care of herself, when he himself couldn’t recall if he actually ate dinner that evening. Rubbing his hand over the back of his neck he sighed, “If it helps at all, I don’t blame you for how you reacted. You were far more restrained than most might have been when faced with Threnn.”

“Not restrained enough,” she snapped, glaring down at her hands, fighting the urge to clench them into fists. “I could’ve killed both her and you. That you’re even coming near me after what I nearly did is astonishing.”

“You didn’t hurt me Tara,” Cullen said softly. He itched to offer some kind of comfort to her but couldn’t think what she’d want or accept while she was in this state of mind.

“I wanted to, in that moment,” Tara said coldly. “I felt a templar trying to drain my magic and I was going to make that templar regret it. You should be grateful that Solas stepped in before I went too far.”

She twisted to speak directly to his face, eyes hard and voice near taunting. “I was your worst nightmare Cullen, an out-of-control mage willing to use my power to hurt someone. You shouldn’t be out here feeling worried that I forgot my boots and may have froze my stupid fucking toes, you should be demanding that I get tossed back in those mouldy cells beneath the chantry until I’m not
a danger to anyone!”

Sparks were gathering over her skin again, tracing back and forth over the silver scars that branched all the way from the tips of her fingers up to her upper arms. Tara’s anger was not truly aimed at him, she was baiting him into arguing with her, agreeing with her self-loathing condemnation. She wanted him to be angry at her.

Midnight was not the fucking time for this conversation and Cullen was positive that he was not the person who needed to handle it with Tara. A sharp pulse of a headache lanced through his temple and he rubbed a shaking hand over his eyes.

Heaving a sigh of resignation, Cullen said, “I’m out here, freezing my stupid bloody toes off, because Leliana asked me to fetch you - with the additional request that you go see her once, and I quote ‘You’ve finished cooking nugs and cursing.’ I’d like to humbly request that we finish this fight you’re starting another time, when we’re both fed and well-rested.” Hauling himself to his feet, he folded his arms as he looked down at Tara.

The antagonistic energy had drained from her body almost as quickly as it had bubbled up, shoulders slumping forward and hands dropping back into her lap, the sparks dying away to fading bright spots in his vision. Her voice was much softer when she spoke again.

“I suppose I ought to be glad Leli didn’t come herself or she’d be dragging me back by my ear. She lost patience with my coping strategies after I nearly roasted her dear Schmooples one time. Is she angry at me?”

“I don’t know,” Cullen replied honestly. He never presumed to know the Nightingale’s mood. “But I imagine Elizabeth is going to be worried, she doesn’t know your habits like Leliana does.”

Apparently mentioning Elizabeth was the right choice. Tara’s posture straightened and she took a few deep breaths to steady herself. Rather than stand she pushed herself forward off the pier to land lightly on the frozen lake. Cullen bit back a curse as she looked up and gave him an all too familiar grin.

“You know, I thought I was going to have to send you to your room like I frequently had to back at the Circle,” he remarked dryly.

Tara snorted. “Oh please, you could barely look at me whenever you caught me kissing Neria in the library. It’s hardly much of a threat.”

“Let’s not test that theory tonight, shall we?” Cullen raised an eyebrow and prayed he wasn’t blushing at the memory now rising to the surface. “I think you might not like the outcome Tara. I’m no longer so intimidated by you that I won’t physically carry you back into the village.” He wasn’t as sure as he sounded.

“Is that so?” Tara smirked, likely aware of his bravado. “Well because you asked so nicely…” Giving him a jaunty wiggle of her fingers, Tara spun to face Haven and in a violet flash of magic Fade-Stepped off the lake out of sight entirely.

Leaving Cullen stood on the pier in the dark like a Maker-damned fool.
No seriously I promise we will be leaving for the Hinterlands next chapter (Stop
laughing at me I mean it).

I'm hoping that once I get these damn idiots and their emotions on the road that we can
start getting somewhere with the PLOT. Maker willing.

As always thank you so much for reading, any kudos & comments are greatly
appreciated ^_^

Also I updated Journal of a Once Dead Warden on Friday so if you want to see
snippets of what's going on in Tara's head then go check that out :D
Chapter Eleven - We're Off to See the Hinterlands! (finally)

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Ohhhh my god guys, I am so sorry that it's been nearly 3 weeks since I last posted! This damn chapter was determined to kill my brain so it's extra long to make up for the delay.

I owe Lady_Savannah 10,000 cookies for beta-ing this chapter and cheerleading me through the half dozen existential crises I had trying to get it done. Seriously, thank you <3 Also as it's her birthday tomorrow I think y'all should go give Through Fire or Fury a read as it's as wonderful as she is ^_^

Now I hope you enjoy this chapter, and pray it doesn't take me another 3 weeks to write the next one!

Stepping from the lake all the way to the cabin door left Tara somewhat light-headed but considering what Cullen had said about how long she’d been outside Haven it was to be expected. It was going to cause her a lot of trouble if she forgot to eat once they were on the road, she’d be in no condition to fight without anything to fuel her body. Fade energy could only get her so far.

Pressing her palm to the cabin door, Tara sought the bolts that Liz had secured for the night with her magic. Tickling the metal with just enough power to wiggle the bolts back she unlocked the door, slipping inside and shutting it softly behind her.

The fire in the hearth between their beds was banked and giving off just enough glowing light to find her way across the room without tripping. Tara tiptoed over to Liz’s bed, grinning at the sight of the younger woman curled up with the blankets tucked just under her chin, the loose waves of her hair forming an almost blood-red halo across the pillow.

A handful of freckles were scattered across the bridge of her nose, the firelight bringing them out against her sun-kissed complexion. Lost in sleep, Liz looked barely old enough to be Harrowed, let alone the Herald of Andraste. Not for the first time Tara wished that the sole burden of closing these Maker-forsaken rifts hadn’t fallen on such gentle shoulders. She could only hope that Liz’s instinct to heal wouldn’t be drained dry by the demands of the Inquisition.

Liz’s breath hitched and Tara froze. She crouched down so she wasn’t looming over the bed as Liz woke, face twitching before her eyes fluttered open. Stormy blue eyes drowsily found Tara and brightened with recognition.

“You came back,” Liz mumbled, a sleepy smile flashing over her lips.

“I’m sorry if I worried you, I lost track of time,” Tara whispered grinning sheepishly. “I was just sent to bed by our resident ex-Templar, I think I was scaring the watch.”

A confused expression wrinkled between Liz’s brows, still half-asleep. “Wandering after curfew?”
Chuckling at Liz’s slightly anxious pout, Tara shook her head. “Not quite but close enough. We’re a long way from the Circles - for which I’m intensely grateful - yet I still miss some things about living there.”

Sighing, Tara raked her hand through her hair, fingers snagging on several snarls that had formed while she wasn’t paying attention. For a brief moment she contemplated cutting her hair back to her earlobes like when she was an apprentice; it’d be easier to manage but it was another thing that could give away her secret. She had to let it grow. He’d never seen her with long hair…

“Can I sleep with you?” Tara asked Liz abruptly.

It took a moment for the question to sink through Liz’s sleep-fogged mind, her body jerking fully awake as her face blanked. Hands clutching the blankets to her chest she stammered, “I-I don’t… I’ve never— I don’t want that with…anyone.” Her eyes were round with something almost like fear.

Tara’s stomach lurched and her mouth went dry. “Oh Maker, no I didn’t mean it like that!” She began to reach out to soothe Liz but snatched her hand back. “I only meant sleep as in literally - I just… didn’t want to be alone.” She slumped onto her knees, dropping her head into her hands as she took shuddering breath. “Never mind, I’ll let you get back to sleep.”

She heaved herself to her feet, half-unsure whether she should even sleep in the cabin or find somewhere else to hide for the rest of the night. As she turned to head for the door a hand grabbed her wrist.

“Wait, please.” Liz said softly, pulling Tara gently back towards the bed. “I’m sorry, you just surprised me.”

Tara gave a strangled laugh. “That’s what I get for blurting out a thought without taking a second to consider how it will sound. I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable Liz, I’m terribly out of practice at having friends and speaking to corporeal people it seems.”

Liz smiled at Tara, slipping her hand down to grip Tara’s and squeezing. “You didn’t make me feel uncomfortable, I promise. It’s been quite a number of years since I’ve had a friend share my bed. When I was an apprentice everyone was hopping in and out of each other’s pallets at night - whether for gossip, comfort or more…intimate acts. I’m guessing it was the same at Kinloch?”

Moving to perch on the edge of the bed Tara nodded. “During winter I don’t think anyone slept alone, Ferelden winters are fucking freezing and out in a stone tower in the middle of a lake there was nothing to insulate us from the wind. I don’t tend the feel the cold much but still, you get used to having another person close by while you sleep.” Laughing softly she added. “I won’t lie though, I did do my fair share of bed-hopping for any and all of those reasons you mentioned when I was an apprentice.”

Liz rolled her eyes, smirking at Tara. She shuffled across the bed towards the wall, flipping back the blankets on the empty side before gesturing grandly. “While it’s not every day I get the chance to have the Hero of Ferelden in my bed, the most I can give is some cuddles. Come on you need to sleep some time before dawn.”

Hesitating for a few heartbeats, Tara crawled up the bed and slipped beneath the blankets. As she rearranged the covers, she stretched out her legs, accidentally brushing her feet against Liz’s, startling a yelp from the other woman.

“Maker’s balls! Why the void are your feet so cold?”
“I may have forgotten to put my boots back on when I ran off for my little jaunt in the snow?” Tara admitted, hiding her blush by yanking the blankets right up to her eyes.

Liz shot upright, her face aghast. “Tara! Please tell me you weren’t out there all that time dressed as you are now. How are you not half-dead with hypothermia? I need to check your toes aren’t frost-bitten.” Green magic flared around her fingertips as she lunged forward to where Tara’s feet almost hung over the end of the bed.

“I’d hate to lie to you this early into our friendship,” Tara said, her mouth still muffled so Liz couldn’t see the smirk on her lips at that moment.

Shooting Tara a stern glare, Liz spent a minute checking her over with her magic. A baffled expression took over her face, growing ever more confused as she found nothing to heal. Not even the slightest chill. Swivelling her head she stared at Tara, who merely shrugged in response.

“This makes no sense,” Liz said, slowly laying back down next to Tara, her frown still in place. “Haven’t you felt cold at all today?”

Rolling onto her side Tara pursed her lips as she considered what she could remember of the time she spent roaming outside Haven, which in all honesty wasn’t much. There was a blackened boulder that withstood all the lightning she could summon before she exhausted her mana. She’d picked another pile of elfroot and other herbs and left them on the porch of the lone cabin out near the livestock enclosure. But had she felt anything beyond the chaos in her own mind?

“I don’t think my body has re-learnt that it needs to tell me when I’m on the verge of harming myself through neglect,” Tara sighed. “It took Cullen asking me when I last ate to realise I was fucking starving. I’m also slightly concerned that I might be able to see in the dark because I never fucking noticed that it was night!”

Liz snorted, her body shaking with laughter. “You know that bizarrely doesn’t surprise me? After every oddity you’ve thrown out so far, the idea that your eyes simply adjusted to deal with the change of light makes some strange kind of sense. In the Fade there’s no sunlight, and your physical form didn’t exist there so your soul could probably see fine in whatever light it had. It stands to reason that adaptation stayed with you when you crossed back over. It would be fascinating to test properly.”

Perhaps not tonight though,” Tara replied, a yawn catching her off-guard as all the physical exhaustion she’d been pushing down past all the other things on her mind finally reasserted itself. Her eyes thudded closed. She listened as Liz got herself comfy, still facing her she realised from the light breaths tickling her cheeks.

It was a warm silence with the soft crackling of the banked fire behind them. Tara could feel her heart begin to slow as sleep came rushing up to claim her. A low noise came from Liz, a swallow as though she meant to say something. Digging in against the tide of oblivion, Tara peeled one eye back open.

Liz was looking at her, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. Taking a shallow breath she asked, “Are you all right? Today was…intense, for you in particular. Leliana said that you tended to prefer being alone when you needed to calm down?”

“I am calmer now,” Tara mumbled, finding it easier to close her eyes as she spoke. “But am I all right? I don’t know. There’s so many different emotions that keep surging inside me that it’s a struggle to keep them all straight in my mind. Now that I’m at less risk of attracting demons I don’t have to keep everything suppressed but Maker knows I don’t have a fucking clue how to process
any of this mess.”

“What did you do in the Fade to keep yourself safe?” There was a restrained curiosity in Liz’s voice, she desperately wanted to know but also knew that they both needed to sleep.

“Something I’m not sure that I can do on this side of the Veil. At least not until my connection to the Fade kicks back in. But it was only a sort of aura shield, to keep my emotions from bleeding out into the Fade all the time. It just meant that they were all bottled up inside my head so I could shove them back where they didn’t bother me. I never bothered trying to make sense of any of it.”

“When was the last time anything made sense?” Liz said half-joking, jaw cracking around a yawn.

Tara was teetering on the edge of sleep and not fully conscious of what came tumbling from her lips. “Fuck, I dunno maybe Haring 9:29? Before my Harrowing, before my best friend decided blood magic was the solution to his love life problems and got me conscripted into the Wardens as an alternative to Tranquillity. Before the fucking Archdemon became my fucking problem to fix.”

A sharp inhale. A sad, gentle voice. “You never had the chance to recover from the Blight, did you?”

“Sometimes I’m not sure if it ever ended for me…”

Tara didn’t hear the quiet snifflie from the woman lying next to her as sleep finally won its battle against her will. But the warmth was a comfort she’d hadn’t felt in far too long, she could almost pretend…

* * *

The next morning Tara woke to find she had cuddled herself along Liz’s back during the night. Her arm had crept around Liz’s middle while her head was nestled against her shoulder, their hair intermingling on the pillow. Tara froze, trying to resist launching herself from the bed. Then low chuckles began to shake Liz’s body in her arms.

“I did wonder what you’d do when you realised,” Liz said, fully awake and highly amused. “I did try to carefully extract myself but you have quite the strong-arm even while asleep. But it was hardly a nightmare to be trapped in bed for a little longer, I don’t get a lot of time to relax and think about nothing these days.”

Tara gave Liz a final squeeze before untangling herself and putting a bit of space between them. “I had clearly forgotten that I used to be a cuddler when bed-sharing,” she grinned. “Although it’s rather novel to be the one curled around someone else, you’re so delightfully tiny.”

Sticking out her tongue, Liz shoved Tara hard enough to push her to the edge of the bed. She flailed her arms for a moment before toppling onto the floor with a loud thud and a curse. Looking up from her new vantage point, Tara waited until Liz appeared above her with a very smug look on her face. Summoning a burst of magic Tara flicked a hastily frozen mass of snow at Liz’s nose.

The strangled yelp that exploded from her sent Tara into a fit of giggles as she rolled further from the bed to avoid retaliation. It took several minutes of near-breathless laughter and muscle cramps to regain any kind of composure. Seeing Liz’s disgruntled expression as Tara hauled herself upright almost undid her hard work.
She crossed the room to splash water on her face from the wash basin beneath one of the narrow windows. It was difficult to judge from the light outside what time it was, but the noise coming from the village made it likely that it was at least a few hours after dawn. Remembering Cullen’s other request from last night she sighed.

“I need to go speak to Leliana,” Tara announced spinning around just as Liz quickly yanked a shirt down over her stomach. “Our illustrious Spymaster was having people keep an eye on me yesterday and had Cullen tell me to go see her once I’d finished ‘cooking nugs and cursing’. Ugh I feel like I’m being summoned to see Irving except Leli actually scares me when she’s in a snit.” Dragging her fingers through her tangled hair she attempted to make it presentable.

Liz finished dressing before asking, “Is that what you were doing out there? *Cooking* nugs?”

“Maker no, I’m not that heartless,” Tara replied. “I did thoroughly roast a boulder with lightning though. I do remember what happened the last time I accidentally blasted a nug and Leli found out.” She rubbed her ear at the phantom twinge of pain. “I don’t want to find an angry Schmooples sneaking into the cabin late at night to take nibbles of my flesh.”

“No, we certainly don’t want that,” Liz giggled as she braided back the unruly waves of her hair. “Tell you what, you go get your scolding from Leliana while I fetch us some breakfast from the tavern. Then we can spend the rest of the day making a start on what stuff we’ll need to take to the Hinterlands. Sound good?”

Tara stretched her arms above her head, enjoying the feeling of her spine crackling back into alignment. “I suppose. I’ve got to get it over with sooner rather than later. Do I look sufficiently calm and not liable to burst out in magic?” She swept her arms down gesturing at herself for Liz’s opinion.

Cocking her head to one side, Liz tapped her chin as she assessed Tara. Her gaze stopped short as she reached Tara’s feet. Her eyebrows lifted and the corner of her mouth quirked up.

“Shoes,” she deadpanned.

Tara looked down. “Fuck a nug!”

Muttering under her breath she stomped over to the stand next to the door where her boots had been left. With an almost petulant huff she sat down and began pulling them on and lacing them to her liking. Once properly shod, Tara stood back up and turned to Liz once more.

“And now?”

“Perfect,” Liz confirmed.

* * *

The walk through Haven gave Tara some time to consider what Leliana might have to say to her. It had been a few days since she’d been able to exchange more than passing nods of acknowledgement with her friend, it was understandable given sheer quantity of work required to get this Inquisition off the ground particularly on Leliana’s part. Information was vital; marshaling all her agents and distilling everything they collected into useful data that could be acted upon took a phenomenal level of skill and organisation that put Tara’s list-making to shame.
It didn’t negate the fact that Tara missed her friend even though they were barely a quarter mile away from each other at any time. While it would’ve been foolish to expect that they’d fall back into the close friendship they’d once had after so long apart, Tara had hoped that Leliana might come and see *her* rather than sending for her like one of her agents.

As she arrived at the tent that served as Leliana’s workspace - having taken great care to approach from the path that didn’t pass the Requisitions area - she found that Leliana was being briefed by an elven woman in green scout leathers. Leaning against the central tent pole to wait Tara couldn’t help but overhear the tail-end of the conversation.

“…he’s killed Farrier, one of my best agents, and *knows* where the others are.” Leliana’s voice was dripping with icy fury. She clenched her fists before turning back to the silent agent. “You know what must be done. Make it clean, painless if you can. We were friends once.” The derisive laugh that followed the order sent a chill down Tara’s spine.

Before the elven scout had chance to walk away to carry out the Nightingale’s fearsome command, Tara pushed off the post and cut into the conversation.

“What the fuck are you doing? Ordering a man’s death without even the pretence of justice? Is this why the Nightingale is so feared?” Tara’s lip curled as she spat the words.

Leliana rounded on her, eyes flashing. “Butler betrayed us!” She hissed. “He murdered one of my agents!”

Tara stood her ground, folding her arms across her chest and raising both eyebrows. “So your response is to murder him right back?”

“You find fault with my decision?”

A veiled threat hid beneath Leliana’s forcibly even tone. She was not Tara’s friend right now. That didn’t dissuade her from provoking the Nightingale further.

“While I’ve not been present for all your decision making, I’ve got to say that this particular decree smacks of Marjolaine and her philosophy for dealing with problems - send someone else to kill it until it goes away.”

Leliana’s expression hardened even further, fierce enough that her agent took a minute step back from them both.

“No, you have *not* been present for my decisions,” she said the steel in her voice masking something neither of them wanted to address. “Butler’s betrayal has put the Inquisition’s agents in danger, I condemn him to save dozens of others. I may not like it but I cannot afford the luxury of ideals at a time like this!”

“There was a time when you had nothing but ideals!” Tara snapped, flinging her arms wide. “What happened to the Leliana who sought to fight evil and bring hope to the world? Where is she? What happened to those ideals and that hope?”

“That hope *died* with the Hero!” Leliana screamed, still controlled enough to avoid exposing Tara even as she raged at her.

Tara had no words. She’d asked the question and gotten the brutal answer she should have expected. Leliana felt all things deeply; both love and betrayal, no matter how much she wanted to help the world, losing someone she cared for so much would have being devastating.
Not just ten years ago, but also now - Dorothea had been the person who helped Leliana heal after Marjolaine betrayed her, who helped encourage her down the path than led her to that inn in Lothering. Without the woman who become Divine Justinia, Tara may never have met Leliana. But that woman was now gone and Leliana could not mourn while the Inquisition looked to her to be their eyes and ears and further its goals no matter the cost.

Shaking off her stupor, Tara stumbled forward and wrapped her friend in a tight embrace, sparing half a thought that she might get stabbed for her efforts. As she buried her face in Leliana’s shoulder, she felt a shudder go through the shorter woman’s body, arms slowly lifting to encircle Tara’s torso.

In that moment Tara didn’t care that Leliana’s agent was probably stood gaping at them, wondering she was and how she dared to question Sister Nightingale and live, let alone be permitted to embrace her. Rumours would no doubt now spring up that Tara was a secret lover or some other improbable nonsense.

Lifting her head slightly Tara murmured into Leliana’s ear, “I’m so sorry, for saying stupid shit without thinking and for the other thing. I’m going to keep periodically apologising for that one until you’re fed up of hearing it.”

A muffled snort of laughter burst from Leliana and her arms tightened around Tara briefly before releasing her to look up at Tara’s face. The cold, emotionless Nightingale was gone, the faint watery smile was all Leliana. Tara grinned widely.

“I mean it you know,” she said, sobering slightly. “I am sorry for leaving when I did, you shouldn’t have had to grieve alone Leli. You shouldn’t have had to grieve at all and I’m more sorry for that.”

The smile faded as Leliana took a deep, calming breath, reasserting her composure before too many saw her falter. “You are here now and that matters more than you could imagine,” she said softly, her eyes warm as she squeezed Tara’s hands.

Leaning forward, Tara pressed a light kiss to Leliana’s forehead before taking the conversation back to where it began. “Leli, find some other way to deal with Butler. His death will not bring back Farrier, but his information might prevent more from being betrayed further down the road. Do not lose yourself to avenge Dorothea, she would never have wanted you to become nothing but cold, merciless steel.”

Lower lip quivering at the mention of her beloved mentor, Leliana nodded once before smoothing her expression. She turned to her agent, stood a few steps further away than before and gave new instructions. “Apprehend Butler, but see that he lives. He will come to learn that my mercy is not without cost.”

The elven scout saluted Leliana, eyes darting to Tara for a fleeting instant before exiting the tent. On her way out she paused to give a half-bow and murmur “Herald” to Liz who had apparently arrived during their conversation without announcing herself. Liz tried to conceal her grimace but not fast enough to prevent Tara laughing at her.

“Shut up or I’m eating your breakfast as well as mine,” Liz warned, waving the cloth-wrapped items in her hand threateningly. “Have you been sufficiently scolded for your nug cooking?”

Leliana gasped in outrage. “You didn’t?!”

“No!” Tara replied, shooting a glare at Liz before looking back to Leliana. “I promise you, no nugs were harmed in the expression of my pent-up emotions. On my honour,” she swore, laying her
hand over her heart.

“Very well,” Leliana accepted with a crooked smile. “Now I need to be getting back to work, I’m sure you have lists to write for your trip to the Hinterlands my dear Tara?”

Sticking her tongue out at the Spymaster, Tara strode over to Liz and snagged her breakfast. “Don’t mock the lists Leli, those lists saved us a lot of pointless journeys during the Blight. You’ve missed those lists.”

“Maybe so. Just be sure to send me copies of any relevant ones.”

Nodding to Leliana in farewell, Tara turned to Liz and spoke around a mouthful of pastry. “Right let’s go see a man about some travel supplies.”

* * *

After five days of meetings and planning for the trip to the Hinterlands Liz was nearly chomping at the bit to be gone. Not that they were riding there - that was one of the items on the growing list of “Shit to fix” which Tara was carrying around night and day - persuade Arl Eamon’s old horse-master Dennett to join the Inquisition and supply them with horses. They had quite the trek to make this first time out of Haven. Tara had made her displeasure about having to walk known every chance she got.

Liz couldn’t help but feel daunted by the scale of what awaited them in the Hinterlands. Judging by the reports coming in from the advance scouting party, fighting was breaking out between rogue apostates and templars so often that the civilians living in the region had been forced to flee their homes and farms to avoid getting caught in the middle of it all. How were they supposed to calm so much conflict when it had raged unchecked for so long?

The day they were due to leave dawned crisp and clear. The light was just creeping over the top of the surrounding mountains and spilling across Haven as their travel party gathered at the gates. The Inquisition council were there to see them off; Josephine was dressed impeccably despite the early hour, Cullen looked like he’d spent half the night awake and the rest of it sleeping at his desk, while Leliana looked unfairly well-rested despite Liz being convinced that their Spymaster never truly slept.

As they loaded their packs of supplies onto the somewhat feeble-looking nag that had been unearthed from Maker knows where, Tara turned to Varric and asked blearily,

“I don’t suppose you know where Bodahn and Sandal ended up after Hawke left Kirkwall do you?”

Varric blinked at the question, scratching at his unshaven shadow of a beard for a moment. “I would’ve thought they’d still be at the Amell estate looking after everything. I know Daisy liked to go visit them once a week for dinner. Why d’you ask?”

“I really fucking miss Bodahn’s waggon right now,” Tara replied in a distinctly petulant tone as she resettled the straps of her backpack on her shoulders.

Varric and Liz both burst out laughing, Leliana and Josephine quietly giggling while Cassandra, Cullen and Solas merely smiled. Waiting for everyone to compose themselves Tara straightened to
her full height and gave them a haughty look.

“You’ll miss having somewhere to take a nap when you’ve been walking for twelve hours and are still miles from a safe campsite,” she said loftily. “I might have dropped dead asleep on my feet a dozen times during the Blight if not for that Maker-sent dwarf.”

Liz grinned, “Just wait until we get decent mounts, you’ll be napping on horseback in no time!”

Grimacing, Tara shook her head, “Fuck a nug, I’ve got to learn to ride first! Then you’ll probably have to heal me every other day when I fall off the void-spawned creature.”

“So you want a waggon Sparky?” Varric asked, mouth twitching with barely restrained amusement.

“Yep,” Tara replied. “I’m a simple woman Varric, give me a waggon to ride in and first watch of the night and camping with my delightful self shall be a dream. However, I can’t speak for my cooking ability these days, you may want to let someone else man the cook-pot until I’ve had chance to practice.” She gave Varric a wink as he began spluttering with laughter again.

Patience wearing thin, Cassandra cleared her throat. “Perhaps we might begin our journey before nightfall? It is no small distance to the Hinterlands and we can hardly afford to delay for frivolities.” Her unimpressed eyebrow lift was mildly terrifying so early in the morning.

Sheepish expressions flitted across both Varric’s and Tara’s faces, the latter ducking her head and muttering “No jokes near the Seeker before breakfast, got it,” low enough that only Liz heard her. She almost bit through her lip holding back the explosion of giggles that would have had Cassandra glaring her disapproval for the rest of the day.

It was going to be an interesting journey to say the least.

Chapter End Notes

*collapses* Thank the fucking Maker they’ve finally left Haven! I’ve been saying it’ll be “the next chapter” since like Chapter 6 I swear and then the words run away with me!

Now we get to enter the land of bears and endless elfroot picking XD

As always any kudos or comments are greatly appreciated by this weary Kitten.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Twelve - These Wraps are Made for Walking

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Good Evening folks! It has been a spell (again) and I apologise. I slightly over-anticipated how much stuff I could fit into a chapter and consequently intimidated myself with the scale of what I had to write. So what was gonna be one chapter is now going to be three and hopefully it won't take me two weeks to put up each separate bit. *crosses fingers*

Anyway as always I gotta thank the ever-wonderful and patient Lady_Savannah for beta-ing this story and being an awesome procrastination buddy when both of us really should be asleep :P Also I had the extreme pleasure of hearing that I made her bff cry in an airport when she read my one-shot Best Laid Plans so that was a thing XD I was at least *slightly* sorry :) Go read Sav's fic Through Fire or Fury it's got way more Cullen than mine and it's fantastic <3

I hope you enjoy this somewhat shorter chapter and with any luck the next one won't be another two weeks away!

The first day of any long journey was always a slightly awkward one as everyone settled into a rhythm of walking and figured out the dynamics of the travelling party. Most of the morning after they left Haven was spent in silence, Tara and Varric both being more focused on waking up fully than providing any kind of entertainment for the rest of the group. Cassandra walked at the front of the party, eyes vigilant for any potential threats ahead while Solas seemed content to remain at the back, lost in his own thoughts.

Liz kept pace with Tara, periodically glancing over at her to assess how she was faring with the intensity of physical exertion after being limited to only walking about Haven for the past week. Within her own mind Liz had appointed herself as Tara’s healer for her period of readjustment to the Waking World. Not that she would tell Tara that she was watching to make sure she ate decent-sized meals and drank enough water every day. Liz didn’t want to baby Tara, she was still a grown woman even if she hadn’t been technically a living one for a long time.

They stopped to eat a cold lunch by a stream somewhere around midday. The snow that still encased Haven even as Spring crept in elsewhere, thankfully dissipated once they got outside the valley and while the air was still brisk, slivers of sunshine peeked through the cloud cover. In between bites of her lunch, Liz fought back laughter at the sight of Tara unlacing the heavy boots she’d started the day in and fishing out the pair of elven footwraps that she’d made with help from Harritt, from her pack.

By the time Tara was done arranging the odd constructions of supple leather on her feet to her satisfaction, the others in the group were openly staring. Solas in particular looked unsure whether he disapproved of a human wearing footwear so widely considered as elven or was curious despite himself about how Tara’s differed from his own cloth wraps.
Tara eventually noticed the odd looks fixed on her. Standing up and wiggling her toes, she planted her hands on her hips then gave her audience a crooked smile.

“You try running around barefoot for ten years only to be forced to wear proper boots again,” she said dryly. “My toes will be free Void take it! If Leli wants to wrestle me back into proper shoes she can try but for now this is as much of a concession as I’ll make.”

Cassandra frowned, “Will you not be at risk of injury wearing only those as we travel? The road is not always so smooth and we will soon see fighting undoubtedly.”

“That’s when barriers and healing will come in handy,” Tara replied with a brief shrug. “I spent hours tooling protective runes into the leather so what little of my feet isn’t covered by the wraps I can be sure to keep an eye on. As will Liz I’m sure.” She tipped a wink at the younger woman who flushed almost the same deep red as her hair.

“It’s not a bad idea Sparky,” Varric cut in with a wide grin. “They don’t look far removed from what Fenris used to wear although I remember him injuring his feet walking through fuck knows what in Darktown.”

“I bet Anders had to pick broken glass out of Fenris’ feet on more than one occasion eh?” Tara said with a sly smile.

“Oh Blondie loved lecturing him on how he was going to lose a toe to infection if he didn’t take better care. Not that he could fucking talk, damn pair of idiots,” Varric grumbled, kicking a small rock into the grass.

“Good thing they’re keeping each other from being too idiotic then yes?” Tara said mildly.

Varric’s head snapped up, his eyes widening as he took in the knowing expression on Tara’s face. Casting a nervous look in Cassandra’s direction he stepped closer and lowered his voice.

“Please tell me you don’t actually know what I think you’re hinting you know?” he muttered.

Leaning down to speak directly into Varric’s ear, Tara replied “Just because it’s not in your book, doesn’t mean that someone doesn’t know about it.”

The dwarf paled slightly, staring up at her with a mixture of awe and mild fear in his eyes. Taking a breath he laughed shakily. “Sparky, I think we’re going to need to have a conversation soon about how much of my book you can contradict just so I can stop feeling my stomach trip over itself every time you say shit like that.”

“Sure thing Varric,” Tara smiled. “So long as you buy the drinks, you’ll probably need a few.” Swinging her pack back onto her shoulders, she took a few experimental steps in her footwraps before sighing happily.

* 

The rest of the afternoon’s walking passed with no further discussion of Varric’s book and its factual veracity. Tara kept up an exhaustive line of questioning with Liz about her Spirit Healer studies at Ostwick, trying to gauge how teaching practices differed from Kinloch as well as for her own curiosity.

While not being overt about it, Liz could see that Cassandra was walking slower, head turned slightly to the side as she listened to their conversation with a thoughtful expression. It surprised Liz that the Seeker cared enough to listen when she had no magic of her own but it gave her hope
that Cassandra might be curious about her gifts.

Nightfall led the group to set up camp in a small wooded grove out of sight of the road. Briefly discussing how they were divvying up the necessary chores, they all set to getting settled for the night. Varric handled the cooking once Liz had gathered wood and built up the fire, Tara and Cassandra pitched the two canvas tents on either side with only minimal cursing on Tara’s part. Solas wandered off for a short while - to set wards - he disclosed when he returned, to give them advance warning of dangers that might approach the camp.

As they all tucked into the rough stew that Varric cobbled together from their supplies, Liz found herself beside Cassandra. Not wishing to let the silence grow too awkward, she tentatively struck up a conversation asking how Cassandra came to be the Right Hand of the Divine. It took a little wheedling from both Liz and Varric but eventually Cassandra grudgingly told them the tale of how she became the Right Hand of Divine Beatrix almost twenty years ago.

By the end of the story, Varric was muttering to himself, scribbling notes onto some paper he’d pulled from his pack. He seemed almost annoyed that he’d somehow never heard the whole of this story before now. Tara stared at the Seeker from across the campfire, more than a little surprise and awe radiating from her whole body, what other heroics did Cassandra have to her name? As intimidating as Tara found her, she was eager to know more about the formidable warrior beyond the brusque interactions they’d had right after the Breach opened.

The day’s walk had tired them all to the point that no one wanted to linger around the fire for long after they finished eating. Solas wordlessly set about cleaning up the dinner things before going to activate the wards he’d placed earlier.

As the first one on watch, Tara had a few more hours to wait until she could sleep. Leaving her sheathed daggers within reach she began a series of stretching exercises to ease the stiffness in her arms and legs. Another thing she’d forgotten during her time in the Fade, travel aches and pains. While she’d mostly been joking that morning about wanting a waggon to rest in, there was a prickle of worry in her chest that she’d not be able to keep up with the others and slow down the journey. If she started doing extra training when they got to camp each day hopefully her old fitness would begin to return. The last thing she wanted was to be a burden on Liz.

It was unsettling to feel so exposed when they were no longer surrounded by mountains as they were in Haven, despite the camp being encircled with pine trees. Tara craned her head back to look up at the stars, trying to dig up the names of the constellations she could see from the depths of her memory that hadn’t even seen them for ten years. She found some comfort in being able to identify Judex and Equinor and she at least could see all the branches of the one she half-remembered as ‘The Oak’ although it definitely had another, fancier name because of course Tevinter gave most of the constellations ridiculous names.

A haunting cry shattered the near silence of the camp, jolting her from her contemplation. Breath caught in her throat Tara already had her hand on the hilt of her dagger when the sound came again, this time its source soaring clear of the treeline on hushed wings. Tara exhaled loudly, muttering several curses about owls being creatures sent from the Void as she sat down hard next to the fire. Scratching at the back of her neck, she waited for her heart to slow its frantic pounding. The Waking World had animals, not demons. Tara needed to remember that more often.

* 

The remaining hours of her watch passed with welcome quiet. Tara crept into the women’s tent and gently shook Cassandra’s shoulder, leaving herself room to get out the way if the ever-vigilant Seeker lashed out as she woke. Tara appreciated that while Cassandra clearly had a hand on her
boot knife beneath her blankets once her eyes had registered who was waking her, she relaxed and sat up slowly.

Entering the tent fully, Tara began peeling off her top layer of armour, leaving the light breeches and undershirt to sleep in. She grinned when she saw that Liz had laid out both of their bedrolls next to each other, overlapping the blankets to form one shared sleeping mat. She slipped beneath the covers, shuffling herself until she was comfortable, doing her best not to wake Liz. A soft sound dragged her attention back to Cassandra who was sat at the entrance to the tent, having laced on her boots she was now staring at Tara with a bewildered expression.

“Something wrong?” Tara whispered.

Cassandra opened and closed her mouth a couple of times before responding. “You share a bed with the Herald? But… I thought- you and the Warden Alistair…”

Tara shut her eyes for a moment, caught off-guard by the sharp ache hearing his name sent lancing through her sternum. Sighing she looked back at Cassandra and tried to correct her misunderstanding without getting upset.

“I share a bed with Liz for the same reason you might share with a sister - for the comfort of having someone to feel safe with while sleeping. This is not me seeking to move on from—” Tara swallowed thickly, unable to even say his name in such a sentence. “-From him. My feelings are unchanged and are not likely to any time soon.”

The Seeker’s face softened, her hand flying to her mouth. “Oh… Maker. Forgive me Tara, I didn’t mean to imply—”

Shaking her head Tara replied softly, “It’s fine Cassandra, you’re probably not going to be the last person to make the same assumption, particularly when most people don’t know who I am. I’m fully expecting that rumours will pop up about ‘that merc woman who sleeps with the Herald’ but so long as none of them get near to the truth then I can live with the whispers. But I’d like the people who know both Liz and I to understand that our relationship is not like that.”

“I shall endeavour to not make more assumptions in future,” Cassandra said solemnly. “I apologise if I upset you Tara.”

She gave Cassandra a warm smile, “I’m not upset, truly. I appreciate that you asked me about it privately and not around the campfire though. As entertaining as I find Varric, I’d rather not listen to him making jokes or bets about my love life.”

“Indeed,” Cassandra said with a slight curl of her lip. “I should let you sleep, we have a long day of walking ahead of us. Good night Tara, sleep well.”

The Seeker left the tent for her watch and Tara snuggled herself down into the bedroll. A few moments later she felt a hand run softly over her hair as she slipped into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

But the dreams finally returned on the fourth night after they’d left Haven.
*cue twilight zone music* :P

Thank you for reading folks! As per usual, any kudos and comments are greatly appreciated to soothe my perpetually anxious writer brain XD

Hope everyone's having a great Saturday (and Bank holiday weekend if you're in the UK :P What *is* all this bright shit outside?)
Chapter Thirteen - The Fucking Fade

Chapter by Fire Kitten

Chapter Notes

Look guys! A new chapter and it's only been 10 days!! How magical! XD

I gotta say a massive thank you for the numerous comments I've gotten over the last week or so, it really makes my day when I get that email notification and there has been the occasional happy cry because I'm a mush with shaky self-esteem *finger guns* Seriously though knowing there are people who are genuinely excited to read a new chapter of this story is such a fantastic feeling. <3

As always - all the cookies for Lady Savannah who betas this fic so wonderfully and listens to all my mad gripes when the writing is just not playing ball. She posted a new chapter of Through Fire or Fury yesterday while AO3 was having its server gremlins so folk might not have seen it. Go read her chapter after you're done here :P

Hope you enjoy! Slight Warning: the start of this chapter is a little darker than usual but nothing too major.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything was wreathed in darkness and smoke. The air burned with every breath she took, eyes watering fiercely as she tried to make out what lurked in the sulphurous gloom.

Was this the Fade? It didn’t feel instantly familiar but something about the space tickled at a memory that she’d kept tightly locked away for many, many years. Her stomach clenched and she glanced down, mind juddering to a bewildered halt at what she wore.

Grey Warden mage armour. Battered and bloody like she’d already fought for hours. Holes in the chain-mail, burns across her chest and her bracers were caked in grim black streaks of... darkspawn blood. Oh Maker.

A prickle of awareness shuddered down her spine moments before the deep rumbling growl behind her vibrated through her chest. Tara whirled around and came face to face with the nightmare she’d prayed she would never see again.

The Archdemon.

Had the dragon truly been so massive before? Its head alone was longer than her entire body and three times as broad, she couldn’t even see the rest of its body at that moment. Through the shadows its wings lifted into view. Horror stole her breath as the realisation hit.

It was dead. Sections of the wing membranes were shredded and disintegrating. Slivers of bone jutted out in places and gaping holes peppered its flesh where no blood flowed only necrosis devouring the dragon from within. Every tiny movement of the rotting wings sent the noxious miasma of death crashing over her, choking and overwhelming.

Its enormous, fang-filled maw loomed barely an arms-length from her face. Every fibre of her...
being screamed out for her to run, hide, do anything to get away from that foul-smelling mouth of the void. But she couldn’t move an inch, her body frozen in place without a single lick of magic used to trap her.

She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t blink, couldn’t even muster a cry for help. She was utterly alone facing down the creature that killed her, as surely as she had killed it in return all those years ago.

Foul whispers clawed at the dark hollows of her mind, taunting, cursing, reminding her of how futile all her efforts fighting the Blight really were. Her hands itched to scratch until her ears bled and drowned out the Archdemon’s insidious voice. But she could do nothing, except stare back at her doom.

A bone-rattling growl built in the dragon’s throat, louder and louder until vibrated the very air around her. Her heart clamoured against her ribcage, thrumming like wings in a cage.

In the void, fire bloomed. Vile tainted flames coalesced into an orb at the back of the Archdemon’s maw, radiating scorching heat onto her face. Beads of burning cold sweat slid over her skin as her heartbeat tripped into a new terrified rhythm.

This was the end. No friends to help her, no sword to drive through the dragon’s neck. Just one woman too petrified to act.

The Archdemon roared, engulfing her in an inferno.

* * *

Dawn was creeping through the trees into the camp when screams erupted from the tent where Tara slept. Liz dropped the pot of water she was placing over the fire as the sound splintered the air. Cursing, she sprinted to the tent, Cassandra lunging to follow, her sword half-drawn before Liz flung open the canvas flap.

Tara thrashed in the bedroll, arms tangling in the blankets with each flail. Her eyes were wide open but unseeing as she screamed until her voice cracked, heaving in harsh gasping breaths before beginning again. Tears streaked down Tara’s cheeks, slowly soaking unhindered into her hair.

Kneeling beside her, Liz held her magic at the ready to calm Tara if she startled and gently laid her hands on the distraught woman’s shoulders. Keeping her voice low she spoke as softly and calmly as she knew how.

“Tara, it’s Liz. I am here and you are safe. Can you hear me?”

Breath hitching, Tara’s eyes shifted to focus on Liz’s face hovering above her. As she recognised her friend, fresh tears spilled over into more sobs, her body curling into a tight ball.

“It-it felt… so real,” Tara whispered, voice raw and crackling. “Agony and burning, I can feel it even now like I’m still trapped there.”

Heart clenching at the horror in Tara’s voice, Liz wrapped her arms around Tara’s torso and held tight. Stroking a hand over Tara’s dark hair she murmured the same words over and over.

“It was just a nightmare, you’re awake now and you’re safe. I’ve got you, just breathe.”
Liz didn’t know how long she held Tara, rocking her gently and chanting the same words until they lost all meaning. At some point Cassandra had left them alone, closing the tent flaps to give them privacy. Tara eventually cried herself out, slipping back into an exhausted slumber, her body relaxing from its tight balled-up position.

Extricating herself carefully from Tara and laying her down on the bedroll, Liz arranged the blankets over her and crept out of the tent. Around the campfire others stood, talking quietly until Liz emerged. Three concerned faces turned her way as she approached.

“Is Sparky okay?” Varric asked first. “I heard screams like that from Blondie more than a few times while we were in the Deep Roads. By the time we left I think we’d all had fucking nightmares at least once.”

Liz sighed, scrubbing her hand over her face. “I don’t know how okay she is right now. She’s asleep again so I’m praying to the Maker that she isn’t going to dream. I think this might have been the first time she’s connected to the Fade since she stepped out of it.”

“She has not been dreaming until now?” Solas frowned. “That is… unusual. But then her situation is so unique, the idea of what constitutes a ‘normal’ connection to the Fade for a mage cannot really be applied in this case.” He tapped his fingers against his chin as he pondered.

“Tara mentioned to me after I woke from stabilising the Breach that she hadn’t been dreaming since she arrived,” Liz said with a shrug. “I figured that she would tell me if that changed - obviously now we all know it has.”

“Is she in any danger?” Cassandra asked, her hand hovering near the hilt of her sword. “Should we be concerned about this happening again? Once we get to the Hinterlands there will be unseen enemies whose notice we risk drawing if Tara has another nightmare.”

“Would it not be prudent for me to shield Tara’s dreams in the Fade until she is better able to cope with them on this side of the Veil?” Solas stated in a haughty tone.

Bristling at the condescension in his voice, Liz replied rather snappishly. “No. I am not going to authorise anyone messing around with Tara’s head without her express permission. She isn’t a damn child and frankly since she’s the only person amongst us to have literally lived in the Fade, I think her assessment of whether she is at risk while dreaming is going to be the one I trust. If she didn’t succumb to demons while in the realm where they are most powerful, I highly doubt that one nightmare is going to be her undoing.”

Folding her arms across her chest, Liz stared down both Cassandra and Solas, mentally daring them to object. She was not Tara’s First Enchanter and certainly not the Knight Commander. Any decisions about Tara and her wellbeing were going to be made by Tara and not for her by people who think they know best.

Eventually Cassandra nodded in acquiescence. “I see your point Herald. We can ask Tara how she feels it would be best to proceed later, once she has re-awoken.” Solas only gave the tiniest tilt of his head denoting his apparent agreement.

“I’m going to let her sleep for a little while longer,” Liz stated. “We can get the rest of the camp dismantled, fill the water skins and forage any other supplies from the area so there’s only the last bits to do once Tara’s up.”

A thud came from behind Liz, startling all four of them into looking back at the tent which now had a bedroll lying on the ground in front of the opening, already fastened back into a neat roll to
load onto the packhorse. Shortly after a sleep-rumpled head emerged followed by the rest of Tara. She held herself delicately but her expression was firm and unwavering.

“No need to delay on my behalf,” she rasped, making it clear she’d heard most of their conversation. “Give me a few minutes to freshen up and we can all get packed and head out. The Hinterlands won’t get any closer while I’m napping.”

Crossing the space between them Liz looked up at Tara’s pallid face and gently reached out to clasp her hand. “Are you sure? You can rest a bit more if you want, it’s not a problem truly.”

Squeezing Liz’s hand in return, Tara gave her a shaky smile. “If I rest longer I’ll only think about it more and Maker knows that’s a shit idea. Honestly I’ll feel better if we keep moving. You’re needed in the Hinterlands, I don’t want to be the lame nag slowing the pace.”

“Andraste’s knickers Tara, you’re *not* a lame nag!” Liz prodded the other woman in the stomach indignantly. “You’re allowed to take time to recover when you need it. I don’t need to know what you dreamt but I want to know if you’re going to be okay. You’re my friend and it’s important to me that you are well.” She met Tara’s gaze steadily, trying to convey how much she meant what she said.

Tara pressed her eyes shut, head tipping back as she took a deep, shuddering breath. Exhaling she wrapped her arms tightly around Liz, dropping her chin down onto the shorter woman’s shoulder. “How do I always end up so fucking fortunate in my friends?” She muttered, her wistful tone tickling a laugh out of Liz.

“Here I was, thinking I was the fortunate one,” she grinned. “I never imagined I’d get to call the Hero of Ferelden my friend.”

“Fuck off, who thought I’d be bedroll buddies with the Herald of Andraste?”

* * *

Once the party broke camp both Tara and Liz made no attempt to discuss that morning’s incident further. Every time Solas cleared his throat and struck up a conversation with Tara about the Fade she sighed and told him to ask her about it later. After the first three attempts Liz took to glaring at the elf whenever he tried to bring it up again.

By the time they made camp again for the night, having covered a good twenty miles down the Imperial Highway as it ran alongside the vast expanse of Lake Calenhad, everyone was feeling a little tetchy with perhaps the exception of Varric. Despite Cassandra’s growling at him periodically when his carefully carefree banter with Tara made them both splutter with laughter.

Liz prepared to settle down for a few hours sleep before her stint on watch, following Cassandra who was taking Tara’s usual watch to allow her to rest properly for one night. When she saw Solas approach Tara as she sat cleaning her footwraps by the campfire, Liz braced herself and watched them cautiously from the tent entrance.

“May we *now* discuss the appropriate precautions for any Fade interactions you will have tonight?” Solas began with some impatience. “I believe I have indulged this childish avoidance of the subject long enough. The Fade will give no quarter if you do not take it seriously—”

“No shit, Solas,” Tara drawled, not looking up from the leather wraps in her hands. “It’s almost like I spent *ten whole years* with my emotions magically warded to prevent demons from flocking to me like leeches. I know just how seriously to take this matter. Which is why for tonight - and only
Standing abruptly, Tara drew herself to her full height and took a step closer to Solas. The elf stiffened, eyes cold as he looked up the few inches to the other mage’s face.

Tara continued in a mild voice, “If by tomorrow night I’ve not managed to find a solution to prevent further incidents like this morning, I may seek your assistance again Solas. However it’s not in my nature to allow mages I don’t know very well to play about with magic in my head, no matter how well-meaning they may be.”

“Indeed,” Solas replied after a long pause. “Well, since you are not sitting watch this evening, shall we proceed immediately so both of us stand a chance of acquiring a full night’s rest?”

Tara gave a nonchalant shrug, turning away from Solas and heading towards her tent where Liz waited with mingled amusement and concern on her face. Glancing back over her shoulder at the rather indignant elf, still stood next to the fire, she gave him a cheeky grin.

“If we’re quite done being all grim and grumpy, I’m really fucking tired Solas. Let’s get some wards thrown up so I can go stomping around the fucking Fade again.”

Chapter End Notes

Phew! We're two chapters down for the Journey to the Hinterlands! XD We will keep chugging along until we finally arrive...someday.

Next time: a Curious meeting ;)

Please share any thoughts you have on the chapter ^_^ Until next time folks!
Chapter Fourteen - Curiosity Didn't Kill the Kat

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Hello folks! Sorry it's been a little while again - as much as I'd like to get chapters up more frequently, staring at screens all day for work kinda leaves my brain mush in the evenings so getting writing done is like trying to corral drunk cats.

Thankfully it's a Bank Holiday here so I was able to get this chapter pretty much written in two stints yesterday morning & today. When I'll get the next chapter done is anyone's guess XD

As always - a billion thank yous & cookies to Lady_Savannah for being awesome & telling me it's okay if I don't write as fast as I'd like to XD Go read her fic ^_^

Hope you enjoy this chapter, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Fade looked far less frightening the second time around, which was a Maker-sent blessing for sure. Gone was the overwhelming aura of terror and the malignant, festering smell of the Archdemon. The space she was stood in was a blurred approximation of the Enchanter’s quarters that Tara had never really had the chance to call her own after her Harrowing. She couldn’t remember if she’d even slept a full night in that room before she’d been dragged into Jowan’s blighted scheme to destroy his phylactery and flee the Circle.

Sighing, Tara glared at her surroundings and exerted her will to shift the room into something less tangled up with sour memories. Slowly the Circle gave way to a forest clearing with a campfire crackling merrily in the centre. There were no tents, no wisps pretending to be one of her fellow travellers from either past or present. Just her, stood alone next to the fire, its light only reaching as far as the tree line.

Faint magic tingled across her skin, prompting Tara to cast out her own spell to locate the source. A shimmer of runes rippled into view as the spell reached the edge of the clearing. She spun on her heel and tracked the line of the barrier which enclosed her entire dream-space. She had asked Solas for this, but it wasn’t a pleasant thought to be essentially barricaded into her own dream.

On a whim Tara sent a shower of violet sparks straight up, letting out a triumphant laugh when the magic didn’t hit a barrier, dissipating only when she let it go. Solas had only built a wall, not a dome which was oddly considerate or he didn’t believe that Tara would think to check and happily remain within the isolated portion of the Fade.

Clearly Hah’ren needed to learn a lesson or two about her capacity to get herself into trouble by poking at things that should be left well enough alone.

Something bright flickered in the corner of her eye. Tara twisted to face the amorphous figure which had approached the barrier. It’s opalescent form was mostly humanoid, but in place of feet it had silvery talons like an eagle’s except they were large enough to encircle Tara’s arm twice over.
It was pressing its spindly fingers against the barrier, an expression of almost wonder on its oddly featureless face.

The rush of relief Tara felt was intense and unexpected. Since her abrupt expulsion from the Fade she’d worried about what might have happened to her spirit friends in the wake of the Breach - Curiosity in particular. It was a spirit that had found her soon after her arrival in the Fade, drawn out from wherever it liked to reside by the sheer novelty of finding an intact human soul fully present in the realm where only memories and spirits remained. Its nature led it to follow Tara almost as faithfully as her mabari around the Fade, pointing out new places to explore and exciting things to see. Curiosity had found other many spirits for Tara to speak to and learn from with inexhaustible enthusiasm and endless questions.

A grin burst across Tara’s face as she stepped across the clearing right up to the barrier opposite her friend. The expression on Curiosity’s face shifted rapidly from surprise to puzzlement, then to realisation and pure joy that lit up its whole being with swirling colours.

“Hero? Is that you?” Curiosity’s two-toned voice always sounded like music harmonising with itself. “I have been searching the Fade for days! I was so worried I would never find you! Where did you go? Why did you leave? How are you here? What is this barrier? It is not one of yours - it is curious, I have not seen its like in… I do not know how long. How vexing! Who made it?”

Tara threw up her hands, trying to get the spirit’s attention before Curiosity got too excited. She held back laughter at how quickly her friend had reverted back to its usual manner of throwing dozens of questions at her without giving her chance to answer.

“I’d say take a breath,” she chuckled. “But you’re a spirit and don’t actually need to breathe. But, yes. It is me and you wouldn’t have been able to find me anywhere in the Fade since I’m no longer here. It’s a ridiculously long story and I don’t even understand how it happened. I only regained my connection to the Fade in my dreams last night and it was… bad.”

Curiosity bobbed its head fervently. “Oh, that explains the great disturbance that rippled across this area several cycles ago. It was not as violent as when the Veil was sundered but still strong enough to draw me here.”

“I’m not entirely surprised that my nightmare disturbed the Fade, it was pretty fucking awful to be in,” Tara said darkly. “But I am so unbelievably happy that you’re alright Curiosity. Seeing how many spirits were pulled through the Breach and corrupted, I was terrified that you might be among those lost.”

The spirit waved its hand airily, a gesture that it had amusingly picked up at some point from Tara’s habit of talking with her hands. Spirits didn’t truly understand the meaning of most of the gestures and how their use altered the tone of what was being said but Curiosity enjoyed imitating Tara’s mannerisms and occasionally made jokes that were more than a little incoherent and cryptic.

“I was fortunate to be far from any of the Veil ruptures when they formed,” Curiosity said. “But when you did not return, I ventured out in search of answers. Many spirits I met were distressed about the rifts that had opened into the Waking World and when I learnt that the first had occurred in the Temple of Sacred Ashes I was afraid of what had happened to you.”

“I met a young woman who’d been thrown into the Fade by the explosion that tore the Veil,” Tara replied. “When I helped her return to the rift she had entered through I was pushed out along with her. When I woke I was somehow alive and locked in Haven’s Chantry dungeon. It’s been a rather confusing couple of weeks.”
A small ‘o’ formed where a mouth would be on Curiosity’s face. Its hands lifted to cup its own cheeks, another human gesture copied from Tara. “So you are no longer a Fade-walker? You now only walk here as a Dreamer?”

Tara tilted her head to one side, brow creasing slightly. “Yes, I suppose that’s it exactly. I have a physical body in the Waking World and only link with the Fade in my dreams although I wasn’t a Dreamer before.”

Curiosity shrugged its shimmery shoulders. “Is it not possible for a mage who walked the Fade in person to then walk the Fade as they choose in their dreams? You are the source of many mysteries Hero, do not doubt that your magic as it is now is vastly altered from what you knew before your departure from the Waking World. I am curious to know if you can circumvent this peculiar barrier.” It trailed a finger over the runed surface of the wall, expression focusing as though it was squinting at the fabric of the magic separating them.

Craning her head back, Tara pondered a moment. Summoning her power she willed a square of magic to solidify as a flat surface in front of her at knee-height. She stepped up onto the invisible floor, pausing to see if it held in place before letting out a giggle and summoning another square higher up. It took nearly a dozen of these magic steps to reach the top of Solas’ barrier. At the top Tara looked around briefly at the pure Fade outside of her dream-space and smiled. It felt more like home out here.

Pushing off from her last step she cleared the wall and dropped to the other side, slowing her fall with pulses of Force magic until she landed beside Curiosity. The spirit swept her into its arms and enveloped her in the strangest hug she’d ever felt. Like being submerged in warm water that constricts around you while still leaving you dry. Pressure more than substance.

“I missed you too Curiosity,” she mumbled into the spirit’s semi-corporeal shoulder. “It’s so strange being back out there, around people who used to know me. I had Leliana pressing a dagger to my throat within a few heartbeats of her seeing me.”

Curiosity loosened its embrace and looked at Tara, concern radiating from its form. “You are not in any danger are you Hero? Are your friends not happy you have been returned to them?”

“I think they’re happy I’m back, but everything is so different,” Tara sighed. “Leliana is not the girl I used to know; she’s older and harder and I worry that some of that is my fault. After I died she turned to a woman who had once saved her, who then put her on a path that only made her more cold and ruthless. I don’t think my being alive again is enough to reverse that change.”

“You cannot hope to undo all the pain your passing caused, Hero,” Curiosity chimed softly. “That loss is a memory which cannot be so easily forgotten by your companions.”

“Maker, I know that!” Tara cried, raking her fingers through her hair and pressing the heels of her hands against her temples. “I just wish I knew how to make up for leaving them all! I am at least able to see Leliana and helping the Inquisition is also helping her. Void only knows what I’ll do if I see Alistair again.”

A ripple of gold flashed over the spirit’s form. “You have not seen your Warden yet?” It asked. “Why have you not sought him out in the Waking if you are there too? Surely he would be happiest of all—”

“No!” Tara cut off her friend, voice cracking. “I have no idea how he would react if he knew I was alive and I can’t search for him if I have no clue where to even start! I can’t think about that right now - I’m meant to be helping Liz and the Inquisition, not running around Thedas trying to hunt
down one Warden who might not even want to see me!"

Curiosity came closer again, reaching out to sooth Tara with uncertain pats on her arms as it made lilting noises that no human could ever produce. “Hero, you must calm yourself, while you are less vulnerable now as a Dreamer, your distress may still draw unwanted visitors. Where are your own wards?”

Tara leaned into Curiosity’s liquid embrace and took several deep breaths, focusing on quieting the bubbling mess of thoughts in her head. “They vanished when I crossed the Veil, I wasn’t able to replace them until I connected to the Fade again. Which is why I had to ask Solas to ward my dream tonight since I can’t keep nightmares away from myself yet.”

“Solas? Is that one of your new companions? They are a mage like you?” Curiosity asked, head tilting slightly too far to one side.

“He’s a elven apostate,” Tara replied. “But he doesn’t look or act like any elf I’ve met before. He says he’s explored the Fade in his dreams for many years. But it seemed strange to me that I’ve never come across another Dreamer while I was here - I know the Fade is vast but it’s not limitless surely?”

“I would not know the answer to that,” Curiosity said with another of its shrugs. “There are spirits of Wisdom who would perhaps know if there is an end to the Fade but I would not be Curiosity if I knew myself. It would certainly be fascinating to try to find the answer to such a question.”

Tara laughed. “That’s a very fair point, I shouldn’t expect you to know everything. That’s half the fun, figuring out where to search for the knowledge we seek. Will you help me get my wards back in place? I’d prefer not to need tucking into the Fade every night by Solas.”

Curiosity inclined its head in something almost akin to a bow. “Of course Hero, I would be glad to assist you. There are still a few cycles left before you will wake and I would rather you were not unprotected when I cannot come to your aid as I once could. As proficient as this Solas may be with his wards, I know you would dream more easily if you cast the magic which guarded you.”

There was no disagreeing with Curiosity’s assessment. Tara gave her spirit friend a warm smile and led it several Steps away from the warded clearing to work on weaving new barriers to keep her emotions from bleeding into the Fade as she wandered.

It not long after she’d finally settled on a combination of runes to form her ward that she felt a hand shaking her shoulder outside the Fade. Turning to Curiosity she wrapped her arms around it once more and gently squeezed.

“Thank you for all your help my friend. I will be travelling further east today so look for my dream-space later and we can check that my wards are functioning properly as we do some exploring.”

“You are very welcome Hero, I look forward to seeing you again soon. Walk the Waking safely, my friend.”

Curiosity touched a silvery finger tip to Tara’s forehead and the Fade dissolved around her into the soft darkness beneath her eyelids. She opened her eyes to find Liz’s faintly anxious face hovering above her.

“Sleep well?” Liz asked tentatively.

Tara gave her a beaming smile, “Never better.”
Friends in the Fade! You know I think I'm gonna like having more nighttime chats with Curiosity in the future ^_^.

Now I know I said that it'd take 3 chapters to get to the Hinterlands, but since when have I ever been right about how many chapters it'll take to get anywhere?! I did spend last weekend starting a new Inquisition play-through *entirely* for the purpose of researching the Hinterlands chapters and how I'd write them without spending another 40k dragging you all over the place and boring everyone to death. I'm praying that the idea that me & Lady_Sav came up with to get round this will work out well :P

Anyways kudos and comment if you like, I am always super grateful to read your thoughts on this story and really appreciate the people who keep coming back, you guys rock!
Chapter Fifteen - One Does Not Simply Enter the Hinterlands

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

HI SORRY I VANISHED HERE’S 5K TO MAKE IT UP TO YOU GUYS! XD

For real I didn't intend to disappear again for something like 3 weeks, but I found out I was going to become not-employed so had two weeks to get all my work shit in order to hand over to my replacement. Today was my first Monday as a Free Elf so of course I went straight back on my bullshit & spent 4 hours writing at the coffee shop XD But it garnered me the second half of this chapter so Yay! Who knows maybe I'll get *another* chapter written this week??

As always gotta thank the inimitable Lady_Savannah for keeping my neurotic ass from going completely loopy these last couple of weeks when my brain was too full of work crap to actually write. She also wrote the lyrics for the tavern song used below - in like a *minute* - which is probably witchcraft but thank you for the hilarious suggestion that I'm looking forward to using again & again... :P

Her fic Through Fire or Fury also updated today so go say Hi, since she basically made sure I *had* to get this chapter done today by mentioning it in her chapter notes XD

On with the madness - WE FINALLY MADE IT TO THE HINTERLANDS! *sobs*

In hindsight it had been ridiculous for Liz to expect some kind of sign to indicate when their rag-tag group had finally reached the Hinterlands. Judging from the maps they had of the area there was almost no distinction between the wilderness stretching west to the foothills of the Frostbacks and the more lush lands surrounding Redcliffe and Rainsfere. Since they’d left the Imperial Highway near the southernmost point of Lake Calenhad there had been a slow transition from the sparse frost-bitten pine forests to the richer green hills that rose up to the east. They’d decided after some lengthy discussion around the campfire a few nights previously that the best route to take to reach the camp which the Inquisition scouts had established near the Crossroads would involve cutting straight through the Hinterlands from its western outskirts rather than trying to sneak south past Redcliffe. It took the better part of a day’s walking south to reach the point where they would enter the Hinterlands, through a narrow gully that cut between two long stretches of hills. The half-crumbled ancient stone arch at the gully’s mouth was as much of a ‘Now Entering the Hinterlands’ sign as Liz could hope to expect.

With the last flickering rays of daylight swiftly disappearing behind the Frostbacks, Cassandra put forth the unanimously accepted suggestion of camping in a cave they’d passed a mile back from the archway rather than attempting to find a safe place to sleep in the Hinterlands proper, before it was too dark to see your own hand in front of your face. While they may have passed no travellers on the path they’d taken this far, it was never good to let down your guard in such troubled times.
After the far quieter wake-up the group had had that morning, Tara’s dreams apparently being mere kittens compared to the previous night, Solas sought out the younger mage with some confidence that his assistance might be needed again.

“Not a fucking chance,” Tara stated before Solas had even managed to finish verbalising his offer. “Like I said last night, I would allow someone else to meddle inside my head once, and once only. I reached the Fade proper and was able to reestablish my own wards from that side to prevent any future asshole nightmares slipping through.” She stood from her spot next to the campfire, carrying her bowl to the mouth of the cave to sluice out the remnants of stew with a wave of magic before turning back to Solas.

“While I appreciate that you feel I may present a risk to the group if I experience another nightmare, I ought to remind you that I spent a year having fairly frequent nightmares where the fucking Archdemon was literally taunting me in whispers I couldn’t understand. I didn’t succumb to any demons then and I was barely out of the Circle! I’ve got this handled.”

“But one night can hardly be sufficient time to re-familiarise yourself with being in the Fade when you only resided within your own dreamspace,” Solas argued. “The ward I placed was not broken —”

“True, but did you not consider that it was easy to escape your ward without needing to tamper with it?” Tara replied with a smirk. “Walls can be climbed Hah’ren if you have the tools to do so.”

The elf’s jaw dropped a fraction before he snapped it shut again. “I see. I may have misjudged, I apologise.” His expression was tightly controlled with no hint of the extent of his feelings showing through.

Tara shrugged. “I doubt it will be the last time you or anyone else will make an assumption about me Solas. Just be willing to actually accept the version of me that is real, rather than cling to the version you have constructed in your own mind. I don’t wish to keep explaining myself to people who don’t care to listen to what I say. Thank you for your offer but it is not necessary.” Giving him a bland smile Tara walked away from the camp fire to the women’s tent at the back of the cave, waving to the others before ducking inside.

“Does anyone else get the feeling that we missed almost all the important points of that conversation?” Varric piped up as he fiddled with one of Bianca’s mechanisms in his lap. “I’m guessing Sparky did something that Chuckles didn’t expect her to do?”

“That is an apt summary Master Tethras,” Solas said stiffly. “I have been reminded that I have not encountered anyone with Tara’s particular experience or abilities before and that it would serve me better in the future to not so easily forget that fact. Now if you will excuse I shall see about warding and disguising the cave entrance so we all might sleep without requiring a watch tonight.”

Varric shared an amused look with Liz as the elf strode outside without looking back. Stifling a giggle Liz finished the last of her dinner and helped Varric to finish cleaning up while Cassandra checked on their packhorse - which had been rather dubiously named Shuffle by Tara because of the creature’s propensity to drag its hooves rather than lift them up when taking a step.

Once Solas returned from setting the wards the rest of the group began retreating to the tents to get in a full night’s rest while they could. As Liz lifted the flap on the women’s tent she caught a glimpse of Tara’s back hunched over the open book in her lap, a slender dip pen gripped in her left hand, writing with the slow precision of someone who had fallen out of practice.

At the sound of Liz’s entry, Tara sucked in a quiet breath, her back straightening a hair too quickly
to be entirely casual. Liz deliberately turned her back as she sat down to remove her boots, giving Tara the privacy to finish whatever she was doing that she had purposefully sought privacy to write. Once Liz heard the muffled clink of a glass bottle and the shushed sound of leather settling she glanced over her shoulder to check it was okay for her to move into the tent fully.

Tara was refastening the straps on her pack as Liz came to sit beside her, no sign of the writing supplies save for the faint black smudges on her fingertips and a reddened indent on the first knuckle of her fourth finger. Eyes lifting to Liz’s face a grateful smile spread over her lips.

“You have no idea how much I appreciate your sense of tact Lizzie dearest,” Tara sighed softly. “Most people would have nosed over my shoulder or asked half a dozen questions by now. You… you just let me get on with it without ever needing to be told.”

Liz wrapped her arm around Tara’s waist, tipping her head to rest on Tara’s shoulder. “I remember the fear of people poking their noses into my things at the Circle, anything that wasn’t a thought in my head was fair game for other mages or the templars to put their hands on and examine. I’m slightly in awe of your bravery to keep a journal at all. I’d be terrified of who could stumble upon the words dredged from the deepest depths of me and committed to paper.” Liz shuddered. “If I don’t get the thoughts out of my head then they’ll just keep swirling around and around until they drive me insane. They only start to make sense when I write them down - I’ve never been good at talking through my problems with people. When they’re scrawled onto a page, they’re just words and don’t seem half so scary.” Tara shook her head, laughing at herself. “It was fine when other people kept telling me about their problems and asking me to help fix them. I can handle a fucking Ferelden Civil War during a Blight but I can’t figure out what shit is going on in my own head if I don’t spend time every day puzzling it out with a pen.”

Squeezing her friend tighter Liz smiled. “Different people deal with shit in all sorts of different ways. I would tell my brother all my worries in the middle of the night when no one else could hear but he would keep his all locked away inside until they broke free and he’d come running to me, sobbing until he fell asleep in my arms.” Her expression grew sad. “I hope he’s had someone to comfort him since I was taken to the Circle.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” Tara said brow wrinkling. “What happened to him?”

“It’s kind of hard to talk about having a brother when you’ve not seen him in 15 years and only have spoken to him via letters in the last year,” Liz replied with a sigh. “He ended up being sent to the Chantry as well - just in case he showed signs of magic too. But he’s not a mage, he’s a scholar in Denerim.”

Tara nodded in sympathy “It does start to feel like you don’t really have siblings once they’ve been missing from your life for so long. I apparently have something like four siblings - all mages - yet I don’t remember any of them or where they ended up. I think I was the youngest and I was 7 when I first showed my magic so my brothers or sisters were probably already gone by that time. I hope you can see your brother again though. I’m sure Leliana or Josephine would be able to track him down if you asked?”

“I reckon Leliana already knows exactly where Henry is,” Liz laughed. “But with Ferelden being so chaotic right now I don’t know if I want him travelling from Denerim to Haven. Anything could happen on the journey and he’s no fighter.”

“We’ll figure out a way to get you two reunited,” Tara promised, dropping a soft kiss on Liz’s forehead. “But for now we’d better get some sleep. Maker knows what we’ll find once we enter the Hinterlands but I’m betting it’s not going to be an easy stroll through to the scout camp.”
Liz grinned, reaching to pull back the blankets on their bedroll. “What about any of this has been easy so far?”

* * *

_Fucking bandits._ Of course there were bandits camped at the end of the gully into the Hinterlands. It made perfect sense, it was one of the only routes in or out of the region that didn’t require you to scale small mountains and the half-mile corridor between the hills either side funnelled travellers right to the dozen bandits waiting on the other end. Tara should have seen the trap coming before they’d taken one step through the archway.

She narrowly avoided having her face skewered when a barrier flashed into place scant seconds before the arrow shattered against it. Only after did she register the shriek that had come from Liz a few paces behind her. Her heart rediscovered its proper rhythm as her gaze snapped to the bandits scrambling to their feet in the clearing in front of them.

“Fuck a nug!” Tara snatched her daggers from their sheaths. “Keep saving my ass like that Liz, and I might start believing that Andraste really did send you!”

“Now’s not the time to find religion Sparky!” Varric called as he shrugged Bianca from her holster on his back. “I think we’ve got more pressing issues!”

Tara gave him a wide, teeth-baring smile, eyes alight. “Oh I can see that. What a lovely way to start the day!” She glanced back at Liz who had her staff gripped in white-knuckled hands. “Barriers and healing sound good?”

Liz gave a stiff nod in reply, her grip relaxing a fraction. Tara wondered if their dear Herald had actually killed a meat-person before now, either way she’d soon find out. Facing back towards their foes she cast a quick look sideways to find Cassandra on her right, sword and shield ready and a wicked gleam in her eyes. They nodded to one another, settling their grips on their weapons.

The bandits seemed hesitant to charge them despite having over double their numbers, although Tara couldn’t sense any mages among them. More fool them. A warrior with a blood-flecked maul started to take a step towards her, rogue’s armour and weapons apparently making her seem the easier target. He’d soon learn.

“Hey ho, here we go,” Tara sung under her breath before Stepping across the clearing to cut down the archer who’d shot at her as they’d arrived.

The rest of the bandits spooked at her disappearance only to scream into action when their comrade’s body hit the ground a few moments later. The warrior turned his attention to Cassandra and roared a challenge.

“Maker take you!” The Seeker cried in response, darting forward to smash her shield into the man with a bone-shaking clang.

The clearing erupted into chaos and Tara’s focus narrowed sharply on finding her next opponent. Cool blue magic tingled over her skin as Liz cast barriers from wherever she’d positioned herself - out of sight Tara hoped.

With a gleeful yell she flung herself at another rogue several feet away, letting lightning crackle...
over her blades as she brought them up to engage. Her target blanched as sparks jolted through their connected daggers, leaping back with a pained hiss. Tara smirked, relishing the rush as she stalked their retreat.

Lashing out with a dagger, the rogue tried to catch her off-guard only for Tara’s barrier to absorb most of the hit. Taking a quick Step around the bandit she slashed her own blade across the exposed section of neck between the base of their helmet and chest armour, severing their spine and killing them instantly.

A strange little tune crept into Tara’s thoughts, sparking a memory of practice fights that brought more laughter than bloodshed. Training to use a sword with Alistair, learning footwork to the rhythm of a tavern song she hadn’t thought of in ten years. Nothing like confusing your enemies with something unexpected. Tara chuckled, a new spring in her step as she sought the next bandit to catch her eye.

* 

Varric had thought Tara’s fighting style was formidable when he’d first saw her cutting a swathe through demons at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Seeing her now was borderline terrifying; vanishing and reappearing in a deadly whirl of enchanted daggers, light and agile on her half-bare feet as she danced around the clearing, almost toying with those she fought. A wild expression on her face, her lips moving as her body flowed from parrying and blocking, to slashing and stabbing.

Over on the edge of the clearing he had to pick his shots carefully, so many bodies in such a small area, at least two of them being Cassandra and Tara, he didn’t want to risk accidentally firing a bolt at one of them. The Seeker would stab him in the book again if he grazed her. He was left to try picking off stragglers at the edge of the group, or if anyone turned their attention to Liz or Solas holding position at the mouth of the gully.

The bandits were down nearly half of their numbers when Varric was suddenly noticed by another rogue who’d been prowling the opposite side of the clearing, waiting for an opening to attack when either Sparky or Cassandra had their backs turned. As the bandit disappeared into stealth Varric did the same, circling around the main fight as quickly as his legs could carry him. There was no telling where the other rogue would reappear and he sure as shit didn’t want it being behind him.

From his new hiding spot Varric was much closer to Tara as she exchanged blows with two of the remaining bandits. Every few clangs of her dagger she’d do a strange flourish and dance away to the side before re-engaging. He stared as she jumped a foot straight up for no clear reason, landing gracefully and sweeping a killing blow across the bandit’s throat with a gesture that turned into a bow. The poor sod died with pure confusion on his face and Varric was no less bewildered.

Creeping closer still Varric finally made it within earshot of Tara as she duelled with her second opponent. It a few moments to truly understand what he was hearing and then he almost cracked a rib trying not to explode into laughter.

Tara was fucking singing as she fought. A void-taken tavern song of all things. Timing her blows with the beats and doing flourishses with each cry of “So Hey! Ho!” Oddly the song sounded familiar although he couldn’t place it while his mind was still reeling with the absurdity of seeing the Hero of Ferelden singing drinking songs while battling bandits.

In his distraction Varric missed when his stealth expired and left him a glaring target. Sparky snapped her head in his direction and in a blink had Stepped to him, dagger raised high, arcing down to carve a shallow line across the chest of the rogue who was poised to stab Varric in the back.
“Fuck!” Varric dropped Bianca down and dived to the side as soon as Tara had materialised a mere foot from his nose. Rolling back to his feet he cocked the crossbow and looked back to the fight he’d almost been in the middle of.

The rogue bandit clearly had some skill with daggers as they kept up with Tara’s rapid dance of metal, catching the blows on the cross-guards before pushing back at the taller woman. Over the grunts and bright clashes Varric caught the words that Tara was singing.

“So lift your cups up, and drink it all down! First one to falter, buys the next round!” Tara spun away at the end of the verse, giving the bandit a taunting grin as she rolled her wrists a few times before leaping back into the fray. “So find me a maid with a mischievous smile, buy us both drinks and piss off for a while!”

The wild cackle of laughter that burst from Tara set the hairs standing on the back of Varric’s neck and he could tell it unnerved the bandit too. Their footwork faltered and they stumbled back a step, giving Tara the opening to lunge for the kill.

“So Hey! Ho! Lift your cups high!” Tara pushed off from the ground jabbing one dagger forward, her whole torso twisting to power through the motion as she landed toe to toe with the bandit. “There’s beer for the drinking, and fresh berry pie!” Her daggers blurred, raining down blows on her opponent, sneaking past their guard to slash bright red lines that bloomed against their armour. “There’s wenches and whiskey and bread made from rye!” The bandit’s arms dropped, knees giving way as Tara finally overwhelmed them. “So Hey! Ho! Lift your cups high!” Silence fell with the final blow.

The battle had ended as Tara began her final attack, leaving her last cry to echo around the clearing. Varric took a shaky breath, glancing about to check there were no more foes to face before holstering Bianca on his back. Cassandra stared at Tara with a muddle of surprise, awe and a sliver of fear in her eyes. She wasn’t the only one gazing at the mage in disbelief. The Tara they’d seen thus far had been a mere fraction of the ferocity of the fighter just unleashed. Varric could now give credence to the stories he’d heard of the Hero of Ferelden’s skill with blades after she’d learnt the Arcane Warrior magic somewhere deep in the Brecilian Forest.

Hoping the dispel the lingering tension in the clearing Varric turned to Tara and joked, “Singing, Sparky? Seriously? Is that how you scared off the darkspawn? I’m surprised the Wardens don’t recruit more bards to the ranks if that’s the battle strategy you use.”

Tara’s posture relaxed, a grin visible on her face as she swung around to face everyone. If you knew where to look there was still something slightly wary in her eyes, unsure of her reception after such a display. “The darkspawn were less appreciative of my vocal talents I’m afraid, Varric,” she said with a wink. “But it does baffle your average brigand or ruffian so beautifully, I thought it worth a shot.”

“Oh no it worked like a dream!” Varric laughed. “It was just a bit of surprise hearing a song I’d expect to hear back in The Hanged Man while I’m busy avoiding getting stabbed.”

Tara gave a nonchalant shrug. “It was the first tune that sprang to mind. I think it was one Alistair taught me when he was teaching me to fight with a sword and shield. Using the rhythm of the song to help me remember footwork and strike patterns.”

“Fascinating,” Cassandra remarked. “An unusual method to be sure but effective as a training tool it seems. Have you used a sword and shield since your return?”

“No, I’ve not had chance yet,” Tara replied. “But I would be very grateful for a sparring partner if
you would indulge me sometime Cassandra? I’d like to regain some of that skill in case I find myself getting bored by daggers in the future.”

Cassandra nodded with a warm smile. “I would be more than happy to spar with you Tara, although might I suggest substituting the singing for humming? For safety of course.” Wry amusement bled into her voice as Tara laughed at the comment.

“I can certainly manage that Seeker,” Tara assured her. “I’ve no wish to invite enemies to our campfire by belting bawdy songs while we practice.”

* 

“Now we’ve got that settled,” Liz called from across the clearing, drawing everyone’s attention to her. “Can I get some suggestions for what to do about my young friend here?” With the butt of her staff she pointed to the ashen-faced bandit trapped by a Glyph of Paralysis some ten paces away from her.

The youth’s face had barely shed the softness of youth, their eyes wide and terrified as they flicked to each of the five people who now held their life in judgement. No sign of any weapon near their clenched fists, Liz had caught them trying to flee the battlefield, using the chaos to creep past her into the gully. There was no reason to kill the poor kid, but she could hardly let them make off with Shuffle, who’d been hastily hitched out of harm’s way once the fight began.

“Well shit,” Varric said, having made his way over to Liz along with the rest of the group. “No way that kid was out here by choice, that ain’t even armour they’ve got on. It’s barely even a coat!”

Liz let the magic powering the Glyph go and slowly set down her staff while locking eyes with the youth. Stepping closer she held up her hands and spoke softly. “Is it alright if I give you a quick check with my magic?” The kid tensed up, hissing in a breath. “No, you don’t need to be afraid! I’m a healer, I just want to make sure you’re not hurt,” Liz hurried to reassure them.

Watching Liz with narrowed eyes, searching her face for some sign of a lie, the kid slowly let go of the air they were holding in and gave a tiny nod. Crossing the last of the distance between them Liz smiled before lightly settling her hands on the kid’s bony shoulders. She closed her eyes, letting her magic flow out, washing over the trembling youth from crown to toes.

Their grimy, possibly blond hair was shorn close to the scalp, rough clothing loose and baggy in the torso, breeches slightly too short for coltish legs. Liz guessed their age to be somewhere around thirteen summers judging from how their sharply blue eyes were almost on a level with her own. She could sense no serious recent injuries, just assorted bruises and hunger that seemed as though the kid hadn’t eaten for at least a day. A few questions lingered.

“What’s your name child?” She asked quietly. “Where is your family? How did you end up with these people?”

A shudder ran down the youth’s spine. They swallowed audibly; wetting dry, cracked lips before speaking. “Name’s Regen m’lady,” the low gruff voice was noticeable Ferelden. “Them bandits killed my Da an’ my two older brothers as we tried passin’ through to get to Haven. Left me alive cos they thought I were too weedy a lad to be worth bleedin’” Regen spat on the ground. “Had me fetchin’ wood an’ water for ‘em then chained me to a tree at night so I din’t run. Those shites were no match for you lot m’lady, I ain’t got no wish to die with ‘em.”

The determination in Regen’s gaze as he looked at Liz was impressive even as it made her heart clench with sadness at what the kid had suffered. Sending a quick wave of healing over him, Liz let
go of his shoulders and unhooked her waterskin from her belt. She held it out to him. “Drink as much as you need. I promise you, we’re not going to kill you Regen.”

Taking the waterskin, Regen cast a dubious look round the group watching him. Eyes lingering on Tara, who was cleaning off her daggers with a scrap of fabric torn from one of the bandit’s clothing, he jerked his head at her and muttered to Liz,

“What about her? I ain’t see anyone fight like that before. She ain’t gonna kill me if I run is she? She’s not one of them Crows I heard tales about at the market right?”

Liz shook her head and laughed. “Tara? An Antivan Crow? No, she’s just a friend from the Free Marches. She’s picked up odd tricks in weird places though. I swear on the Maker, she’s no danger to you.”

Tara held her fist over her heart and gave Regen a solemn-faced bow. “I swear on my honour that my blades will only be wielded against those who seek to harm me and mine. I do not murder the innocent, especially not those held against their will. Although I did actually know a Crow,” She winked slyly as she finished her declaration.

Regen’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?” A crack of youthful excitement burst through the tightly controlled expression. “Are they as terrifyin’ as the stories say? All shadows an’ sharp knives in the night?”

Sliding her now-clean daggers back into their sheaths, Tara snorted with laughter. “Oh kid, I wish I could say that was true. The Crow I knew was a terrifying flirt and a piss-poor lock-pick but since I hear he’s systematically taken out every other Crow who ever tried to kill him over the last ten years I guess he probably does strike terror into a lot of people. Just not me.”

“That sounds like the same Crow I know Sparky,” Varric remarked. “He was doing pretty well for himself when I saw him a couple of years ago in Antiva. He’s gotten much better at picking locks now.”

“Oh good,” Tara replied, smirking. “I did start to worry that I’d have to get Barkly to show him how to do it at one point he fumbled the picks that often. Maybe he was doing it on purpose so I’d stop asking him to open every chest and door we came across.”

Regen’s eyes were nearly wide as saucers listening to their conversation. “Who are you people?” he asked in a fervent tone.

“We are part of the Inquisition,” Cassandra answered gently, gesturing to Liz. “This is Elizabeth Trevelyan, some call her the Herald of Andraste.”

“Some, meaning people who don’t actually know me,” Liz added quickly. “My friends call me Liz unless they are trying to be funny.”

“Of course Herald,” Cassandra deadpanned so flawlessly it sent Varric and Tara into fits of laughter, even prompting a slight chuckle out of Solas.

Liz rolled her eyes and groaned. “Yes, yes, you’re all hilarious.”

Turning to Regen she said, “We’re trying to get to our scouting team just outside the Crossroads. I’d like for you to come with us, then I know you’ll be somewhere safer than on your own in the Hinterlands or on the road to Haven. Only if you want to of course. I’m not going to force you to come with us back across the Hinterlands when there’s potentially rogue mages, templars and Maker knows what else roaming about. But I would sleep better tonight knowing you are fed and
well-defended in the Inquisition camp. What do you think?”

“I’m not gonna be a prisoner?” Regen frowned.

“Maker, no!” Liz wanted to hug the poor kid but that’d probably be a tad much for him to deal with just then. “As of right now, I’m declaring you a Ward of the Inquisition and under its full protection.”

“You can do that?” He asked incredulously.

Liz shrugged. “Who knows? But if they’re going to call me Herald then I reckon I should be able to fling that authority about to help people if I can. Once we get to the camp I’m going to make sure that you get proper clothes and some armour to wear - I’m sure the scouts will have something sized for someone younger or maybe a dwarf that we can make fit. Obviously a hot dinner or three because I know for a fact you need it.”

Regen flushed under all the dirt and grime on his face. “You don’t have to do that for me m’lady. I’m fine, I don’ need anythin’ really.”

“Nice try, but no Ward of the Inquisition is going cold and hungry on my watch,” Liz stated, folding her arms across her chest in an attempt to look as authoritative as she could when barely a full inch taller than the lad she was scolding.

A smile twitched in the corner of Regen’s mouth, quickly smothered when Liz raised her eyebrow at him. “As you say m’lady,” he sighed, squaring his shoulders. “But I ain’t gonna be a no good layabout when you’re stickin’ your necks out to keep me alive. I’m good with snares and findin’ things to eat in the woods, plus I know these parts - you want to avoid all the magic folk an’ tin cans? I know a few hunting paths that’ll keep us off the roads most of the way to the Crossroads.”

“I like the sound of that, kid,” Varric grinned.

“So do I,” Tara agreed. “Let’s get all this mess cleaned up, then our resident Hinterlands expert can show us the way through this mess so we don’t get any more arrows to the face. I’d rather we didn’t do that again.”

Liz elbowed Tara in the stomach. “It was one arrow and you’re welcome by the way.”

Chapter End Notes

I'll be real with you, I have no fucking clue where Regen came from. Damn kid just popped out of nowhere *today* and now I have like half a plot thread already materialising that I gotta add to the weave. Writing is wild, man.

I had hoped that we could make it to the Outskirts Camp in this chapter but life ain't working out that way. But we're actually *in* the Hinterlands and it only took 45K to get there! XD So next time we're going to meet up with the Queen of Scouts!

As always, leave a comment if you like, throw a kudos my way to remind me to not take so damn long to post the next chapter, every single one I get is like a warm hug from my inbox ^_^
Chapter Sixteen - Scout Harding is Always a Win

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Good evening dear jelly beans! Despite my hopes to have another chapter up for you last week, alas Real Life intruded somewhat and stole my weekend (in a not all bad way thankfully) so it’s only today that I’ve been able to finish up this newest chapter. It’s also a good deal shorter than the last one but if I’m writing more regularly I don’t need to churn out quite so much in one go ;)

Usual massive thanks & love go to Lady_Savannah and also cookies for my regular commenting babes Dovah & Beckily - every time I see your names pop up in my inbox it makes me smile so thank you for your continued support ^_^

Hope you enjoy reading! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The Herald of Andraste? We’ve heard the stories- Inquisition Scout Harding at your service. It’s good that you’re here. We’d had word from Haven that you were on your way although with all the fighting out there, we weren’t sure if you’d run into trouble.”

Liz could have hugged the cheerfully smiling dwarf, she was that happy to see the Inquisition banner as they stumbled into the camp. Almost the entire day had been spent creeping along narrow and sometimes worryingly steep paths, watching where every step was placed to avoid sending stones or themselves clattering down a rocky slope. But Regen had been true to his word; he’d gotten them to the Inquisition camp without seeing any creature larger than a fennec, and they’d caught a few of the ones they’d come across.

“We did have a bit of a run-in with some bandits as we entered the Hinterlands,” Liz said, returning Harding’s smile with equal warmth. “But they weren’t too much trouble, and our new friend Regen did an excellent job of navigating us the rest of the way here.” She swept out her arm to point out the suddenly blushing youth who stood at the back of the group next to Varric. “I’d like for Regen to stay with the scouts until we return to Haven, so he’s going to need some new clothes and armour plus a bedroll and—”

“M’lady you don’t have to do that, I’ll be fine wi’ just another pair of breeches,” Regen interrupted.

Swivelling her head to glare at the youth, Liz replied in a steely tone, “What did I say this morning? No Ward of the Inquisition is going cold or hungry. Maker take me, I’m going to make sure you’re outfitted properly and eating decent meals. You hear me?”

Nodding fervently, Regen bowed deeply. “Yes m’lady Herald. I hear you.” A twinkle of mischief glinted in his pale blue eyes.

Liz wagged a mock-scolding finger at him with a grin. “Good, now go find whoever’s manning the cook-pot and hand over our contribution to dinner.”
Snapping his fist over his heart in a salute, Regen made another bow before skipping off further into the camp, the string of fennecs and a solitary nug bouncing against his back.

“I’m guessing you rescued the kid from the bandits?” Scout Harding remarked. Liz nodded. “I’ll see about getting supplies sorted for him, I think we’ve got some spares that’ll fit. One of the lads who tends to the ravens is about the same age so I can place Regen with him until you’re able to escort him back to Haven.”

“Thank you Scout Harding, that would be wonderful,” Liz sighed in relief. “His father and brothers were killed as they tried to flee the Hinterlands - if I have to declare every orphan I find a Ward of the Inquisition to make sure they have someone to care for them, I’ll do it.”

A bark of laughter escaped Tara, “Oh I can’t wait to see the flock of children we end up accumulating with you on the Mother Hen rampage. I think we’d better warn the Advisers that we’re likely to need more appropriate resources for the younger refugees as we find them. My bet is some will be in an even worse state than Regen.”

Harding’s gaze shifted from Liz to the woman behind her, blinking twice as she took in Tara’s face before shaking her head. A sober expression replaced her initial cheery demeanour as she spoke again. “I’m afraid you’re probably right. We’ve not been able to get a headcount on the refugees yet but this war has left quite a lot of families scattered and broken. Some have made it to the Crossroads where Mother Giselle and her helpers are doing what they can for them, but resources are scarce and there’s no safe route to get more in just yet.”

“We’re going to do our best to fix that quickly,” Liz stated. “Mother Giselle will be our first port of call tomorrow and then we can start addressing whatever else is urgent in the area. Have we had any word about the Horse-master Commander Cullen wants us to contact?”

“Horse-master Dennet lives out to the west and there’s currently dozens of rogue mages and templars scattered between here and him,” Harding reported. “None of our people have been able to get through to even see if he’s still alive. But we’ve got a rough idea of where the two factions have encamped plus the locations of several rifts that we can transfer onto your maps.”

“Sounds good to me,” Liz smiled. “Is there somewhere we can get cleaned up before dinner is ready? Sneaking through the countryside is surprisingly sweaty work.”

The dwarf nodded, waving for the group to follow her. “We’ve got a tent set up with a tub and I can start sending men to the stream with buckets if you wish Herald?”

“We can probably just dunk ourselves in the stream itself so long as there are guards about. No need to fill a tub five times when we can go to the water. And please call me Liz, too much Heralding is going to give me a headache,” she winked, prompting a giggle from Scout Harding.

“I can arrange that, Liz. Welcome to the Hinterlands.”

* * *

Tara had deliberately waited until last to head to the stream to clean up; once the idea of sharing a stream with her fellow travellers wouldn’t have sent prickles of fear down her spine. Ten years spent around spirits who have little to no interest in meat-people shells had all but erased her self-consciousness about what her year of fighting had done to her body. But the newer memories that had been carved into her skin and deeper were not something she could explain to people just yet.

Her recent body shyness had led Tara to bathe at odd times in Haven when no one else was around
and since they left for the Hinterlands she’d quietly asked Liz if she’d stand guard while she washed up. To her surprise, Liz had seemed almost relieved by her request and asked if Tara would do the same for her. Every night they’d alternate washing and standing watch for each other once the rest had done. Never asking why or sneaking a peek at what they wanted to hide.

So when Tara reached the bank of the stream, her clean clothes and washing gear bundled in her arms, she almost leapt out of her skin when Liz suddenly crested from beneath the water in front of her.

“Fuck a nug!”

Liz’s eyes were closed when she emerged, but flew wide at Tara’s curse - a strangled yelp getting caught in her throat as she wrapped her arms around her bare torso. Thank the Maker she’d kept her smalls on. Her heart thudded against her ribs beneath her arms as she stared up at Tara, whose face was caught between mortification and the same kind of shock Liz was currently feeling. Then Tara’s eyes flicked lower for a second and the shock shifted to something like horror.

Shit. In trying to avoid exposing her chest, she’d forgotten to hide the real reason she bathed in private. Beneath her arms, her stomach was clearly visible and so was the livid scar a few inches above her navel. Its shape was unmistakable to anyone who had wielded a sword and impossible to believe. If Liz had dared to turn her back, it would have revealed the sister scar several inches to the right of her spine.

Meeting Tara’s eyes, Liz straightened her back and waited. After several moments of silently assessing, Tara’s mouth twisted into a slight grimace, her jaw clenching as a decision flashed over her expression. Tara set down her bundle of clothes on the bank of the stream and stood, taking a deep breath before pulling her shirt off over her head. When Tara lowered her arms again, Liz jolted, her foot slipping slightly as she was thrown off-balance.

Beneath Tara’s right collar bone sat four lozenge-shaped scars, pockmarked so deeply you could almost fit a fingertip in the hollows left behind. While the skin around the scars was only a few shades paler than her face - Tara’s Rivaini ancestry showing through as her complexion darkened with each sunny day - the scars themselves were icy white, almost unnaturally so. A shiver rippled over Liz’s skin, her gut uneasy as she stared at Tara’s shoulder.

*What in the void had inflicted a wound so brutal as to leave scars that deep? And when?*

Liz’s heart clenched at the wary look on Tara’s face, her teeth worrying at her lower lip as she held herself so carefully. Giving her friend a reassuring smile, Liz relaxed one arm and traced a shaky finger over the scar on her stomach.

“Until the day I am ready to talk about this, I won’t ask a single question about those,” she nodded towards Tara’s shoulder. “And you are under no obligation to answer any such questions until the day you feel ready to tell me. Does that work for you?”

Exhaling heavily, Tara nodded. She blinked away the wateriness in her eyes and gave Liz a nervous smile. “That sounds perfect. Do you want me to give you time to finish washing or—”

“Just get in here,” Liz gestured, sinking back down into the water. “No reason not to now, you’ve already seen me basically naked.”

Tara cackled at the lascivious wink Liz sent her way before setting about removing the soft, linen breeches she’d been wearing beneath her armour. Next she unwrapped her breast band, revealing the small tattoo on her ribs that was only visible when she lifted her arm.
“Is that… a rose?” Liz squinted at the delicate lines inked onto Tara’s skin.

Tara pressed her eyes closed, waiting for the sudden pang of memory to fade before nodding. When she looked back at Liz, there was a saddened understanding on her face. “It hurt like a bitch, getting it done,” she said dryly. “Took Zev the better part of an evening to do and Maker did it cause a fuss that I spent several hours half-naked with a dashing Antivan Assassin.”

“Oh really?” Liz grinned.

Tara laughed and rolled her eyes. “Yep. A certain someone actually refused to speak to me for three whole days until I crept into his tent and took off my shirt to show him what I’d really been doing with Zevran. Once he’d stopped apologising for being a jealous idiot he did rather a good job at making it up to me. Even managed to look Zev in the eye the next morning without blushing.”

Leaping from the bank without warning, Tara landed with a loud splash next to Liz, smacking her in the face with a wave of chilly water. Once Tara got her footing, Liz pushed her hands across the surface of the stream, giving back as good as she got. Both women dissolved into shrieks of laughter as they launched into an all-out water fight.

* 

The handful of Inquisition soldiers standing guard within earshot smothered grins at the noise coming from the stream. The Herald of Andraste wasn’t quite as fearsome as the stories had painted her, it seemed.

* 

Later, after they’d eventually gotten out of the stream and dried themselves off, Tara and Liz joined the others around the campfire to devour a hearty bowlful of the stew and grilled meat that had been prepared by Harding’s people. It took Liz a moment to recognise the eager, blond lad in scout’s leathers who collected their empty bowls as a considerably cleaner Regen. At the surprised look on her face, Regen smirked.

“Am I lookin’ presentable now, m’lady?” He asked with a cheeky wink. “Scout Harding got me set up with nicer gear than I ever had in my life an’ no one yelled when I took two bowls of stew and ate ‘em both myself! I think I’m goin’ to like it here.”

Liz fought back a sudden surge of emotion and smiled widely at the boy. “I’m extremely glad you’re settling in well here, Regen. Hopefully it won’t be too many weeks before we can escort you to Haven.”

The lad shrugged his narrow shoulders. “There’s lots of stuff I can do to help around camp, and Scout Harding says I can learn to help Daniel with the birds that carry messages and whatnot. Don’t worry about me m’lady, I’ll not be bored sittin’ about doin’ nothing I promise you that.”

At his assured declaration, Liz beamed with pride, catching sight of similar looks of approval on the others’ faces. Cassandra in particular, was moved by Regen’s honest desire to help the Inquisition in whatever way he could. Solas seemed almost impressed at the courage shown by the young human since they’d rescued him, a contemplative smile curling the corners of his mouth as he glanced between Regen and Liz.

“You’re gonna be a credit to the Inquisition, kid,” Varric said from across the campfire. “I’ve got a good sense for these things- Liz ain’t gonna regret taking you on for even a second.”

“Thank you ser,” Regen replied, flushing. “I don’t want m’lady to ever think she made a mistake
Liz reached out to clasp Regen’s shoulder and squeezed briefly. “I’m probably going to make many mistakes in the near future wearing this ill-fitting mantle of Herald but Andraste witness me, saving you Regen, was the furthest thing from a mistake I could choose to do and I’d make the same decision again in a heartbeat.”

“Oh.” Was all the response the lad could muster, blush spreading all the way to his ears. Clutching the empty bowls to his chest, he made a deep bow to Liz before backing away from the fire and disappearing into the camp.

A few seconds passed before Tara barked out a laugh. “Maker’s balls, Liz! For all your talk of not being Andraste’s Herald, you’re sure doing a damn good job of making folk feel the call to join the faithful when you come out with shit like that.”

The glare Liz shot back at her could’ve peeled paint. “Don’t make me dunk you in the river again, Tara.”

“You can try, your Worship.”

“Oh, fuck you!”

“Only if you ask me nicely.”

“If you’re quite finished,” Cassandra interjected with an exasperated sigh. “I think we should all be turning in for the night, tomorrow will be a very busy day, I fear.”

“Ten silver says we get our weapons wet before noon,” Varric said as he stood and stretched.

“Nah, I reckon it’ll be before we’ve even gotten an hour away from the camp,” Tara countered.

“I’ll take that bet.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand next time we're finally gonna meet up with Mother Giselle! I'll be honest, I didn't want to have to write two consecutive chapters with fight scenes so the Crossroads mage/templar battle section could wait until chapter 17 :P

Hopefully this chapter doesn't feel like filler though ^_^

As always please leave a comment if you like, drop a kudos if you haven't yet (I know I sure forget to sometimes), and if you're feeling like you might in fact want to know when I post the next chapter, then please do subscribe (end youtuber spiel) XD

Also because I love me some procrastination I finally made a tumblr for all my DA nonsense so if you want to find me over there then feel free (I'm still kinda new to handling a sideblog so I may occasionally fuck up in reblogging stuff to the wrong tumblr XD also I didn't realise that I would end up following folk as my main blog soooo oops?)
Chapter Seventeen - Clearing the Crossroads

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Happy 4th of July! (I know it's slightly daft for me *a Brit* to say but whatevs) I hope fireworks, food & booze are a pleasant distraction from the raging trashfire of the US news cycle even if only for a day.

Here’s a little more distraction! I hope you enjoy!

Usual uber thanks to Lady_Savannah who posted a new chapter on Monday and cracked 80K on Through Fire or Fury. Now we both get to ride the Milestone Party Bus! WOooooo!

*edit* I am a fucking dipstick who managed to mess up my chapter number even though it WAS RIGHT THERE. Ugh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You owe me ten fucking silver, Varric!”

“Yes, well maybe when we’re not about to get fried like sitting nugs I can take a moment to reach my fucking coinpurse eh, Sparky?”

“I’m just letting you know, I’m not going to forget if you try to weasel out of paying up. I can hold a grudge for a pretty long time y’know!”

“I’m not gonna swindle you Sparky, I’ve seen enough of what you can do with the business ends of those daggers to know what a stupid idea that would be!”

“Good! Now do me a favour and stick a few bolts in that tin can prick clanking up behind me!”

Diving forward into a roll, Tara heard three meaty thuds and a choked-off gasp as Varric’s shots landed. She faced the wild-eyed Templar as his sword dropped from his grip and he crashed to his knees. The man’s face was blood-streaked and gaunt, the hollows beneath his blood-shot eyes making him almost like the corpse he was soon going to be. Lyrium withdrawals and hate had damn near devoured him from the inside.

The swift dagger she swept across his throat was as much mercy as she could give.

* 

They’d made it all of two miles from the camp before an Inquisition scout came sprinting up the road from the Crossroads crying out that a dozen rogue mages and templars had blasted their way into the settlement and were at risk of killing more than just each other as their battle raged so close to all the refugees.

Liz shrugged her staff free of its holster on her back, gripping it tight to keep her fingers from trembling. She unhooked her waterskin from her belt and passed it to the scout as they tried to
catch their breath.

“Once you feel able, please return to the camp and inform Scout Harding we will need more soldiers sending to secure the Crossroads as soon as possible,” Liz was impressed at how steady her own voice sounded giving the order.

“Yes, Your Worship,” the scout replied with a salute before handing back the half-drained waterskin. “Maker watch over you.” Setting off at a run the scout continued up the hill until they vanished from sight.

Liz rolled her shoulders and resettled her grip on her staff. Looking to the others their weapons were already drawn and ready, their eyes on her, waiting. *For her to lead them.* She heaved in a deep breath and straightened her spine.

“Our priority is to eliminate the danger to the Crossroads before too many are killed. That being said, I would rather we didn’t cut down every single rogue mage or templar without at least trying to get them to surrender first. There are likely a lot of terrified and exhausted people down that hill who just want to survive and know no other way to do that. The Inquisition should be trying to provide safety and shelter to all who need it, even those who might currently be posing a threat to others.”

“That is an admirable goal, Elizabeth,” said Cassandra. “But will these apostates even listen to us? They may think us as much a danger to them as the templars they’ve been fighting for years.”

“There is also the risk that the templars themselves will attack us if we appear to be aiding the apostates,” Solas pointed out.

Liz’s stomach clenched. “I understand both your concerns, and I agree it’s entirely likely that we’re not going to make a lick of difference by trying to persuade them to lay down their weapons peacefully. But I think it’s worth *trying* at least.”

Four solemn faces had nodded back at her, Tara’s eyes flashing with a glimmer of pride as she briefly squeezed Liz’s arm before jogging off to follow Cassandra’s lead down the hill.

It wasn’t necessary to muffle their approach into the Crossroads as the yelling and furious clangs of battle overwhelmed every other sound. The path brought them out into a flat open space in the middle of the settlement crammed with people in ragged robes and templar armour, all vying for their mutual destruction.

A squad of Inquisition soldiers were ringed around the edges of the fighting, trying desperately to keep it corralled away from the buildings where frightened faces watched from the windows. But so few soldiers could not prevent stray magical attacks from striking the cottages and at least one stood ablaze. Liz hoped fervently that anyone taking shelter there had fled before the flames took hold.

Cassandra raised her sword and let out an impassioned yell. “Lay down your weapons! Surrender to the Inquisition and your lives will be spared!” Her voice carried above the noise and several heads turned in their direction.

There was swift response from one of the templars as they turned to charge Cassandra bellowing “Die, Apostates!”

“Oh fuck it all to the void,” Tara muttered just low enough for Liz to hear. “Keep barriers on everyone you can and if you know any good way to knock out these idiots without needing to bash
them on the head then use it. If anyone charges you, please get your staff up and point the stabby end at them. We need you alive more than we need them, you hear me?”

Giving Tara a terse nod, Liz reached for her magic and cast barriers over all five of them. “Same goes for you. I don’t want to be the one sending a raven to Leliana telling her that some crazed templar took you out before we’d been in the Hinterlands two days.”

“They can fucking try,” Tara shot back as she flung herself forward into the fray.

* * *

In the end, for all of Cassandra and Solas’ pleas to surrender, only one mage was left alive, trapped by a Glyph of Paralysis that Liz had managed to throw down behind them. Gesturing for the others to stay back, she approached the young man where he stood rigid, eyes bulging as they darted from face to face. A vein pulsed in the mage’s forehead, every muscle in his neck straining against the paralysis.

Liz laid her staff down ten feet from the trapped mage and stepped closer, ignoring the hissed curses coming from Tara behind her. She held up her empty palms so the mage could see she was unarmed.

“We are with the Inquisition, we are here to help,” Liz said soothingly. “I offer you sanctuary in Haven if you are willing to come in peace. I do not want this madness and death to continue, so many of our fellow mages have been slaughtered already and I do not wish for you to join them.” Steeling herself, Liz slowly unravelled the glyph holding the apostate in place.

It took a moment for the mage to realise that he was no longer trapped. He stared at Liz and her hopeful, outstretched hand. Then his expression twisted, rage rushing forth as he raised his staff.

“You will not lure me with your lies! I will not be locked back in that tower ever again! Void Take You!” His voice suddenly deepened, a dark echo rumbling beneath his fury as his skin began to bubble and roil.

“LIZ MOVE NOW!”

The scream registered faintly as Liz stood gaping with horror at the man turning into an abomination before her very eyes. His body was shifting, blurring from the terrified human into something truly monstrous and she was within its reach. Maker save me.

Her hand was still held out in front of her, her mind too numb to snatch it back. The mage was almost unrecognisable now, the tell-tale fiery glow of a rage demon burning through the cracks of what was once a man. A roar was building within, its first target in its sights.

It lurched towards her and finally her mind unfroze.

“NO!”

Liz flung a spell into the abomination’s torso and crushed her hand into a fist. Barely a second later an unseen force yanked her backwards, the air battered from her lungs as she hit the ground hard. Stars burst across her vision as she wavered on the edge of consciousness. The rushing sound in her ears muffled the numerous voices that suddenly erupted around her.

A cool wave of magic washed over her, taking with it the dizziness and confusion clouding her senses. Two hands took hold of her face and she blinked as a seething Tara came sharply into focus.
“Are you out of your fucking mind?!” The words were barely more than a whisper but they carried the full force of a bellow. “What part of ‘We need you alive more than them’ was unclear? Andraste’s tits, Liz! That abomination was three feet from cooking you in your skin! What the fuck were you thinking?!”

Liz swallowed thickly, eyes filling as she stared at her friend’s distraught expression. “I wanted to save someone, they shouldn’t have had to die fighting us for their lives. The mages deserved to feel safe for once but these didn’t trust us enough to even listen. This war needs to end Tara, but must it end with dozens of mages dead by Inquisition blades? What more can we do?”

A strangled sob burst from Liz’s throat. Tara released her face and pulled her into a crushing hug. Rubbing a gentle hand over Liz’s back, Tara spoke in a far softer tone “Sometimes even as much as we want to, we can’t save everyone. Sometimes we have to harden our hearts, save as many as we can and make sure we’re still standing to fight the bigger battle that’s always further down the road.” Loosening her grip, Tara locked eyes with Liz.

“You’re currently our only means of closing the Breach, we need to gather enough power and resources in order for you to be able to do that. That means that until we are ready to face that challenge, your life is the single-most important thing the Inquisition must protect above everything else.”

“Surely my life should not be worth more than every other soul in Thedas?” Liz whispered.

Tara gave her a watery grin. “That’s what happens when you get caught in the wrong place when the world goes to shit. Suddenly everyone thinks you have all the answers and while half the world reveres you, the other half wants you dead and all you’ll want before long is a Maker-damned nap until the next Age. But we’ve got a lot more work to do, Lizzie my dear so I need you to stop asking abominations to dance before you turn all my hair white. Please.”

A strange laugh gurgled from Liz’s chest as she shakily wiped the tears from her face with the heel of her hand. “I could use a nap now I think. But I hear what you’re saying and I will try to remember next time. I’m sorry for scaring you Tara.”

“You’d bloody better remember,” Tara replied giving Liz a quick shake. “Maker’s balls what was that spell you hit it with though? It felt like Creation magic but then the abomination just dropped dead and that’s more like what I’d expect from Entropy magic.”

Liz looked down at her hands. The left looked less obnoxiously green with her leather fingerless gloves covering the Mark, and the right looked even more innocuous despite having just ended a man’s life with a mere flex of her fingers.

“I call it Heartstopper,” she murmured. “I modified a healing spell that stops bleeding to pinch blood vessels within the body closed, specifically those going to and from the heart. No blood to the heart and the body dies. I’ve never used it on an abomination before so I’m glad it actually worked.”

Tara’s jaw dropped, and it took her a few attempts to pick it back up again. “Well, fuck. That is not what I expected you to say. Colour me highly impressed and slightly afraid. Let’s not tell too many folk about that spell just yet eh? At least not until after you speak to that Chantry Mother we came all the way out here to see. Maker’s saggy balls you’re a dangerous, tiny, witch Liz.”

Liz jabbed a finger into Tara’s shoulder with a mock-frown. “Oi, who you calling tiny? I’m compact I’ll have you know.”
Grabbing onto the hand that was poking her, Tara stood and levered Liz up at the same time. Stood toe-to-toe the height difference between the two women was near comical, Liz’s neck craning back to glare up the eight or nine inches to Tara’s face. After a beat of silence they both crumpled into giggles until they were nearly breathless, an edge of hysteria creeping into their laughter just as Cassandra finally intervened to shush them.

“While I’m intensely grateful that you are unharmed, Herald, we need to turn our attention back to the matter at hand. The bodies need to be dealt with and I’m sure there are wounded that need to be tended to amongst our men and the refugees. How would you like to proceed?”

Drawing a few deep breaths Liz smoothed her expression and tried to calm the knot of emotions jangling beneath her ribs. “Cassandra and Tara; you two strip the dead of anything we can use, sell or return to family members and ready a pyre for them. Solas and Varric; could you help the uninjured soldiers put out any fires you can find around the settlement and let people know that it’ll soon be safe for them to come out. Any sign of more trouble, shout up. I’m going to get the wounded carried to wherever the healers are and start doing what I can for them. I’m sure Mother Giselle will make herself known once we’re done clearing up.”

Everyone nodded, accepting their tasks without comment and scattering. Liz looked about for her staff, finding it several paces from the awful scorched mess of flesh that had been the man she killed. She shuddered, dragging her gaze from the abomination and snatching up her staff. Once it was settled back in its holster she clapped her hands together, startling herself slightly with the noise.

“Let’s get to work then,” she said to no one in particular, walking away from the dead she couldn’t save, to find the living she still could.

Chapter End Notes

HOLY SHIT THIS FIC IS OVER 50K WHAT THE FRICKLE FRACK.

No lie this is now officially the second longest thing I've wrote, fic or otherwise. There's a long way to go until it'll beat the 120k novel I have gathering dust in the Nope bin but don't worry, we're definitely gonna be getting there eventually. I don't want to even attempt to guesstimate how long this fic might end up being though. Or how long it'll take.

Okay fair warning, I'm going to be changing up the format slightly for the next few chapters in a semi-desperate attempt to get through the Hinterlands without it taking 12 chapters and boring y'all to *death*. Hopefully I won't utterly bugger up the html to get it all looking how I want. Keep your fingers crossed for me! XD

As always any comments and kudos are greatly appreciated and make me a very Happy Kitten ^_^
Chapter Eighteen - Let's Get Down to Business (to fix the Fucking Hinterlands)

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Well gosh darn would ya look at that! A new update only a week after the last one! Hoo boy what a rush XD

I'm not going to go completely wild and say that I'll have the next chapter up this time next week, but it's not completely beyond the realm of possibility right?

Gotta shout-out mah best gal Lady_Savannah for suggesting this format to get me through the endless slog of the Hinterlands. I had been wracking my brain for how I could cover everything without it taking *another* 50k and boring every soul on the planet to death, so letters and lists are saving my sanity XD You're welcome. Now I can't say for certain *when* but based on the fact that I've *read* it, Lady Sav's got a new chapter for Through Fire or Fury going up soon :P

Hope you enjoy this slightly shorter chapter! ^_^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

20 Guardian 9:41 - Crossroads

C, J & L,

We survived our first proper day in the Hinterlands you’ll be pleased to know. I am sure Scout Harding sent word when we made it to camp yesterday night but I thought it would be helpful if I sent my own reports on our progress.

First and most importantly, Mother Giselle has generously offered to facilitate a meeting between the Inquisition and several influential Chantry Mothers in Val Royeaux as well as provide assistance with the civilians in Haven. As soon as we can secure safe passage through the Hinterlands she will travel to Haven and provide the names of people we may able to approach. I have to wonder if any of the other Chantry Clerics will be as open-minded as Mother Giselle appears to be - she defended the mage healers when some of the wounded refugees would have rejected their aid. She also seemed not to be perturbed by my discomfort acknowledging my supposed status as the “Herald of Andraste”.

I had hoped to convince some of the rogue mages and templars we encountered here to lay down their weapons and put aside their animosity to try and broker a real peace but as yet no one has stopped to listen before they try and kill us. It’s a little disheartening. But I’m not giving up all hope that we at least might be able to save someone.

After the morning’s excitement we remained in the Crossroads to take stock of what aid the refugees needed. Food, blankets and healing supplies are the most pressing concerns; Tara, Cassandra & Varric led a group south to hunt ram and brought back a dozen or so which should keep the settlement supplied for a while. Solas and I stayed behind to help the healers to treat the rest of the wounded. For now there’s no urgent injuries but once Mother Giselle leaves however, there will no longer be anyone in the Crossroads who is skilled with healing and herbalism.

Corporal Vale tells me that there should be a competent healer up in Redcliffe but until we can safely enter the village the refugees will have to rely on whatever herbs and potions we can supply.
Tomorrow we’re going to head over to Calenhad’s Foothold where Scout Harding reported a rift, while clearing a path through the mage/templar fighting is a priority I’m loathe to leave the demon-spewing holes in the sky open any longer than necessary. Tara’s compiling a list of everything we need to deal with which seems bigger every time I see her looking at it. I hope Teryn Cousland appreciates the honour guard we sent to Highever for the memorial. Until tomorrow.

Elizabeth

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20 Guardian 9:41 - Crossroads

Leliana,
I don’t know what Liz wrote in her report, but I’ll bet half a soggy turnip that she left out how she nearly got her damn face melted off by a mage having a spot of the abomination as she tried to talk him into surrendering to the Inquisition. She is fine don’t worry, but Andraste’s Dimpled Butcheeks my heart stopped for a few seconds.

Also she rescued a young lad from some bandits we dealt with on our way through the Hinterlands. Congratulations, the Inquisition is now taking orphan Wards. He’s a smart kid though and I reckon he’ll make a fine scout once Harding has him under her wing for a few weeks. Now there’s a fearsomely competent woman, and unfairly adorable with all those freckles...ahem what was I saying?

It’s occurred to me that this region has recovered astonishingly well considering there was a fucking Blight only ten years ago, I half-expected it to be a near barren void-scape but everything is green and I’ve only seen the odd sign that Darkspawn ever walked here! Perhaps the Blight was too short for Ferelden to be afflicted by the devastation that followed the previous four? However it happened, I’m glad of it.

Now I ought to get this to the ravens and get some sleep. I spent rather a lot of this afternoon chasing rams around a valley - they’re fast little bastards when they feel like it - Varric is still sitting gingerly after one headbutted him ass over teakettle. Bianca is unharmed, his dignity is not. Of course I’m going to tease him mercilessly for the next week, I’m sure Cassandra is reliving it right now based on the dreamy expression in her eyes. Oh no, she caught me grinning at her.

Write soon,
T.

Un-fucking the Hinterlands - List the First

1. Find Mother Giselle - Liz got that out the way pretty efficiently & for a Chantry cleric she seems alright?

2. Find Horsemaster Dennet/Acquire horses for the Inquisition - Harding says he’s somewhere to the west where they can’t get. Here’s hoping he’s not dead.

3. Close the fucking rifts - We’ve got locations for at least three so far, as Harding’s people spread out in the region I’m sure that number will climb.

4. Food for the refugees - The Crossroads is stocked for now. By the time they run out of meat we should’ve made the area safer for them to hunt themselves.

5. Winter supplies - One of Corporal Vale’s men mentioned that the refugees don’t have sufficient warm clothing and blankets. Apparently the apostates in the area have been squirrelling supplies away in various places so will be keeping an eye out for caches we can requisition for the refugees instead.

6. Healer wanted - Vale asked if we could find a proper healer from Redcliffe to see
to the Crossroads once the Chantry robes have gone. I’m picking every scrap of elfroot I find until then.

7. Find the elven kid & send his runaway ass home - Liz got the lad’s mother stabilised but said her lung condition is chronic and needs the specialised potion. This Hyndel kid is a Maker-damned fool for gallivanting off to join a fucking cult and leaving his own mother without the means to treat her illness. I think Solas wants to shake some sense into him as much as I do.

7a. A Fucking Cult in the hills - Void take me what is it about people and cults when the world is falling apart? They better not be fucking into blood sacrifices and dragons too.

8. Astrariums - What the fuck are they? Found one while out hunting ram, the intricacy of the puzzle mechanism was beyond any dwarven-crafted machine I’ve ever seen. Beautiful though and there seemed to be some magical component which indicated there were at least two others being in the area. Research further.

***

21 Guardian 9:41 - Lake Luthias
C, J & L,
We’ve set up a second Inquisition camp a few hours west of the Crossroads just beside the waterfall below Lake Luthias. Bathing this evening was delightful if a little chilly. The plateau we’re on overlooks the West Road and Fort Connor - Maker take me there are a lot of fires burning down there. When the wind shifts we can hear the fighting, although I think it has fallen quiet for the night now.
The rift at Calenhad’s Foothold is closed - it still bewilders me how I can simply hold out my hand and connect to these tears in the Veil while having no understanding of how it works. But it’s one less rift to worry about. Solas seems happy with the stability of the mark for now, it doesn’t hurt quite as much as it did before but it’s still a tad prickly when I actually close the rifts. But it’s manageable.
The ruins were fascinating, there was another Avvar statue dedicated to Tyrrda Bright-Axe (we found one in the Crossroads). I know Tara has been taking note of the inscriptions; they appear to be stanzas of a longer ballad, who knows how many more there might be, but it’s a fun treasure hunt of sorts.
Tomorrow we going to venture down to the West Road - Maker willing we’ll be able to persuade a few of the mages or templars to withdraw and maybe join the Inquisition. We’re going to need all the help we can get.
Elizabeth.

*L

21 Guardian 9:41 - Lake Luthias
Leli,
The shit people leave lying around is quite honestly baffling. There is a void-taken skull on a pedestal at the edge of the plateau we’re camped on. There’s some strange crystal in one of the eye-sockets and a hole drilled through the back of the skull like it’s meant to be some macabre fucking spyglass! None of us felt comfortable at the idea of looking through the hole so we’ve left it alone for now. I’ve marked it on our map and if we find another or some explanation of what it actually is then we might come back to investigate further. Something about it makes my skin crawl though.
We had to talk Solas out of sleeping in Calenhad’s Foothold. The daft elf wanted to dream in the ruins which until this morning had a bloody rift in the middle of the courtyard. I mean,
I’m certainly intrigued by the idea of seeing what memories linger in the Fade there but Andraste’s Ass it’s hardly the safest place to take a nap right now. Liz gently suggested that we could come back when the area is a bit calmer.

My pack is already half-full of elfroot and blood lotus, I’m going to have to borrow some apothecary gear to start processing some of it to send to the Crossroads pretty soon. I’m sure Cassandra thinks I’m out of my mind, every time I Step away from the group to pick something she ends up with her sword half-drawn before she realises what I’m doing. Imagine yours truly, crouched by some elfroot I just spotted beneath a tree, belt knife out and about to cut the stem. Then imagine one Pissed Off Seeker who thought there was an enemy when she felt me Fade Step (because walking fifteen feet is for losers). I think Varric enjoys hearing Cassandra shout “Tara!” in that disapproving voice more than he enjoys bragging about his chest hair because that smug grin he sports each time Cassandra scolds me is making me want to shave him while he sleeps. My patience only goes so far.

I miss your singing in the evenings. Our camp is too quiet, I even miss Shale muttering her curses on all bird-kind as much as it once annoyed the shit out of me. I might have to resort to singing myself just so we’re not all staring into the fire in silence.

It’s getting late, we’re doing watches tonight - Harding sent a bird saying she’d get someone out here to hold the camp tomorrow so I’m the eyes in the dark for now.

I hope you’re well.

T. x

Chapter End Notes

Formatting html is going to be the fucking *end* of me X_X This took at least 3 edits to get everything to display correctly.

Next chapter is going to be back to the more usual format, but who knows there might still be some of the epistolary stuff (I am a fucking junkie for epistolary fics, seriously journal/letter/email/text formats are my goddamn jam XD)

If you fancy please leave a comment or kudos, my little fic writer heart grows size with every comment notification I get ^_^

Hope everyone is having a good Wednesday !
Chapter Nineteen - Stumbling at the first Smite

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Oops, I took nearly a month to post again and it's not even that big a chapter to make up for it :S

Sorry folks. My only excuse is that July was a bitch to my brain and the never-ending heat just sapped any remaining energy I had to the point that writing was not happening for love nor money.

Hopefully August is going to be a better month, but I'm not betting gold on it.

As always a squillion thanks & massive cuddles to Lady_Savannah for being a Maker-sent wonder during Depression July™ when more than just my inability to write was mashing my brain. She posted a new chapter of her fic the other day & things are getting *exciting* af so you should go give it a read.

I really hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

22 Guardian, 9:41 - Lake Luthias

Leliana,
While the issue this note concerns will hopefully be resolved by the time it reaches you, I thought it necessary to send word immediately so you might be able to ensure that the risk of future occurrences is minimised.

We engaged some of the rogue templars and apostates on the West Road this morning. Apparently some of the templars out here either have some lyrium supplies or have only recently abandoned their duties and are still able to use their abilities to the greatest effect. One templar saw Tara wielding magic with her daggers and hit her with a Smite... Maker take me I've never seen someone collapse like that. Most smites I have had the misfortune to witness or experience only staggered the mage as it disrupted their connection to their magic, never did it render them unconscious like Tara.

I prevented the templar from harming Tara further and we retreated back to camp before we were overwhelmed. Solas suggested that we give Tara a dose of lyrium to reconnect her own magic to the Fade but as neither of us were sure whether she'd had any lyrium since her return to the Waking World we gave her little more than a mouthful. Thankfully there did not appear to be any adverse reactions and Solas says that her Fade connection is stable but until she wakes up again we cannot know what damage might have been done by the Smite. Maker willing it won't be long.

I will send another note as soon as I have more news. But please consider this a standing order that any Templar in Haven who smites or silences a mage without cause, will be imprisoned until such time that I can be sure that they are not a danger to those who they once swore to protect.

Elizabeth Trevelyan.
Leliana,

It took an hour or so from Tara having the small dose of lyrium for her to regain consciousness but it seems that she hasn’t suffered any permanent damage from the smite. She’s exhausted and weak as a kitten but lucid enough to grumble at me when I told her she needed to rest for the whole afternoon.

I don’t suppose there’s an easier way to stop Tara from over-exerting herself without resorting to threats of violence or magic? I would rather not spell her to sleep unless it’s absolutely necessary. We’re all somewhat guilty of forgetting that she’s only been in the Waking World again for three weeks and despite appearances to the contrary her physical body isn’t anywhere close to being in fighting form. Solas believes that she’s been drawing so much energy from the Fade to be able to fight and keep up with everyone that when the Smite cut her off the connection her body simply couldn’t support itself and she immediately fell unconscious.

Needless to say, I don’t want Tara to be that vulnerable in the field again. I can’t ask her to return to Haven and train until she isn’t relying on Fade energy to get through a fight, however. She has her pride and I don’t wish to mortify her by sending her home. I need her here, but I also don’t want her to put herself at further risk by pushing beyond her physical limitations.

If you have any suggestions for helping Tara to regain her strength and stamina while she’s out here in the Hinterlands I’d greatly appreciate them. You’ve know Tara far longer than I have and likely have a better idea for what might help her the most. I have only been out of the Circle for a year; I was in a similarly poor physical state and it’s only due to the fact that I spent that year mostly walking from Ostwick to Haven that I can keep up with what the Inquisition requires of me.

Maker willing, by the time we return to Haven we’ll both be stronger than when we left.

Elizabeth.

* * *

Dearest Henry,

I’m so sorry this letter is so late in being written, I’m sure you’ve been slowly going out of your mind waiting for news from Haven if the stories about what happened at the Conclave reached you in Denerim. First of all, I can reassure you that I’m definitely not dead although I did fear for a time that might not be the case. Maker, what a month I’ve had!

To cut an immensely strange story short; I got caught in the middle of the Conclave explosion, survived somehow due to a quick trip into the literal Fade (I can’t begin to explain that in a letter since I still don’t understand how it was even possible), emerged with a magical mark that enables
me to seal the rifts in the Veil, was briefly considered the murderer of the Divine until I stopped the expansion of the enormous Breach above the Temple of Sacred Ashes and now an alarming number of people refer to me as the “Herald of Andraste”. The Hands of the Divine revived the Inquisition and now I get to stomp all over the Ferelden Hinterlands sealing rifts and showing the people that we can help restore order.

I’ll be honest Henry, I’m a little overwhelmed by it all. I spent fifteen years of my life being the quiet little healer mage who no one cared to notice and now I’m suddenly meant to be the divine figurehead for a heretical organisation! It’s only by the grace of Andraste that I have people around me who are far better equipped to deal with this sort of insanity. I’d be utterly lost without them. But Maker do I miss you brother.

That’s not a request for you to come to Haven - I’d rather you stay in Denerim where it’s safer. The thought of you having to travel through this void-taken mess that is the Hinterlands is enough to stop me sleeping.

Today was rough enough thanks to the scare Tara gave me - I can’t go into all the details here but she had a run-in with a Templar and was knocked unconscious. I had to step in to protect her… I killed the Templar, Henry. Not even with magic, I slashed his throat with my staff blade and didn’t even stop to think about it for a second. The only thought on my mind was that I couldn’t let Tara die. I’ve only known her since the Conclave but I’d not be exaggerating when I say she’s now the closest friend I have after you.

I suppose I should feel regret for killing the templar, particularly since I’m a Spirit Healer and ending lives entirely contradicts my magic’s purpose. But when I weigh Tara’s life in the balance with a Templar who has already abandoned his duty to hunt and kill mages who were left with no place to feel safe, it’s not a very difficult decision to make. I’d choose Tara every time.

This letter was meant to be just to let you know I was alive, but I guess I needed to get those thoughts out of my head. I have a feeling that I’ll be sending letters more frequently as the Inquisition grows and my responsibilities increase.

I love you Henry, but please stay in Denerim. It is going to be far safer for you there than being in Haven and I’d rather not have to worry about you all the time as well.

Write soon,
Lizzie.

**

22 Guardian, 9:41 - Day fuck what is it? 20 ?

Dear Ali,
Templars are the bane of my fucking life. Don’t worry, I’m not including you in this sweeping condemnation of the Order based on the fact that you were never fully inducted into the Cult of Lyrium Lickers and despite still having the ability to smite mages you never whacked me in the chest with that particular shitty stick. So thank you for that, I guess.

But Maferath’s venerated testes, I don’t enjoy being smote². I don’t remember ever feeling this exhausted and achy before, but it’s not like I can really remember how it felt since the last time
I got hit with a Smite might’ve been when we were clearing out Kinloch and that was eleven fucking years ago.

Imagine if someone reached into your chest and grabbed hold of your lungs, then yanked them out through the spaces between your ribs - that’s about what it felt like for the few seconds I remember before I apparently hit the dirt faster than being dropped off a cliff. Thank the Maker for Liz, I don’t have any bruising from the fall or from the fight up to the point I pissed off Ser Smite-a-Lot. But even after having slept through the rest of the morning and half the afternoon I only just about had the energy to pull myself upright to write in this journal. I feel almost more dead than I did when I actually was dead.

Solas gave me a lovely lecture when I woke up after they’d hauled my unconscious ass back to camp. According to him, I’ve been pulling more and more of my energy from the Fade rather than allowing my body to feel the exhaustion that it’s suffering and properly recovering my strength. He said I was pretty bloody lucky that the Smite didn’t outright kill me again, my own life force was so low without the Fade connection. The thought scared me, I’ll admit that.

Now I’ve got to learn how not to keep drawing on the Fade unconsciously when I’m physically exhausted so it doesn’t happen again. It’s going to be just like those first two weeks after I left the Circle with Duncan. I could barely get up each morning with how stiff and sore I was from walking all day and sparring in the evenings. Ugh, I’m getting too old for being whacked with sticks every night.

Liz and the others should be back soon. They left me behind in camp since Scout Harding managed to send a couple of her people to hold the site for the Inquisition once we move on. Liz said they were only going to head further up the path to Lake Luthias proper but it looked like a reasonably sizeable area on the map so perhaps there’s more up there to explore than could be done in a couple of hours. They better be bringing back something for dinner.

I think I’m going to make a start on processing some of the herbs I’ve got building up in my bag. There’s only so much Elfroot I can carry before I begin putting down roots myself.

I’ll try to take better care of myself. Just make sure you’re doing the same, Ali.

Love, Kat.

* * *

22 Guardian 9:41 - Haven

Tara,

I’m relieved to know that this morning’s incident hasn’t done you any lasting damage and I hope that you’re resting like I’m sure Elizabeth has instructed you to.

Please endeavour to not push yourself too hard over the next few days, I’d really rather not receive another note like I did today.

I expect at least one apology for the fright you’ve given me again. Please say this isn’t becoming a habit, Tara. There is enough for me to worry about already.

Leliana.
22 Guardian 9:41 - Lake Luthias

Leli darling,
Please consider this a promissory note for one pair of Orlesian shoes by way of an apology for being a terribly reckless friend and not considering that my health and well-being impacts more people than just me.

I’m going to try and not get smited again but that’s also going to rely on the Templars we meet being a little more open-minded than I think we can reasonably expect them to be.

Liz says I’m not taking watch tonight so I think that means I’m being sent to bed early. Do not tell Cullen or I will buy you the ugliest shoes I can find in Val Royeaux.

Tara.

Chapter End Notes

*collapses* This felt way too hard to get done considering it's only like 2K. I hadn't originally intended to do this chapter in this format - I was gonna do it in proper prose - but with the old brain-box being uncooperative with the words I decided it was going to be easier to actually Get the Thing Done if I went for the epistolary format again.

Tara's Journal entry is also going to be posted in the side-work Journal of Once-Dead Warden so they're all together.

Next Time: We're gonna avoid the West Road for a little while and get Other Shit Done.

Like always, any comments or kudos will make my day/week so if you want to please leave me one ^_^

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Twenty - Getting Back on Track

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday Folks!

I'm not sure where the heck August is going, but boy is it going fast!! I'm gonna blink and it'll be mid-September, I just know it.

Today's chapter is brought to you in conjunction with my busted-up knee following the rain-induced prat fall I had this afternoon right outside my usual coffee shop. *Thankfully* my laptop (on which I'd just spent the last FOUR HOURS writing most of this chapter) didn't get broken although my knee & elbow will be delightfully purple by tomorrow morning I reckon. This is what I get for leaving the house for the first time all week.

Usual Thanks & Cookies to my dearest Lady_Savannah for being the bestest Beta/Friend/Cheerleader/Provider of Kitty Pictures a girl could ask for.

Hope you enjoy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The second morning at the Lake Luthias camp was far quieter than the first. Liz carefully extricated herself from her bedroll, leaving a still sleeping Tara snuggled in the blankets as she crept outside to join Cassandra. Having taken the last watch of the night, the Seeker was fully armoured even as she stirred the cookpot over the fire. When Liz emerged from the tent, taking a moment to stretch out the kinks in her spine, Cassandra flashed her brief smile.

“Good Morning Elizabeth. You slept well, I hope?”

“Not too bad considering the day we had,” Liz grinned. “I’m going to let Tara sleep a little longer. She’s probably sick of resting after yesterday but we will need to keep a close watch on how quickly she seems to tire today. It’s only going to hinder her progress if she keeps resorting to Fade energy instead of taking a break when she needs one.”

Cassandra nodded, brows furrowing “She will likely not thank us for treating like an invalid however. When I woke this morning her aura felt like it had almost fully recovered from the smite.”

“Oh I don’t doubt that Tara’s mana has replenished itself entirely overnight.” Liz stuck her hands out to warm over the fire. “She’ll have no issue using magic to fight but if she’s using her daggers to fight melee at the same time then she’s likely to exhaust herself physically faster than she’ll run out of mana. I don’t want to limit her to just using magic at range, but if we get into a lot of fights consecutively, I might have to just to keep her from overdoing things her enthusiasm to help.”

“You could always trap her in one of those glyphs you’re so handy with,” Varric called from the entrance of the other tent with a wink. “I reckon that’s gonna be the only way to keep her still
during a fight without leaving her behind altogether and I’d bet you five silver she’d challenge every last one of us if we try that.”

Grimacing, Liz sighed. “I only got away with it yesterday because she was too exhausted to really argue with me. I can’t tell her no if she pushes to do it and I certainly don’t have the strength to physically stop her.”

Varric chuckled, joining them around the cookfire. “I’d like to see you try and physically restrain Sparky especially since you’d need a box in order to look her in the eyes rather than at her chest.”

The sly grin on Varric’s face had Liz blushing near scarlet all the way down her freckled neck. It hadn’t escaped her notice that she had to either crane her neck back to talk to Tara or make the fact that she was effectively addressing her sternum as non-invasive as she could. The last thing she wanted was people to think she was leering at her own travelling companion. She was trying to form some sort of response that didn’t also sound like an innuendo when another voice cut across Varric’s laughter.

“Hey, it’s a very nice chest I’ll have you know and if Liz wants to look at it then she’s quite welcome to - Maker knows it’s been getting no appreciation for the last ten years.”

Liz swung round sharply, cheeks flushing hotter as Tara padded over to her barefoot, a wicked smile lighting up her wan face. Purple smudges still lingered under her eyes and her cheekbones looked sharper than they ought but otherwise Tara didn’t look too worse for wear after yesterday’s ordeal. She slung an arm around Liz’s shoulders when she reached the fire and pulled her snug against her side. Liz tipped her head back and smiled softly before settling her own arm around Tara’s waist.

“So besides everyone praising my chest, what have I missed?” Tara asked, looking from Varric to Cassandra.

Cassandra spluttered, “I was not praising your—! Maker’s breath!”

Tara winked. “Don’t worry yourself my dear Seeker, it is absolutely fine if you want to appreciate my magnificent bosom, so long as I can marvel over your fearsomely well-sculpted arms. Andraste take me, you must put a lot of work into keeping those biceps looking like that.”

The slow, regarding look Tara cast over the Seeker had her cheeks flushing and twitching against the urge to cover her arms somehow. Liz ducked her head to hide the grin that was teasing up the corners of her mouth. It had either been a long time since Cassandra had been flirted with or she’d never been so brazenly admired by another woman.

Even with her lack of interest, it was easy for Liz to see what Tara meant. Cassandra had a sharp, almost brutal beauty to her features, a well-honed hardness in her expression that threatened to cut down any over-blown flattery flung her way. But Liz had already seen signs that the Seeker wasn’t as gruff and tough as she appeared; there had been no mistaking the worry on her face as she’d carried Tara back to camp the day before. Despite their rocky beginning, Liz’s respect for the older woman was growing every day.

Finally regaining some composure, Cassandra looked Tara in the eye, a hint of amusement in her expression. “I try to train or spar whenever I can, to keep up my strength. You could join me if you wish? It will be good to practise fighting against someone using a sword and shield who isn’t trying to kill you. I can also show you some exercises to regain muscle and flexibility which should improve your more rogue-like style of fighting.”
Tara stared at the Seeker for a moment, mouth agape. She shook herself out of her surprise and gave a beaming smile in reply. “If you’re offering to beat me up every evening Lady Cassandra, how could I possibly say no?”

* * *

“Fuck a nug, I’m beginning to regret agreeing to this,” Tara panted as she hauled herself up off the ground after being knocked on her ass for the fourth time that night. “I know I said you could beat me up Cassandra, but I honestly think I’ve got more bruises from you than I’ve gotten from the dozens of demons, templars and bandits we’ve faced in the last week and a half.”

Without even a hint of pity on her face, Cassandra rolled her shoulders, swinging her sword back up into the guard position, shield held casually away from her torso to present Tara with more of a target. “If you’ve breath enough to complain, you’re still able to fight. From the beginning.”

Tara groaned, shaking out her arms and wrists. Casting a puppy-eyed look at Liz she whined “Can’t you tell her to stop dumping me in the dirt? She listens to you.”

“I’m not getting in the middle again, Tara,” Liz laughed, not even glancing up from the report she was writing. “You didn’t complain yesterday when she did it eight times, if I recall.”

“I hadn’t had to sprint a quarter of a mile in ninety seconds to keep from being dragon food yesterday!” Tara retorted. “I’m surprised I’m still standing, I’ve never ran so fast in my damn life!”

Liz couldn’t argue with that logic. Although they’d heard from the scouts that a dragon had been sighted to the north-east of the Hinterlands they hadn’t expected it to start spitting fireballs at them within minutes of them setting foot outside of the tunnel that led into Lady Shayna’s valley. One moment Liz had been crouching to pick some Royal Elfroot she found beneath a tree, the next an ear-splitting roar shook the ground itself, right before great gusts of wind knocked them all off their feet as a massive shape whipped overhead.

It had taken Liz several seconds to shake off the awe of watching the dragon bank through the sky several miles away, the full span of its wings blocking the sun from view for a moment before soaring back down the valley towards them, the white-hot glow of pure fire gathering in its maw. She had screamed at the others to run, only to realise that Tara had already vanished as she flung up the strongest barrier she could muster to cover their retreat through the tunnel.

On their breathless return to the camp they’d liberated earlier from some bandits, Liz had spent half a minute looking for Tara before she found her rinsing her mouth out behind a tent. While Tara had brushed off Liz’s concerned questions at the time, she’d then not spoken at all during dinner, eyes staring blankly at the flames dancing in the firepit, lost in thought. It was only when Cassandra had barked that it was time for their training that Tara had jolted out of her odd mood.

Hearing Tara complain about being tired was much more preferable to the disconcerting silence, in Liz’s opinion. Even though she’d improved in leaps and bounds over the last ten days, Liz was still a tad worried about Tara and the lingering fragility that seemed to show in the creases around her eyes after a long day of walking, fighting and fixing the endless problems the Hinterlands threw at them.

Shifting her attention back to the pair still stood facing off, Liz offered “What about one more
sparring bout then call it a night? I was thinking it was past time that we headed back towards the West Road to try and track down that Apostate camp. If we leave a bit earlier in the morning then we’ll have time to replenish our supplies in the Crossroads as we pass through and we can offload some of the gear we looted from the bandits. I’m sure Corporal Vale will be glad of some better equipment for his men to help defend the village.”

Cassandra dipped her head in acknowledgement. “That seems a wise course of action, we have done much to help the eastern portion of the Hinterlands but there are still both the apostate and templar encampments to deal with as well as the task of finding Horsemaster Dennet. I’m sure Mother Giselle is eager to leave on her journey to Haven and we have yet to clear a safe path for her.”

“Shit, yeah,” Tara sighed. “We can hardly spend two months just traipsing about in the hills, eventually we’ll have to tick the big jobs off that awfully long list we’ve got. Okay Cass, see if you can knock me on my ass one more time then I get to lie down.” She flicked her dagger tips up and grinned as the Seeker readied herself to fight.

“There will be no if about it,” Cassandra taunted before lunging forward with a yell.

* * *

Un-fucking the Hinterlands - List the Third

1. Find Mother Giselle - Liz got that out the way pretty efficiently & for a Chantry cleric she seems alright?
2. Find Horsemaster Dennet/Acquire horses for the Inquisition - Harding says he’s somewhere to the west where they can’t get. Here’s hoping he’s not dead.
3. Close the fucking rifts - Closed a handful so far in the eastern Hinterlands, left one alone to the south as it had some pretty nasty-looking demons loitering around it and the other in the area was a royal bitch to close. It’s far enough from any settlements to be fine for a while.
4. Food for the refugees - The Crossroads is stocked for now. By the time they run out of meat we might have made the area safer for them to hunt themselves.
5. Winter supplies - I don’t quite understand why the Apostates decided to scatter their caches willy-nilly across the countryside but at least Vale’s people can make use of them now.
6. Healer wanted - Vale asked if we could find a proper healer from Redcliffe to see to the Crossroads once the Chantry robes have gone. Left some elfroot potions with Mother Giselle when we passed through last.
7. Find the elven kid & send his runaway ass home - Hyndel has learnt the error of his (runa)ways and gone home, potion in hand for copious grovelling I should hope. Solas was muttering what sounded like swearwords under his breath the whole time the kid was packing - ask Curiosity for translations.
7a. A Fucking Cult in the hills - They were worshipping the fucking rift?! Maker save me from rich idiots with no inclination to help anyone other than themselves. Maybe now they think the sun shines out of Liz’s ass they’ll actually look outside their nice secure tower. Will need to make sure they help the refugees like Liz told them.
7b. Find Lord Whatsit’s Lady Friend - While I want to be mad that the daft man asked his beloved to travel across dangerous country all by herself, it was still a damn awful thing to tell him that she’d never be coming. I hope he can find some happiness
with the Inquisition.

8. **Astrariums** - What the fuck are they? Found one while out hunting ram, the intricacy of the puzzle mechanism was beyond any dwarven-crafted machine I’ve ever seen. Beautiful though and there seemed to be some magical component which indicated there were at least two others being in the area. Research further.

9. **Creepy-ass Skulls on Sticks** - Found one by the Lake Luthias camp, didn’t poke at it. Found another one near Calenhad’s Foothold, there was a small camp on the ledge with some notes referencing the weird skulls - called them **Occularum**. They supposedly reveal objects veiled with magic or some shit like that. We marked its location and I took the notes but I still ain’t touching it.

10. **Clear the West Road** - What a shit show. Too many damn templars, some of which apparently still have a fucking lyrium supply. Too many fucking mages with death-wishes as well.

11. **Find a key for the Door to Valammar** - Liz cleared out some Carta types from behind the waterfall feeding Lake Luthias. Someone in the damn Hinterlands has a way through that door, just gotta find them.

12. **Retrieve Widow’s ring** - What kind of scum do you have to be to kill a man you mistook for a mage and then rob him of his wedding ring? I’d be lying if I didn’t admit to gleefully taking down those templars.

13. **Where’s Scout Ritts?** - Well it sure takes some balls to seduce a Mage in the middle of a war. I’m almost impressed. Although I hope for Ritts’ future lovers that she does that shit somewhere safer from now on.

14. **Deliver Ser Mattrin’s effects to Ellendra** - I am starting to really not enjoy telling people that their loved ones are dead. Liz talked the Enchanter into joining up so at least some good came of this. We need all the skilled mages we can get.

15. **Lyrium Vein?** - Nope! **Red Lyrium** vein, very not-good. We smashed that shit into tiny pieces and scorched it with the hottest fire it was possible to summon with three mages. Also carved a stone marker for the poor dwarf who apparently lost his mind to the lyrium song. That shit is evil, burn it all.

16. **Bandits!** - Even if those idiots were pretty well-equipped for these backwaters, they were still no match for an extremely peeved Seeker of Truth (I think she was venting the irritation she felt for Varric’s needling that day on the poor bandits).

* * *

**Tara’s Very Short list of Shit to Leave the Fuck Alone**

2. See above x1000

Chapter End Notes
Look it's not all letters & diary entries this time!! It's not that I don't enjoy writing them, but I feel like I'm copping out of actually showing those sections by not writing it in prose. That's just me taking this fic writing lark *waaaaay* too seriously for my own peace of mind.

Also yea I just skipped over 10 days of Hinterlands wandering because I didn't want to spend twelve chapters here, you're welcome. I think part of why I'm struggling to get myself to write is cos while I have a very detailed list of all the shit that's getting done in the Hinterlands it's so fucking boring that I don't want to actually *write* it. So we're just not gonna do that.

Next Time: Taking back the Witchwood maybe?

If you've got time, I'd love it if you left a comment or kudos. It makes my whole dang week getting those emails, especially when I recognise the returning usernames ^_^

Also because I'm apparently a monster - I started another related side-work Here which is gonna look at important moments between 9:31 & 9:40 from a certain Warden's perspective. I'll be honest it's not gonna be a particularly happy time, I apologise in advance as the first chapter drops you in like ten minutes after the end of Best Laid Plans *leaves out the tissues*
Chapter Twenty-One - Can We All Just Talk About This Like Reasonable Apostates?

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday Folks!

I had hoped to get this chapter posted like a week ago but then Shit Happened™ and I ended up spending something like 30 hours over 4 days visiting my sister in the hospital because she tripped in a massive pothole & half obliterated her ankle. She's meant to be going home today so that's good. But dude it feels like I've been writing this chapter for *weeks*!

Anyway putting aside all the Real Life Drama - It's a pretty beasty chapter this time sooo I hope you like it!

Oodles of thanks to Lady_Savannah as always for general awesomeness and pointing out where I made dumb mistakes in the first chunk of this chapter and didn't notice because Proofreading (I don't know her). Her latest chapter for Through Fire or Fury is an epistolary journey to Skyhold & you know I am always here for that. ^_^

On to the chapter! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I know they called this place the Witchwood, but does it really need to be quite so misty and creepy? It’s hardly much of an incentive to take a stroll through the area and see the sights.”

It seemed appropriate for Tara to whisper as they crept through the eerily silent woods north of the Crossroads. Surrounded by steep hills, the valley felt oddly isolated from the rest of the Hinterlands, even though they were at most five miles away from Fort Connor none of the noise or smoke from the fires that burned there disturbed the air beneath the trees. A perfect place for apostates to hide.

“I don’t know Sparky, I think it adds to the ambiance pretty well,” Varric muttered, glancing around at the spindly trees, Bianca loaded and primed in his arms. “Come see the Witchwood for the ghost trees and mist, stay for the irate apostates.”

A few steps ahead, Liz smothered a giggle. It had taken an hour or so for both Tara and Varric to wake up enough to start bantering back and forth. Unlike Liz and Cassandra who could wake at dawn and start their day without any grumbling, their rogue party members needed the adrenaline boost of clearing demons from around a rift to truly feel awake.

Since they’d closed the rift on the Redcliffe road and dealt with a handful of templars before heading into the Witchwood, there’d been a semi-constant flow of chatter between Tara and Varric. It certainly lightened the mood and kept away some of the nerves Liz felt as they searched for the Apostates’ camp.
“Maybe once we’ve got this place calmed down you two can work on rejuvenating local tourism,” Liz joked, grinning back at Tara just behind her.

“I’m sure we can think of some good slogans to entice folk back here,” Tara replied. She drummed her fingers on her chin, nose scrunched up in thought. “Would ‘Come stay in the Hinterlands, you probably won’t die now’ be a tad too morbid?”

Choking on a laugh, Liz nearly tripped over her own staff, staggering a few steps until she got her balance back. “I think it needs some tweaks,” she wheezed.

Tara nodded solemnly, eyes alight with amusement. “I’ll give it some more thought later.”

From the front of the group, Cassandra spoke up, voice dry and disapproving, “If we could please focus on our current task? There could be more threats than just apostates lingering in these woods, we wouldn’t want to alert them all to our presence so they may catch us unawares.”

“Sorry Cass,” Liz and Tara mumbled in unison, sharing a sheepish look before returning their attention to their surroundings.

Liz wasn’t sure if she imagined the soft chuckle from Solas at the rear of their party.

* 

A couple of hours and another rift later they took a quick break inside a cabin that had until only a few minutes ago housed a mage-turned-abomination. Tara had found a key inside a letter several days ago that apparently opened the door but instead of finding an apostate quietly hiding from the fighting they instead found a terror demon. In such a tight space it was a difficult to kill the demon without tripping over each other, so once Cassandra struck the final blow they decided to take some time to heal the various minor injuries they’d all acquired.

They took advantage of the security of a lockable door and usable supplies left in the cabin to have a peaceful lunch before they headed back out into the Witchwood. Laying their map out on a table, Liz traced the route they’d taken that morning to their current location before trailing her finger up towards where Scout Harding had reported the Apostate camp to be located.

If all went like she hoped, they might be able to remove the rogue mages from the conflict and gain some more allies to help tackle the Breach. While both Cassandra and Tara were understandably wary about Liz’s plan to approach the camp with their weapons sheathed, they couldn’t deny that simply charging in and killing everyone wasn’t a reasonable course of action. Liz couldn’t believe that every single rogue mage was out here because they were a blood mage or so determined to never return to the circle that they’d kill anyone who approached them. Some of them would want to join the Inquisition and have somewhere safe to stay, surely.

Once they left the cabin, locking it behind them, Cassandra took point as they made their way north in search of the Apostates. The air turned colder and they passed several pillars of ice jutting from the ground that could only have been created by magic. Liz was almost shivering by the time they stepped out into a large clearing at the base of some cliffs. More icy spikes loomed in a rough circle in front of what appeared to be the entrance to a cave. It made sense that the apostates would choose a place that was easily defensible with a single point of entry to bottleneck any potential attackers.
From across the clearing Liz spotted a few mages patrolling outside the cave entrance, faces gaunt and robes ragged. Who knew how long they’d been holed up out in the wilds fighting to survive from one day to the next. Maker willing they’d at least listen to what she had to offer. Nodding to Cassandra and the others, Liz took a deep breath as she stowed her staff in the holster on her back before slowly beginning to approach the cave.

Each step further out into the open twisted her stomach tighter, Liz could feel her mana coiled barely beneath her skin, ready to throw up a barrier the instant one of the apostates felt twitchy. She didn’t want to risk scaring them into launching an all-out attack on them before she even got two words out, but she could hardly allow them the chance to cook them where they stood. Every four or five steps she remembered to actually release the breath locked in her chest before silently heaving in another.

When one of the apostates finally spotted them it was almost a relief. Now Liz could act.

She lifted her empty hands, straightened her spine and pitched her voice to carry. “Peace, my fellow mages! I wish to speak with you on behalf of the Inquisition - to offer sanctuary and safety. Might I approach?”

The apostate stood closest to Liz frowned at her declaration but then relaxed from the battle stance he’d taken, holding his staff out to the side in one hand. With the other he beckoned Liz forward. The mage looked to be close to her age if perhaps slightly older, his face weathered and care-worn from the years he’d likely been outside of the Circle.

“You claim to speak for the Inquisition?” He asked in an unexpected Starkhaven brogue. “Why would a Chantry organisation have a mage representing them?”

Liz flashed him a self-deprecating smile. “Because we’re not a Chantry organisation. And believe me, it’s entirely an accident that I’m the one being touted as the face of the Inquisition. But I am a mage and that’s why I’m here to speak to your group - I have no desire for the violence to continue. Too many of our people have died in this war and I’d imagine that you’re tired of feeling hunted.”

“Aye, it’s not been all that restful these past two years,” the mage grumbled, rubbing a hand over an unkempt beard. “You sound Marcher, lass. Whereabouts d’ye hail from?”

“Ostwick,” Liz replied, offering up her hand for the mage to shake. “Elizabeth Trevelyan, formerly of the Ostwick Circle. More recently known by some ridiculous epithets I’d rather not mention.”

The Starkhaven mage hesitated a beat before returning the handshake. “Trevelyan eh? I’ve heard of that family, didn’t know they’d birthed a mage though.”

Liz grinned. “Of course you wouldn’t know. Bann Loren went to great lengths to deny I ever existed, after all. The world couldn’t know of his deepest shame - although I imagine the Trevelyans are soon going to be rather eager to acknowledge their long-forgotten relation.” Over her shoulder Liz heard Tara’s barely muffled snort.

“If you’re the one they’ve been referring to as the ‘Herald of Andraste’ then I’d not be surprised if the notoriously pious Trevelyans suddenly remember they have a mage in the family,” remarked the Starkhaven mage with a wry smile.

A groan escaped her before she could rein it in. “So you have heard that ridiculous epithet even out here in the wilds? Maker take me, all I did was wave my hand at the Breach then pass out for three days, I’m pretty sure Andraste had nothing to do with it. But if that name allows me to offer protection and sanctuary to those who need it then I’ll claim it.”
“Is that what you truly wish to offer us? Sanctuary? In return for what? Our freedom?”

Shaking her head Liz explained, “You would not be prisoners of the Inquisition, rather valued allies with skills and abilities that can be put to use to restore peace across Thedas. We are not the Circle, your every move will not be watched by Templars and we certainly won’t be collecting phylacteries from you.”

“But you have Seekers among your forces!” A new voice cried out behind Liz.

Biting back a curse Liz spun round. Two more apostates had snuck up on them, the men levelling their staff blades at Tara and Cassandra’s throats while unwisely ignoring Varric and Solas. These apostates had more of a nervous energy about them compared to the relatively composed Starkhaven mage.

“Derrick, you shouldn’t believe their lies,” hissed the older of the two men, his staff trembling in his hands as he held it scant inches from Tara’s chin.

Musterling all the calm she possessed Liz tried to speak soothingly. “We have just one former Seeker in the Inquisition and she is stood right in front of you. Cassandra is not here as a Seeker, but as a member of the Inquisition who also wishes for this senseless violence to end.”

It might have been a slight fudging of the truth, if the pointed eyebrow Cassandra raised was any indication. However Liz had faith that the warrior would only draw steel on these apostates if it seemed that peaceful entreaties were doomed to fall on deaf ears.

“Nylen, there is no need to threaten them,” sighed Derrick, shaking his head at his comrades. “They approached with their weapons sheathed, it costs us nothing to listen to what they offer. The younger mages especially would fare better away from the constant threat of attack by the templars.”

“You have apprentices in your group?” Liz looked back at the Starkhaven mage, brow furrowed. “How many of you are there camped in that cave?”

“There’s about fifteen of us left, templars have killed nearly half a dozen over the last few months. Perhaps half of our remaining number are unharrowed apprentices - the youngest is thirteen I think. We have only three young women here, they arrived after the majority of the mages retreated to Redcliffe so we were the closest group they could find to take shelter with. I believe they’d be far happier with the Inquisition.”

Nodding solemnly, Liz took a deep breath. Most of the lone apostates they’d seen so far in the Hinterlands had been men, it took incredible guts to travel alone as a woman and a mage given the myriad dangers that might lurk behind any bend in the road. Liz hoped that the other apostates were as reasonable as Derrick, not distrustful and twitchy like the two still threatening Tara and Cass.

“Would it be possible for us to speak with the rest of your group?” Liz asked. “I’d prefer to hear everyone’s thoughts before any decisions are made and if anyone is in need of healing I am happy to offer my aid.”

As Derrick gave her a nod of approval, a derisive laugh burst from Nylen that sent an unpleasant shiver down Liz’s spine.

“We are not so foolish as to let a Seeker stroll into our camp, Herald,” he sneered. “You and the other woman may enter. The rest can remain here with Teren.”
In the moment that Liz met Tara’s steady gaze she felt the anxiety churning in her gut quieten. Even if they were likely walking into a trap with their eyes open, she was going to be safe with Tara, if the apostates hadn’t realised that she too was a mage then Liz wasn’t going to point it out.

Derrick sighed heavily. “Very well. Please follow me, lass.”

The mouth of the cave was covered by a blue, shimmering barrier that radiated cold outward. When Derrick drew close he gestured to someone on the other side to let them in. After a few seconds the barrier collapsed and a pale, squirrelly-featured man appeared, suspicion narrowing his eyes as he looked over the newcomers.

“Who are these two?” There was a nasal, Orlesian whine to his voice, lip curling slightly. “We don’t take social calls.”

“Rene, this is Elizabeth Trevelyan. She’s here to offer sanctuary with the Inquisition for any mage who wishes to join,” said Derrick, loudly enough to prompt a ripple of voices further back inside the cave.

“The Chantry are sending other mages to do their dirty work now are they? Is this your templar chaperone?” He gestured disdainfully at Tara, stood with her arms folded across her chest looking down at the man with a distinctly unamused expression.

It wouldn’t help if Liz laughed in his face like she wanted to in that instant. She seriously doubted the magical prowess of any of these apostates if none of them could even sense Tara’s aura, tightly coiled and tucked away as it was. That being said, Liz could only feel the faintest prickle of magic coming from her that was likely only due to the additional Fade sensitivity from the Mark.

Making an effort to keep her face smooth and voice level, Liz said “Tara is just a mercenary, not a templar. The Chantry have no stakes in the Inquisition and they certainly won’t like what we’re doing right now. I’ve no intention of offering you sanctuary in order to lure you into a prison.”

Seeing several dirt-smudged faces appearing out of the gloom further into the cave, Liz stepped past the Orlesian mage and tried to approach the others before a hand clamped around her upper arm. The ever-suspicious Nylen had lunged around Tara to hold her back, oblivious to the very immediate danger he was now in.

“Your pretty words mean nothing, Herald,” Nylen spat digging his nails into the meat of her arm. “We will not be tricked into giving up our freedom after we have fought so hard to take it.”

The air inside the cave prickled on Liz’s skin, the tingle of magic from Tara growing into something almost tangible, an ozone tang in her nose, the threat of lightning crackling. Tara gripped Nylen’s wrist and prised his hand from Liz’s arm.

“Grab her again and you’ll lose the arm,” Tara said with such deadly calm the apostate paled slightly.

“You can’t be much of a mercenary to make such threats when so outnumbered by mages,” Nylen blustered, squirming in Tara’s grasp.

A chilling smile slowly spread across Tara’s face, baring teeth in the low light. Liz heard several sharp intakes of breath behind her, the shuffle of feet as the apostates stepped back from the woman they’d so readily underestimated.

“You can’t be much of a mage to so quickly assume that you’ve even the slightest chance of overpowering me,” Tara whispered into Nylen’s ear. “There was a reason the Circle harrowed me
when I was barely nineteen.”

The moment Tara loosened her grip and let her aura expand, Liz involuntarily gasped at the overwhelming surge of power within the cave. Flickers of lightning danced along Tara’s arms, casting eerie shadows against the craggy walls around them. Nylen jolted, a faint whimper falling from his lips as he struggled.

Closing her eyes briefly, Tara took a breath, brow wrinkling in concentration. The weight of magic in the air lifted suddenly and all the mages sighed in relief. The purplish glow from Tara’s lightning faded away and as quickly as she’d let it out, she’d drawn her aura back within her skin so only the tiniest hint of her power could be sensed by an outsider.

From where Liz stood she could see the faces of Nylen, Rene and Derrick. The latter was half-smiling in awe while the former two were wide-eyed and more than a little fearful as Tara finally relinquished her hold on Nylen’s wrist with a sneer of disgust.

“Now maybe we can get back to the matter at hand?” Tara said mildly with a smirk to Liz.

Clearing her throat to disguise her giggle, Liz turned back to the rest of the apostates and slowly made her way deeper into the cave, the entry tunnel eventually opening out into a larger cavern that smelled strongly of woodsmoke, charred meat and unwashed humans.

A large firepit was burning in the centre of the space with a dozen or so bedrolls circled around it. In a corner some distance from the tunnel a makeshift tent was pitched and Liz could just make out two pale faces peering out of the opening in the canvas. Even among their fellow mages, the girls had put an additional barrier between them it seemed. She flashed a smile in the direction of the tent before addressing everyone else.

“Thank you for allowing me to enter and speak with you,” Liz said glancing from face to face trying to meet the eyes of all those who stood before her. “I am Liz Trevelyan and I am here to offer a place within the Inquisition to anyone who wishes to join. We have need of mages who are willing to help use their skills to restore peace to Thedas in this chaotic time, but we also want to ensure that the youngest and most vulnerable people among us have somewhere safe to sleep.”

She could see the scepticism on a few of the older faces and repeated what she’d already said to Derrick and Nylen outside. “The Inquisition is not part of the Chantry, nor do we seek to emulate the Circles by having Templars shadow every step a mage takes. I want to show Thedas that mages should not be inherently feared but that given trust and support, we can be highly effective allies and members of society. For those younger mages who’ve not had chance to live outside of the Circles the Inquisition can help you learn to survive as well as further develop your magic.”

A young Antivan-looking man spoke up, “Are there… Templars within the Inquisition?” There was a quaver to his voice that sent a pang of sadness through Liz.

She did not wish to lie to them. “There are some Templars, yes. Not many, but those who are in Haven have chosen to stay and protect the people rather than roam the wilds hunting and killing anyone who even looks like a mage like so many of their brethren have chosen to do.” Maker how many times would she need to convince these mages that she meant them no harm?

Nylen and his weaselly friend Rene jumped on this admission, with vindicated malice. “You expect us to take your word that you are not luring us to the eager shackles of the Templars? What is to stop them putting us to the brand like so many did in Kirkwall?” A collective shudder went through the group.
Tara came to stand beside Liz, fists clenched by her sides as she spoke through gritted teeth. “Not while I live, will any soul in the Inquisition wield a lyrium brand against a mage. But it’s curious how fervently you seem to search for a reason not to join the Inquisition, Nylen. What secrets are you so scared we will sniff out?”

The sneer slid off Nylen’s face at the implied question in Tara’s words. A sliver of dread took root in Liz’s gut, at least a few of these mages were never going to agree to come with them and Tara knew why. Glancing over at Derrick she saw the worry she felt mirrored in his expression. Would he help or hinder her?

Derrick locked eyes with Liz, the tension between Tara and Nylen keeping everyone’s attention on them. Slowly and with undeniable intent, Derrick swivelled his head to stare at the cluster of apprentice lads huddled to one side of the group for a long moment before shifting to focus on the tent at the back of the cave. When he looked back at Liz’s face she gave him slightest nod. He straightened his back, his hand slowly altering its grip on his staff as he dipped his chin in acknowledgement.

Liz interrupted the glaring contest taking place beside her, lightly touching Tara’s elbow. “The Inquisition will not be offended if you do not wish to join, Nylen. But I would ask that you do not prevent those who do wish to come with us from leaving here today. The young people among you should be able to choose to go where they feel safest for themselves. Do not doubt; we can and will protect them at all costs.”

“So what’s it going to be?” Tara asked the mages, relaxing her fists and giving Liz’s fingers two quick squeezes while no one could see. “We cannot guarantee anyone’s safety out here in the wilds. I don’t want to return several weeks down the road to discover that templars found this hidey-hole and slaughtered everyone without a second thought.”

Several of the apostates appeared to be considering their offer, their expressions contemplative with a flicker of hope. Contrasting those were the faces of Nylen, Rene and a couple of others who wore matching frowns, with shifty fearful eyes and hands that crept towards their belts.

Nylen broke the silence, a hateful sneer twisting his mouth as he shouted, “I will die before I let anyone lock me up with templars again! You can go to the Void with them!”

Faster than Liz could follow, the apostate snatched a dagger from his belt and slashed the blade across his palm with a scream. Blood dripped through his fingers and a grotesque smile split Nylen’s face.

Chaos erupted. Barely taking a second to think, Liz slammed barriers over the two groups of young mages and herself before stepping back into the tunnel where no one could sneak up behind her. Derrick had lunged forward to defend the young boys while Tara engaged both Nylen and Rene, fighting the exposed blood mages with lightning streaking from her fingertips.

The campfire in the centre of the cave was extinguished, plunging the space into near darkness save for the flares of spells and the hazy blue glow of Liz’s barriers. Screams seemed louder in the dark, too many to distinguish who was fighting for their lives and who was fighting to win.

Tears of frustration welled in Liz’s eyes, biting back her own shouts as she kept flinging out barriers and healing spells to those she could see in the melee, desperately hoping that someone, anyone would be left to walk away from this mess.

She had no clue how much time passed before the last whimpers fell deathly silent. It could’ve been hours, minutes or barely long enough for her to take half a dozen breaths. Footsteps echoed
behind her. Whirling around Liz had almost let loose a spell before she realised that it was only Cassandra and Solas, showing signs of fighting a bloody battle themselves.

“Maker, what happened?!” Cassandra gasped.

Liz’s shoulders slumped, her hands falling limp by her sides. Gut churning she faced back into the cave as Solas sent a handful of magelights soaring through the air, illuminating what was left of the apostate’s camp.

Tara stood over Nylen’s corpse, blood-splattered but hale while a hand-shaped burn smouldered over the apostate’s heart. Derrick leant heavily on his staff, hand pressed tight against a wound in his side, chest heaving even as he still held his position in front of two terrified but unharmed lads.

Across the cave the two young girls shakily emerged from the tent that had shielded them from the devastation. One cried out in anguish at the sight of the body of the third woman, struck down a few paces from their corner, undoubtedly trying to prevent anyone from reaching them. Nearly a dozen mages were dead.

Scrubbing at the tears that slipped over her cheeks, Liz could hardly look Cassandra in the eye as shame clogged her throat.

“I failed. I’m so sorry.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope people can relate to how it seems to take four times as long to write out these damn chapter notes as it does to copy & format the actual chapter text! XD Or I just always get distracted while I'm doing them so that's why it takes me like an hour.

So that's not how Liz wanted things to go... eep.

Next time: We're finally going to find the Horsemaster maybe?!

If you want to make me a very happy Kitten please leave a comment or kudos ^_^ Getting those emails make my whole day and leave me with a giddy smile knowing that people actually *like* reading this hot mess XD
Chapter Twenty-Two - Finding Hope Again

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Yikes I am so sorry about how long it's taken me to post this chapter!! It's faintly ridiculous that I've had so much time on my hands and the words just weren't coming but then today when I'm tired, achy and aggravated as fuck, suddenly when I sat my ass down and blared my DA playlist all these words just fell out of my head!

It could all be a mess who knows but it's a chapter!

I'm super glad that I've got something to post before I go away on Sunday otherwise it would probably have ended up being nearly the middle of October before I could post again. I'm considering this as my birthday present to myself, so I can chill the fuck out when I go to Denmark and not worry that I've not written in weeks :P

Special Thanks to the ever-wonderful Lady_Savannah for comforting me while my brain was being so silly and giving me the best pep talks. Dude I cannot wait to get drunk with you later this month :P Sav posted a new chapter of Through Fire or Fury yesterday and there maaaay be *another* chapter real soon if the writing gods are smiling upon us ;)

Anyway here's wonderwall.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You doing okay there, Hopeful? I know my cooking’s not great but the way you’re glaring at that bowl of stew is making me worry that it’s worse than I thought."

It took several seconds for Liz to blink out of her stupor and look over to where Varric sat on the other side of the camp fire. The dwarf’s face had furrows of concern dug between his eyebrows, a joking smile that wasn’t mirrored in his eyes; something sad lingered there instead.

Her gaze dropped back to the wooden bowl cupped in her hands. Liz wasn’t honestly sure if it tasted bad or not, she couldn’t remember tasting any of what little she’d eaten over the last day and a half. Almost without thinking about why she did it, she lifted a spoonful of the stew to her mouth and swallowed. It was warm and that was all she could really discern.

Everything was foggy in her mind. She knew that they were now camped on Horsemaster Dennet’s farm but she could remember hardly little of the many hours that preceded them getting here. Flashes of memory gave a few insights but Liz hoped that someone else had taken charge while she had so spectacularly shut herself away in her own mind.

She stared into the flames of the camp fire.

It was by her insistence that they’d stayed with the five apostates who’d survived the bloodbath in the Witchwood to help them gather their belongings and clear the cave of whatever supplies were salvageable. No one had argued her decision to pile up the bodies into a makeshift pyre and say the
funeral prayers.

Cassandra had spoken the words while Derrick lit the pyre. The younger mages were huddled together, expressions somber but not distraught. It was hardly their first experience with death and would likely not be their last. The war had hardened these young people and there was no return to innocence after living through that.

Liz could only stand to watch the fire take hold before she turned to Tara and buried her face against the taller woman’s torso, arms wrapped tightly around her waist. Without saying a word, Tara had held her until the pyre was nothing but ash.

By the time they’d escorted the mages back to the Crossroads where they were then housed with Enchanter Ellendra until the road to Haven was safe, the sun had set behind the hills and the sky was darkening rapidly.

Out of some grief-addled determination Liz had tried to insist that they head out again in search of Dennet’s farm as their maps indicated that they might be able to reach it via a gully from the Witchwood. She wanted to end the day having achieved something rather than merely failed to protect those she had hoped so fiercely to bring to safety.

It had been Tara that had told her no, quietly but firmly, that it would do them no good to travel through unknown territory in the dark. It would be better for all of them to sleep in the Crossroads and set out in the morning once fully rested.

Liz knew she’d said something unkind to Tara afterwards. But for all the shame burning in her chest, she couldn’t recall what exactly she’d shouted at her friend who had only acted out of concern for her well-being. It was one of several apologies she planned to make tomorrow. A gut feeling told Liz that Tara had already forgiven her but she was going to do it anyway.

By some lucky happenstance they’d been able to sneak into the Witchwood by cutting through the West Road without drawing the attention of any of the bandits and templars that roamed there. Much of the walk through the gully was a blur for Liz, she couldn’t recall looking at their surroundings save for one instance of confusion when they came across a lone druffalo grazing between some rocks.

On the other side of the gully the ground had sloped down towards a river. Liz’s hand had started aching sharply and Tara had hissed through a string of curses as she steered Liz by the shoulder away from the rift that floated high above a waterfall.

They crept across the river, far enough downstream that the demons didn’t spot them but a shudder ran down Liz’s spine as she caught a glimpse of strange cloaked creatures she’d never seen before alongside the usual wraiths and terror demons.

“Despair demons,” Tara had whispered to her, fingers digging harshly into Liz’s shoulder. “We should leave that rift alone for now. It won’t be an easy fight.” Something in Tara’s voice convinced Liz to keep walking and not argue, it wasn’t enough at the time to snap her out of her mental fugue.

From there it was only a short climb up the steep bank on the other side of the river to where the land suddenly levelled off and signs of inhabitation appeared along with some unexpected wolves.

Liz’s participation in the fight that followed was minimal, she’d cast an initial barrier on everyone in the group but beyond that had endeavoured to stay back and avoid drawing the attention of the unusually persistent animals.
Tara had come to check she was alright afterwards. Liz thought she’d reassured her but a niggling feeling had her wondering if her lack of reaction to the whole incident had worried Tara more. Another apology was probably needed for that too. Oops.

What Dennet must have thought of her when they finally located him in the big wooden house at the centre of the farm, Liz couldn’t guess. She’d felt almost detached from her own body during their conversation, her voice nearly a monotone that had Varric giving her some oddly rattled looks.

They’d then had to go and speak to Dennet’s wife, Elaina and the farm’s overseer Bron - who both had tasks for them to complete. Tara would have taken note of what those were, Liz was sure.

Maker she’d made a mess of things. She was meant to be the one leading this group, representing the Inquisition and she’d barely been present in her own body for over a day. After her first real failure she’d almost shut down, shirking her responsibilities onto the others and making them watch over her while she gave no thought to her own safety.

She was a damn fool of a Trevelyian. Liz scowled at the now empty bowl still cradled in her hands. Even as her mind caught itself up her body had carried on eating it seemed, a small blessing in such times.

A low chuckle from across the fire startled her head upright. Varric had clearly sat watching her the whole time she was ruminating, something about her expression prompting the wide smile creasing his face to reach his eyes too this time.

“I’ve been such an idiot,” Liz muttered, embarrassment heating her face as she avoided meeting Varric’s gaze.

“Oh, none of that talk!” Tara dropped on the log beside Liz with no warning, prompting a strangled yelp that immediately turned into a coughing fit. “Shit, sorry I didn’t mean to scare you half to death.”

Passing over a waterskin, Tara waited for Liz to gulp down a few mouthfuls and catch her breath before carefully slinging her arm round Liz’s shoulders.

“Are you feeling better? I’ll admit you’ve had us a tad worried for a bit there,” Tara laughed awkwardly.

Arching her eyebrow and shooting an incredulous look at her friend Liz remarked, “Worried I was going to leave you in charge of fixing all this mess?”

That got a bark of laughter. “Maker’s balls that’s exactly what I was afraid of! Please don’t leave me to make all the decisions or I’ll tell Dennet that he can build his own damn watchtowers!”

“We’re building him watchtowers?” Liz had definitely missed far too much of today’s important conversations.

Tara nodded giving her a gentle smile. “Technically we’re going to get Cullen to send some qualified folks out to build and staff them but we’ve got to mark out the locations and send the request to Haven. There’s also a den of wolves that we need to clear out or at least identify what is making them attack people so persistently.”

“What could make wolves act like that?” Liz frowned.

“Demons most likely,” Varric put in across the fire. “If animals and inanimate objects start
acting weird as shit then it’s usually because there’s a demon messing with them. Kill the demon and the weirdness stops.”

“Exactly,” Tara confirmed. “There’s a couple other things that got added to the list but we can deal with all of them in the morning. Right now I think you need to get to bed, Lizzie dearest.” She grinned as she gave Liz a squeeze round the shoulders.

Sighing exaggeratedly, Liz rolled her eyes. “Yes, Mother. I’ll head in shortly. Don’t you have first watch?” She giggled as she caught an elbow to the ribs.

“You’re not too big for a smack, Herald,” Tara retorted, leaning in and pressing a loud, tickling kiss onto Liz’s cheek. She stood up and left Liz still chuckling by the fire.

Varric grinned at her. “It’s good to have you back with us, Hopeful,” he said.

“Is that seriously the nickname you’re going with?” Liz asked. She’d felt distinctly hopeless since the disaster with the apostates.

“I think it suits pretty well,” Varric argued. “You’d be hard-pushed to find anyone else in all of Thedas who would look at the shit storm you’re facing and see good in people who’ve done some damn questionable things in order to survive. It takes a lot of hope to even try right now, and Maker knows you’re trying with all you’ve got. So I’m sticking with Hopeful.”

Liz couldn’t reply, her throat unexpectedly thick all of a sudden. Blinking rapidly she staggered up from her log, heading to the small pond beside their camp to rinse out her bowl. As she knelt at the water’s edge she took a shuddering breath and pressed her eyes shut before the tears that gathered could fall.

She was intensely fortunate to have friends who had such faith in her. Now it was up to her to not let them down again.

Her hope would be tested every day that the Inquisition existed, it would be a constant battle against despair.

But today was not going to be the day she lost it all.

Chapter End Notes

I really hope this chapter was worth the wait cos it felt like I was nearly bleeding it from a rock. I'm seriously hoping the next chapter isn't so difficult to get out of my head.

But if you did enjoy it then I'd love it if you left a comment or kudos so I can tell my daft brain that it can stop shouting at me about being crap.

Also it's technically my Birthday tomorrow (since it's now Saturday oops) so comments would be the best present :P

Until next time folks!
Chapter Twenty-Three - Waiting on the Watchtowers

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

What's this? Another chapter only a week after the last one?? INCONCEIVABLE!

Seriously I did intend to take a break from even thinking about this while I was on holiday but then I had a couple of 4 hour coach journeys and wouldn't you know it my brain suddenly realised that it was all down to do another epistolary chapter! Six slightly shaky pages of scribbles later and I had most of this chapter done. All I had to do when I got home was type them up and add in some other stuff from my notes, it was positively easy! XD Of course this now means the next chapter might be a nightmare *crosses fingers*

Special Thanks as always to Lady_Savannah who got me some awesome birthday presents that were wonderful to return home to on Wednesday. I am gonna get to squish her in person later this month and I am *hyped*.

Hope you enjoy reading! Do we like the occasional epistolary chapter to skip through the slightly boring missions? Should I keep doing them?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

6 Drakonis 9:41, Western Hinterlands

L, J & C,

My apologies for the lack of reports these past two days, I didn’t intend to alarm anyone with my behaviour but I’m guessing I did if Cassandra’s reaction to my saying good morning to her is any indication. I’m not sure what she or Tara may have written to you but my plan to approach a group of apostates camped out in the woods north of the Crossroads, did not have the outcome I’d hoped.

Out of the fifteen or so mages we found in the camp, only five survived the fight that occurred after a few of the mages revealed themselves to be blood mages. They were determined to avoid being “trapped” once more, despite my repeated assurances that the Inquisition was not going to be another prison for mages.

Most of the survivors are only apprentices, too young to know how to live outside of the Circles. But there is also an Enchanter from Starkhaven who is going to watch over them until it’s safe for them to travel to Haven. Since they’ve managed to maintain control over their emotions and magic even after many weeks in the wilds, I’m confident that they should not pose a threat, provided that they are not received with fear and suspicion when they arrive.

I will not tolerate any member of the Inquisition terrifying these young people purely for being mages. They have been promised safety and sanctuary and that is what the Inquisition will give them. And anyone else who needs it.

We left the mages in the Crossroads yesterday morning and set out to locate Horsemaster Dennet. I cannot give a fully accurate report of the day as I was rather detached from myself until the evening - I can’t even recall my conversation with Dennet himself.
Tara tells me that before he’d be willing to supply the Inquisition with horses, Dennet wants to be sure that it is safe to transport so many mounts along potentially dangerous roads. He’s also understandably concerned about the security of the farmlands here in the Hinterlands, especially as they’ll soon need to begin the spring planting.

He has requested that we build three watchtowers in the region to allow the farmers to better guard their lands in these troubled times. Would the Commander be able to send a team of masons and possibly some soldiers to build and staff the towers? If these could be sent as soon as possible please? I’m aware that we’ve been in the Hinterlands for half a month at least and that we’ll need to travel to Val Royeaux in a couple of weeks in order to meet with the Chantry clerics that Mother Giselle has recommended we approach.

Dennet’s other request is to remove some possible demon-influenced wolves from the area. We’ll be looking to deal with that in the next day or so once we locate their den.

While we await the response to this letter, we’ll be exploring the area around Dennet’s farm more thoroughly - there’s a rift to the north that needs closing and I’m sure there will be other interesting things to discover while we roam.

We have very kindly been loaned some horses by Dennet which should speed up our travel times, however as Tara claims she never learnt to ride she will have to ride pillion with me for today. Tomorrow I can ask if Dennet’s daughter would be willing to teach Tara some basics before we have to return to Haven. Tara’s not looking forward to that in the slightest as you might imagine.

I shall endeavour to send another report in a day or two with an update of our progress here. Also amusing anecdotes of Tara’s riding lessons.

Elizabeth.

* * *

6 Drakonis 9:41, Haven
Elizabeth,

We were sorry to hear of the tragic encounter you had with some of the rogue apostates. We will see to it that suitable lodgings are ready for when the remaining mages arrive and that the Inquisition’s opposition to the abuse of mages is made clear to all in Haven. Of course we wish the Inquisition to be a safe place for all who join in good faith.

A team of masons will be on the road by the morning, accompanied by two squads of soldiers who are familiar with the Hinterlands. They should be with you within a week. I’m expecting that there will be sufficient building materials available in the region.

Stay safe Herald,
Commander Cullen

* * *
9 Drakonis 9:41, Western Hinterlands

L, Who’s fucking idea was it to get horses for the Inquisition? I was just getting used to walking everywhere again - physical fitness was hardly a priority in the Fade - and now you expect me to learn to fucking ride?!

I’m too old for this nonsense Leli, the bruises on my ass have bruises of their own! My knees and thighs have been screaming from how tightly I’ve had them clamped round the biggest beast I’m sure Dennet could find in his stable. I don’t need to be that far off the ground, if anything it’s making me more of a target surely?

There are far better things I’d like to be doing with my time besides having Dennet’s daughter - who is lovely and unfailingly patient with me I must add - teaching me to ride a creature that stands taller than both Varric and Liz.

I’ll break my neck if I fall from that monster’s back without warning. I’ve been lucky so far, I had time to barrier myself before I hit the dirt. But I swear by Maferath’s shrivelled sack, if that fucking dwarf ever writes about this I’ll feed him to darkspawn. Liz is only safe because we have no guarantee that we could wave her severed hand at the rifts if I killed her.

She’s been almost insufferably smug after Seanna challenged her to race a few circuits around the farm on horseback and won. Some of us didn’t have their first riding lesson when we were five!

I think within a few more days we’ll have most of the area around Dennet’s farm calmed enough to get the watchtowers built without any bother. The wolves were denned down-river from a particularly nasty rift that we’re not touching this time - there’s at least two despair demons skulking about beneath it. I reckon a demon must have latched onto one of the wolves and starting affecting the rest of the pack.

Once Varric stuck a few bolts through the demon, the wolves seemed to shake off their weird hyper-aggression and were more concerned about finding a new den than making us into dinner. Solas looked pleased that we didn’t have to kill them all - they’re social creatures and I still feel bad for the poor wolves we killed in the Brecilian Forest before Zathrian’s curse could be broken. But these wolves will live to see another dawn at least.

That’s better than I can say for the Carta thugs we ran into trying to fish some cargo out of the river. Varric’s now got some nice new armour for when we go to visit the Templar camp eventually.

Liz is hoping to convince some of them to join the Inquisition like she did with the mages - a noble cause, a warm bed and a stable lyrium supply should be an enticing offer but I fear that some of these templars have been away from the Circles and the blue stuff for too long to be reasoned with. Lyrium withdrawal fucks up the mind and the body - it’s a wonder that any of the ones roving the hills out here have the strength to even strap their armour on.

I wonder if the Carta are supplying them with lyrium as a bribe to overlook whatever illegal nonsense they’re getting up to? Might be worth investigating.

It’s nearly the end of my watch, I’ve got to go wake Solas. I hope the Fade doesn’t feel so weird
near all the rifts - it’s been quite unsettling sleeping in this camp the last few night with the big rift at the bottom of the slope. Bad memories keep trying their luck with me.

I’m almost eager to get back to Haven, what the void does that say about me?

Tara

* * *

13 Drakonis 9:41, Western Hinterlands

J, C & L,

The building team has arrived! They’ve spent much of today felling & splitting trees into posts and planks and quarrying some stone for the tower’s foundations. The drawings I’ve seen look quite simple but they should go up quickly and serve the farmers well.

Tomorrow they’re going to start building the watchtower which will overlook Dennet’s own farm while we ride over to the Templar encampment off the West Road to make our offer of peace to them as well. I’m hoping to persuade at least one. After last time I know better than to hope that all of them will listen. But one is better than none.

Once the camp is dispersed - however it happens - we’ll look to sweep back through the West road clearing out whatever stragglers are still causing trouble around Fort Connor. Everyone who’s been holed up in the Crossroads will finally be able to set out for Haven once that’s done. Maybe if the watchtowers are finished quickly, Horsemaster Dennet will acquiesce to send some of his mounts with Mother Giselle and the others.

With any luck we could be heading home before the week is out!

Elizabeth.

P.s Tara hasn’t fell off her horse once in the last two days. Although Varric has a pool going for how long it will be until she does fall again. Ten silver to pick a day. Pray she doesn’t find out.

* * *

Un-fucking the Hinterlands - List the Fourth

1. Find Mother Giselle - Liz got that out the way pretty efficiently & for a Chantry cleric she seems alright?

2. Find Horsemaster Dennet/Acquire horses for the Inquisition - He’s not dead but of course it’s not as simple as just saying yes. No, there’s an additional to do list.

2a. Build some Watchtowers for farm security - Cullen’s team is starting work tomorrow. Should be done within a few days perhaps?

2b. Wolves being Weird - Sorted. Demon-fuelled wolves are bitey little bastards.

3. Close the fucking rifts - Closed a handful so far in the eastern Hinterlands, left one alone to the south as it had some pretty nasty-looking demons loitering around it and the other in the area was a royal bitch to close. It’s far enough from any settlements to be fine for a while. Leave the Waterfall rift alone.
4. Food for the refugees - The Crossroads is stocked for now. By the time they run out of meat we might have made the area safer for them to hunt themselves.

5. Winter supplies - I don’t quite understand why the Apostates decided to scatter their caches willy-nilly across the countryside but at least Vale’s people can make use of them now.

6. Healer wanted - Vale asked if we could find a proper healer from Redcliffe to see to the Crossroads once the Chantry robes have gone. Left some elfroot potions with Mother Giselle when we passed through last.

7. Find the elven kid & send his runaway ass home - Hyndel has learnt the error of his (runa)ways and gone home, potion in hand for copious grovelling I should hope. Solas was muttering what sounded like swearwords under his breath the whole time the kid was packing - ask Curiosity for translations.

7a. A Fucking Cult in the hills - They were worshipping the fucking rift?! Maker save me from rich idiots with no inclinaion to help anyone other than themselves. Maybe now they think the sun shines out of Liz’s ass they’ll actually look outside their nice secure tower. Will need to make sure they actually do what Liz told them.

7b. Find Lord Whatsit’s Lady Friend - While I want to be mad that the daft man asked his beloved to travel across dangerous country all by herself, it was still a damn awful thing to tell him that she’d never be coming. I hope he can find some happiness with the Inquisition.

8. Astrariums - What the fuck are they? Found one while out hunting ram, the intricacy of the puzzle mechanism was beyond any dwarven-crafted machine I’ve ever seen. Beautiful though and there seemed to be some magical component which indicated there were at least two others being in the area. Research further. Found the second one! I think the third must be somewhere nearby but there’s lots of hills it could be hidden amongst.

9. Creepy-ass Skulls on Sticks - Found one by the Lake Luthias camp, didn’t poke at it. Found another one near Calenhad’s Foothold, there was a small camp on the ledge with some notes referencing the weird skulls - called them Occularum. They supposedly reveal objects veiled with magic or some shit like that. We marked its location and I took the notes but I still ain’t touching it. Another damn skull on Dennet’s farm. How many of these fucking things are there? We will have to actually investigate them at some point.

10. Clear the West Road - What a shit show. Too many damn templars, some of which apparently still have a fucking lyrium supply. Too many fucking mages with death-wishes as well. Soon. Maker Help Us.

11. Find a key for the Door to Valammar - Liz cleared out some Carta types from behind the waterfall feeding Lake Luthias. Someone in the damn Hinterlands has a way through that door, just gotta find them.

12. Retrieve Widow’s ring - What kind of scum do you have to be to kill a man you mistook for a mage and then rob him of his wedding ring? I’d be lying if I didn’t admit to gleefully taking down those templars.

13. Where’s Scout Ritts? - Well it sure takes some balls to seduce a Mage in the middle of a war. I’m almost impressed. Although I hope for Ritts’ future lovers that she does that shit somewhere safer.

14. Deliver Ser Mattrin’s effects to Ellendra - I am starting to really not enjoy telling people that their loved ones are dead. Liz talked the Enchanter into joining up so at least some good came of this. We need all the skilled mages we can get.

15. Lyrium Vein? - Nope! Red Lyrium vein, very not-good. We smashed that shit into tiny pieces and scorched it with the hottest fire it was possible to summon with three mages. Also carved a stone marker for the poor dwarf who apparently lost his mind to the lyrium song. That shit is evil, burnt it all.

16. Bandits! - Even if those idiots were pretty well-equipped for these backwaters, they were still no match for an extremely peeved Seeker of Truth (I think she was venting the irritation she felt for
Varric’s needling that day on the poor bandits)

17. Sister Tanner has been naughty - If the note we found on the Redcliffe road is any indication, there’s a Chantry sister up to some rather dubious shenanigans in Redcliffe. Will have to search her out and ask a few questions.

18. Witchwood Mages - The camp is gone, five to join Inquisition. Bad fucking day.

19. Hidden loot? - So a chap called Hessle thought it was worth risking death by wolf to hide a rather unimpressive belt for carrying grenades in a box halfway up a sheer wall. I mean, it can go back to Haven for the general Inquisition stores maybe?

20. Carta have good loot right? - We did have to fight off a couple of Carta heavies to acquire what they so carelessly lost, but Varric is liking the new armour since it’s already his size.

21. Druffalo took a trip - I didn’t entirely enjoy the afternoon spent on horseback luring it all the way back from Dead Man’s Gully, past that awful rift and up that ridiculous hill. If it gets loose again, I’m certainly not volunteering to go find it.

22. Rogue Templar Camp - We’re riding over there tomorrow. Maker please let us manage to at least get three words out before someone swings a sword at Liz.

* * *

Another Short List of Things to Avoid

1. Bears in Rivers. They’re wet, they’re angry and they can always run faster than you can.
2. Unnecessarily Aggressive Rams in Rivers. Who pissed in their porridge? I don’t appreciate getting dunked by some horned prick taking exception to my existence.
3. Demon Wolves. Already menacing predators now with added Terror Demon!

Chapter End Notes

Guys I think I might just get us out of the Hinterlands by the end of the next chapter... It might actually happen!

I don’t know yet whether to be excited or terrified because I’m going to have to start bringing in more of the Inquisition gang and I’m already pretty prone to forgetting that Solas is there most of the time (He just stands at the back of like every scene, quietly observing and doing nothing interesting ugh). But I think it might be fun.

Anyways, if you enjoyed reading and want to make this Kitten’s day please leave a comment or kudos ^_^ I’m getting close to 1k hits which is utterly bonkers. And 85 kudos! How the heck have *85* different people read this story and enjoyed it enough to hit that button?? Thank you so much, seriously ^_^

Until next time! Which I’m hoping won't be too far in the future!
Chapter Twenty-Four - Tackling Some Templars

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Oh my god I'm back! Wow I really did not mean to disappear for 3 weeks again folks, I'm sorry!

It has been a tad manic these past two weeks so I've just not managed to steal the time to bash out a chapter. Thankfully I got a big chunk of writing done on Monday afternoon at the coffee shop to add onto the bits I'd scribbled on another day. Considering the fact that I am a grown-ass woman I really should be better at focusing when I'm at home but I genuinely have to rob myself of the internet in order to get shit done.

But in excellent news from the last week - I got to squish and drink with Lady_Sav !!! We drank a prodigious amount of cherry wine & mead, sang a ton, and stayed up until nearly the crack of dawn talking. There is now no disguising that I am a Grade A Disaster Human™ so there goes all my hopes of retaining an aura of coolness XD

ANYWAY Let's get on with the chapter! There is Much Drama - Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Please tell me you already know what you’re going to say to them,” Tara pleaded as she saddled up her obnoxiously tall horse alongside Liz the next morning. “We’re going to be walking right up to a camp full of templars who’ve likely not had a steady supply of lyrium for at least the last six months - they’re going to be jumpy at just the sight of Cassandra let alone two obvious mages.”

Liz sighed, reaching to fasten the saddle straps under the belly of her new gelding. “I’ve got a general plan of what I want to say and what I think might get a good response from some of them. Were all of the Templars at Kinloch angry and scared of mages? Quite a few at Ostwick were almost cordial with some of us.”

Tara snorted derisively “By the time the Blight was over and nearly half of Kinloch’s Templars had been slaughtered by Uldred and his fellow blood mages, I think the remaining tin cans were considerably more fearful of mages in general. Obviously I don’t know what Kinloch has been like for the last ten years but I’d imagine it ranked somewhere in between Kirkwall and Ostwick.”

“I don’t think it’s possible for any Circle to be worse than Kirkwall,” interjected Varric, wandering over already astride the more appropriately sized pony that Dennet had managed to find for him. “Maker knows that the Gallows was only a few short steps from being an annex of the void itself. That there were any sane mages left in there by the time the Chantry blew was nothing if not miraculous.”

It was difficult to argue with either Tara’s or Varric’s reasoning, Liz knew she’d had a comparatively easy time of it in Ostwick. The majority of the Templars there had been lenient; at least until the Circles had started to fall, that’s when the more vicious among them had seen the spreading chaos as an opportunity to finally treat the mages as they felt they deserved.
She finished up securing her packs and double-checked the horse’s tack. Everyone else looked ready to leave, Solas was mounted and patiently waiting, Cassandra was in the process of swinging herself into the saddle of the towering, chestnut Ferelden Forder that had been loaned to her. Liz reached up to grip the saddle horn and steadied herself a moment. She really ought to have asked for a smaller horse.

Before she could launch herself up into the saddle a pair of hands gripped her waist and bodily lifted her off the ground until she was high enough to swing a leg over and seat herself. Smothering a squeak and gripping the reins in her hands so tight the leather creaked, Liz shot a wide-eyed look down at the wicked grin splitting Tara’s face as her shoulders shook with laughter.

“A little warning might have been nice!” She hissed, nudging Tara in the ribs with the toe of her boot. “You could at least pretend it wasn’t as easy as lifting a sack of potatoes!”

Tara sauntered over to her horse and swung herself onto its back with far more confidence than she’d had only a week before when she’d barely done more than ride a loop around the farm. If you knew where to look it was possible to see the well-concealed nervousness in Tara’s unnaturally upright posture and occasionally clenched jaw. It didn’t stop her winking in Liz’s direction.

“Would you rather I’d left you to jump and wriggle your way onto the horse’s back for ten minutes?” She said dryly. “It was quicker than finding you a box as well - how in the void did you end up with a horse whose withers stand at your eye-level? Surely Dennet had another pony that would have been more suitable?”

“I wouldn’t have said no to a smaller horse,” Liz muttered low enough that Cassandra wouldn’t hear. “But apparently the Herald of Andraste can’t been seen riding anything so indecorous as a pony. We have my appearance to think of after all. I should be seen riding triumphant on a mighty steed.”

“Oh fuck appearances,” Tara said rolling her eyes. “If anything we’re making you an easier target parading you around high enough for any archer to pick you out of the group. Maybe after a couple of days of seeing you risk your neck climbing in and out of the saddle, Cassandra will consider your safety more of a priority than your perceived consequence.”

“From your lips to the Maker’s ears,” Liz drawled, tapping her heels against the horse’s flanks and turning to face the rest of the group. Pitching her voice to carry she cried, “Let’s move out! One squad stay here with the building crew, the other with us to the Templar camp. Any trouble send a bird immediately.”

The Inquisition soldiers that Cullen had sent saluted as one and broke into two groups as requested. Cassandra wheeled her horse into position at the head of the column and led the way to the road. Tara and Liz fell in behind her with Varric trailing while Solas chose to bring up the rear, after the two lines of soldiers began a brisk march to keep pace with the horses.

Casting a quick glance across at Tara, who smiled at her without hesitation, Liz shifted in her saddle and began carefully running over her arguments to make to the Templars. It was only a short ride and the jittery feeling in her gut showed no signs of lessening the closer they got.

***
Varric was in the middle of the fight before he’d had chance to process how it had even begun. The
parley with the Templars had shifted so suddenly from something promising to fucked beyond
saving there was no telling what exactly had set them off. Maybe they didn’t want to believe what
Hopeful was offering them was for real. Maybe two obvious mages were two too many for them to
tolerate in close proximity. Maybe it was just inevitable.

One of the Templars they’d met at the mouth of the path leading to their cliff-side camp hadn’t
shouted the alarm the second he’d laid eyes on them. He was younger than most of the haggard
wild-eyed men they’d come across so far in the Hinterlands and was surprisingly coherent when
Liz spoke to him.

Templar Recruit Kaiden he’d introduced himself as - he’d not yet taken his vows or begun taking
lyrium when the Order had started to splinter so having nowhere else to go, he’d simply followed
some of his comrades from Jader when they left the Chantry several months ago. He’d seemed
eager to join the Inquisition, it was a rough existence living in a ravine beside a waterfall.

Now that same youth was wielding his sword against those former comrades as they tried to rout
the Inquisition from their camp. Varric kept an eye on the lad as best he could - Kaiden would
probably be the only mind they’d change today. But saving one was always preferable to saving
none at all.

The rest of the Inquisition group were spread throughout the camp engaged in their own battles.
Cassandra battering her way through the warriors with her usual grim determination; Solas coolly
slinging spells from a prominence higher up the cliff-face, wearing down Templars from where
they couldn’t reach him in return; and Tara flitting about daggers blurring, probably singing some
demented tavern tune under her breath again.

It took a few tries to lay eyes on Hopeful herself, Varric’s feet carrying him through the camp
without him fully understanding why he ran. By the time he found her, he was going to be too late
to help. Even hoisting Bianca and firing two bolts in quick succession wasn’t going to stop the
Templar charging at Liz with his shield raised high.

Varric could almost feel the bone-rattling impact as the Templar’s shield collided with Liz, her
hastily cast barrier shattering a moment later as the momentum launched her backwards. For a split
second Varric prayed the fence at the edge of the camp would be enough to stop Liz’s flight. But
the wood splintered and a piercing shriek followed as Hopeful tumbled over the edge of the rocks
and vanished from sight.

Well, fuck.

* * *

For three heartbeats Tara was frozen. Liz was gone. And she’d done nothing to stop it.

She barely registered the pain in her side as the Templar rogue she’d been trading blows with got a
lucky slash past her non-existent guard while she stared at the spot where she’d last seen Liz.

A roaring sound filled her ears, her daggers dropping from numb fingers as somewhere deep within
her chest a howling rage slipped free of its restraints.

They were soon going to learn what it would cost to incur her wrath.
Solas shuddered as a sudden surge of magic pulled so fiercely on the Fade he could almost feel the Veil straining not to tear. Across the camp Tara was gathering a staggering amount of power within herself, that she wasn’t already lost to demons was astonishing enough. He knew of no mage in recent memory who could wield so much magic with such control.

The very air began to hum around them as lightning crackled over Tara’s arms. Fade-stepping down from his vantage point, Solas beheld the fathomless expression on her ashen face at the moment she unleashed her rage on those who’d sent the Herald tumbling into the ravine.

The first Templar died instantly as Tara pressed two lightning-wreathed fingers to his forehead, body jolting rigid before slumping to the ground without ever making a sound.

Solas hurried to place barriers over the Inquisition team - their new ally included - and braced himself for whatever was to come. The midday sky darkened, an unnatural wind whipping up as the prickling sensation of magic in the air became almost unbearable.

Seven bolts of blinding white fury screamed down from the sky, striking with terrifying precision, ridding the camp of remaining enemies in one fell swoop. Breathless awe seized Solas, he blinked rapidly to clear the after-image from his vision as he sought out Tara in the now smouldering battlefield.

There she stood in the epicentre of destruction, a trickle of blood running from her nose to smear onto the viciously triumphant smile that twisted her face into someone unrecognisable. This was the woman who’d faced down an Archdemon and send it to the Void even as she damned herself to share its fate.

This woman had watched her friend fall and instantly sought to scorch the world. She could either become a fearsome ally or his deadliest foe. Solas knew which he would prefer Tara to be. It would not be wise to have a mage of her calibre standing against him.

But what of the Herald?

* * *

Cassandra wasn’t sure she’d taken a full breath since Elizabeth had crashed through the fence. The icy terror gripped her chest even now, the Templars were destroyed - she avoided looking at the grotesque figures of melted metal and blackened flesh that had once been men - but their cause was lost if the Herald had not survived her fall.

Staggering towards the plateau’s edge she dropped her weapons carelessly and climbed out onto the rocks, gazing down into the ravine with a prayer on her lips. The pool at the foot of the waterfall was not so deep that Elizabeth would have sunk to the bottom, but had she struck any of the large boulders dotted around the ravine floor?

A flicker of green in the water caught her eye. “There!” She cried, glancing back over her shoulder
as the others approached. Cassandra took a step away from the edge, making room for Tara to stand beside her.

The aura of power still radiating from the younger woman sent a shiver prickling down Cassandra’s spine. In all her years with the Seekers and the Chantry she’d never seen one mage wield so much magic without resorting to dangerous quantities of lyrium or blood magic, yet Tara hardly seemed to comprehend the magnitude of what she’d done.

Without pausing to warn anyone Tara took a large step forward… off the cliff. A strangled noise came from behind Cassandra as Tara dropped like a stone to the water below. The young Templar recruit was pale and wide-eyed, mouth agape as he stared at where Tara had been standing.

“Who—?” he began, voice cracking. “I didn’t know she was a mage- Who is she?”

Varric patted him on the arm with a consoling smile. “Don’t worry about Sparky, she’s not usually so scary. Be glad she’s fighting with us and not against us.”

“That’s not the most comforting thought, Serrah but I appreciate the attempt,” the lad replied with a shaky smile in return.

Splashing sounds echoed up from the ravine and a shout followed. “Clear the ledge, I’m coming up!”

Cassandra waved everyone back to the fence line, having to gently nudge the bewildered recruit when he didn’t move at first. A dark shape came flying up and landed softly on the ledge, dripping water in their wake.

Tara’s face was shining in a beaming smile, a completely different woman to the vengeful creature who stepped off the cliff only a scant few minutes ago. A limp body with dark red hair was cradled in her arms but if Tara was happy…?

“She’s alive!” Tara cried, striding to set Liz down on the nearest flat surface that wasn’t lightning-scorched. “Her arm looks broken but other than that I can’t see any real injuries.”

“How is that possible?” Cassandra gasped. “The fall alone should have killed her!”

Kneeling beside Liz, Solas reached for the neck of her robes and carefully extracted an amulet, the crystal on the front cracked down the middle. A soft green light bloomed around his hand as he pressed it to Liz’s forehead for several moments before moving it slowly over the length of her body. Once finished with his diagnostic spell Solas looked up at the anxious faces around him.

“I believe the Herald has been incredibly fortunate,” Solas stated. “Her arm is the only serious injury although there is also a cut on her head which I assume was caused by the initial shield bash. It seems that the Lifeward amulet Elizabeth was wearing activated before she hit the water and the personal barrier it produced protected her from further harm. She will be fine.”

A ripple of relieved sighs went round the group. The vice around Cassandra’s chest finally loosened and she took the first deep breath for what felt like an hour.

“Thank the fucking Maker,” Tara whispered, her posture relaxing before listing sharply to the side, her eyes rolling back.

Cassandra lunged forward, hands out to stop Tara’s head from hitting the ground. It took a moment to spot the darker section of her leather armour on her side, even less time for the curse to come bubbling to her lips at the sight of how much blood had soaked into Tara’s clothes beneath.
“See kid? I told you Sparky wasn’t that scary all the time!”

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit that was a bit of a wild ride! There was another scene that I was going to put at the end buuuuut I thought it would wind down all the tension so it's going at the start of Ch25 ^_^

So help me god we are getting back to Haven next time even if I have to make the chapter 4 fucking K.

I won't be in any hurry to use that many different POV shifts again, good grief was it too many?? But I wanted to cover the fight from various sides to get some of the other's thoughts. Hopefully you guys liked it?

If my dubious maths is right... this hefty yet barely begun fic is now **70,000 words long(ish) O_O** That's more words than I've written on one project in maybe 4 years? And there is soooo much more to write! I hope you guys don't mind sticking around for a long haul read.

Thank you so so much for reading and if you want to leave me a comment or kudos I really freaking appreciate every one I get <3 Have a great evening! ^_^
Chapter Twenty-Five - Havenbound

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Good evening jelly beans! It's only been a fortnight-ish since I last posted but with how quickly November has vanished it weirdly feels like it's been forever??

PRAISE THE MAKER WE'RE OUT OF THE HINTERLANDS! XD I feared I'd never leave!
Also this chapter is like twice as long as the last one because the words kept coming - which is a great thing because I live in terror of the words abandoning me.

I seriously can't overstate how grateful I am that people have stuck with me and this story through to this 25th chapter! We've still got a long-ass way to go but I hope y'all are excited for what's to come (I know at least two people are and they're both *not* me XD)

The usual eternal love, hugs & cookies to Lady_Say for all the things and for being such a fan of this story <3

Now I hope you enjoy this slightly manic chapter! (what is editing)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liz was getting altogether fed up of waking up in strange places after an indeterminate period of time, feeling like she’d been pummelled with rocks. At least the cot she was laying on wasn’t a cold dungeon floor. Wriggling her arms free of the soft, woollen blankets tucked around her, she moved to lever herself upright but froze as a throbbing pain shot up her right forearm.

“Fuck,” she hissed through gritted teeth. Reaching for her magic she swept a spell over her arm, trying to identify what was hurting.

What in the Maker’s name had happened to her?

Footsteps thudded upstairs, growing louder across the wooden floor until Tara shot around the corner, wide-eyed and barefoot, staggering to a halt at the foot of her cot. Barely pausing for breath, Tara knelt between Liz’s feet and lunged forward to gather Liz in her arms. She squeezed the smaller woman until Liz’s ribs almost groaned.

“Breathing…would be nice,” she squeaked.

“You can breathe when I’m done reassuring myself that you’re not dead in the bottom of a river,” Tara muttered into Liz’s shoulder, relaxing her grip slightly despite her words. Heaving out a deep sigh she spoke again in a shakier voice. “You really fucking scared me, Liz.”

It took a few seconds for Liz to connect what Tara was saying to her fuzzy recollection of the last time she was awake. Her arm ached sharply as the memory of a Templar’s shield smashing into it rose from the depths of her mind. The sensation of falling, falling, falling with nothing to catch her sent her stomach lurching.

“Oh fuck… I fell off the cliff didn’t I?”
That startled a laugh out of Tara. She sat back on her haunches and rested her hands on Liz’s shoulders as she looked her dead in the eyes.

“You did indeed, fall off a fucking cliff, you ridiculous woman,” Tara deadpanned. “And then I lost my temper so spectacularly, I think your baby Templar recruit is never going to feel comfortable around me again.”

“What did you do?” Liz asked, eyebrows lifting. “Kaiden didn’t seem the type to be easily spooked when I spoke to him.”

Tara looked slightly sheepish. “I might have cooked the rest of the Templars where they stood… with just one spell. Then jumped off the cliff to look for you. He hadn’t realised I was a mage so it all came as quite the surprise.” A blush spread over Tara’s cheeks as she looked down her hands, fingers tangling together in her lap.

Liz’s jaw fell open for second before giggles took over and rendered her senseless for a full two minutes until she finally got a grip on her hysterics and took some deep breaths.

“Are you quite done?” Tara said. “I had good reason to be angry, you’d just been punted off the edge of the camp by a tin can with a shield almost taller than you! What was I supposed to do?”

Taking her hand, Liz smiled up at Tara. “I am infinitely grateful that I had you to avenge me so fiercely after I fell, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I’m sorry I scared you - forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Tara replied with a grin. “This isn’t the first time we’ve had a conversation like this and I’ll stake my second life on it being far from the last time we do. Solas worked some slow-healing magic on your arm and let you sleep a few days so once you’ve given it a boost with your own healing spells it should be good as new - it was a bad fucking break though.”

Glancing down at the unmarked skin of her forearm, Liz finished casting the spell that she’d begun before Tara arrived. She could see the faint shadows of where the bones of her arm had been shattered and splintered wrapped in the fading glimmers of the spells Solas had used to hold all the pieces in place while another deeper spell worked to heal the bones from within. Even now it was slowly pulsing, sending a trickle of magic to strengthen over time rather than flash-heal and leave the bones more brittle and fragile. It was impressively intricate spellwork.

“It seems I owe Solas quite a debt of thanks as well,” Liz remarked. “I’ve not seen healing like this in the Circles, I’d be interested to know what other spells he knows like this. Wait, did you say I’d been asleep a few days?”

Tara nodded. “Solas felt the spells would be more effective if your body was properly resting while they worked. I had to agree - it was hardly going to help if he patched you up and then you went straight back out into the field. So we let you sleep while we finished off some of the shit that needed doing.”

“I see,” Liz said slowly. “Might I request that in future, somebody asks me if I want to be kept in a magical sleep for three days regardless of how injured I am?”

Paling slightly at her friend’s colder tone, Tara chewed at her lip a moment before speaking. “If the situation arises again, I promise I will ask before we do anything that’s going to leave you vulnerable and unable to defend yourself. You stopped Solas casting spells on me without my express permission - I should have done the same for you. The decision was made while I wasn’t able to voice my objections and by the time I was, the spells were already cast and I didn’t like to
risk hindering the healing process by waking you up.” She ducked her head, cheeks flushing
darker.

Liz tilted her head slightly. “Why weren’t you able to tell Solas no?”

Tara swallowed audibly, not lifting her gaze from her lap. “I, er, might not have been conscious for
a while after I lifted you out of the ravine? I... kind of passed out?”

“What Sparky is dancing around admitting is that she collapsed from blood loss after throwing
around more magic than five mages should reasonably be able to muster,” Varric remarked from
behind them. Both women flinched, having missed the rogue’s sneaky approach.

Tara twisted round to throw a blistering glare at the dwarf before facing Liz again, her expression
softening as she confessed the truth. “So I might have been lightly stabbed and didn’t stop to do
anything about it when you fell. It caught up with me as soon as I knew you were safe and going to
be okay.”

For a few moments, Liz did nothing but stare at her friend. Her ridiculous, idiot of friend who
seemed more upset that she’d not been able to prevent their companions from making decisions for
her while she was unconscious than over the fact that she herself got wounded badly enough to
collapse. Liz pinched the bridge of her nose to stave off the headache that thought was surely going
to cause.

“You aren’t still hurt, are you?” Liz reached for Tara’s hand, sending a thread of magic between
them checking for lingering pains.

“That tickles,” Tara said wriggling as the magic trailed down the side where the Templar had
cought her. “I promise I’m fine. Varric here can tell you, they chucked a couple of elfroot potions
in me and I was back up on my feet within the hour. Too late to stop Solas getting magic-happy but
well enough to insist on carrying you back to Dennet’s.”

Varric confirmed her story, smirking all the while. “Sparky nearly had a shouting match with
Cassandra about it, but she looked quite the heroic prince cradling you in front of her as we rode
back to the farm. She’s also been doing a fine job of standing in for you as we finally cleared out
the last of the idiots fighting between here and the Crossroads. I think Corporal Vale’s men are
torn over whether to fear or worship her.”

Smothering a giggle at the flush rising on Tara’s cheeks, Liz resolved not to tease her some more.
“So what’s left for us to do here? Are the watchtowers finished? Has Dennet decided if he’s going
to help the Inquisition or not?”

“The towers are done, the Crossroads now has a clear route to get their supplies in and out, Dennet
has agreed not only to supply the Inquisition with mounts but to join up as our Horsemaster,” Tara
said proudly. “He’s sending along half his stable with us - and the folk from the Crossroads who
have been waiting to travel to Haven - then he’ll follow in a week or so with the rest once he’s
gotten everything settled here.”

“So all I have to do is make sure my bags are packed?” Liz was intensely relieved that there was no
more heavy work to be done for now. As exhilarating as the last month was, she was eager for a
change of scenery, even if that was only a few days in Haven before they needed to depart for Val
Royeaux.

“You don’t even have to do that,” Tara replied. “I made sure both our bags were ready to go for
when you woke up but if you want to rearrange your stuff then I might let you before we load you
into the waggon we’re taking back.” She winked as Liz opened her mouth to argue.

“Are you sure you don’t want this Herald job yourself?” Liz grumbled. “You seem to be managing just fine without me.”

“Fuck no I don’t,” Tara laughed, tweaking Liz’s nose between her fingers. “I’m being the ever-helpful Lieutenant getting shit done so the boss doesn’t have to worry about all that on top of saving the world. Let me worry about the little stuff while you’re still recovering.”

Realising that she was losing the argument no matter what she said, Liz sighed. “Fine, I’ll take it easy until my arm is back at full strength. Maker knows I’m lucky to have such capable companions who can do what needs to be done without needing me to approve every tiny task. I’d have surely lost my damn mind weeks ago without you, Tara.”

“There’s still time yet for that,” Tara quipped clambering off the cot and stretching her arms above her head. “I’ll go see if I can rustle up some food for you and let Cass know that we’re okay to set off for Haven tomorrow.” Flashing another smile she padded back to the stairs far more quietly than she’d came.

Liz turned her attention to Varric who still stood beside her, his expression more somber than she expected. “I didn’t worry you that much did I?” She asked softly.

“There was a moment where I thought this story might end sooner than it should and it was going to be real fucking tragedy,” he admitted with a shaky grin. “But now I think I’m more concerned about what Sparky would have done if you had been killed. You didn’t see her Hopeful - she took out eight Templars faster than I could take two breaths and I think she was still holding back. For all her smiles, I think she was fucking terrified that she’d lost you and something sure snapped inside her in that moment.”

“Are you saying she’s a threat to us?” Liz whispered, fighting the urge to snap in vehement denial of what Varric was insinuating.

“To you? Never. The Inquisition? Probably not. But to anyone who would dare to threaten the lives of people she cares about? I don’t think she’d hesitate for a second to destroy them where they stood. And not give a single thought to what she did to herself in the process.” Varric shook his head, grimacing.

That, Liz found easier to accept. She’d already seen the risks Tara would take in fights - she’d barely been out of the Fade a few days before she was launching herself at a Pride demon armed only with daggers and pure dumb luck. It was no wonder Katarina Amell had inspired such loyalty in her companions and allies if she had been just as ready to give everything in order to do what was needed to end the Blight then as Tara was to help the Inquisition now.

She looked Varric dead in the eyes. “You’ll help me protect Tara from herself if necessary won’t you?”

“Absolutely, Hopeful,” Varric replied. “I don’t ever want to be the person who has to tell the Nightingale that Tara got herself killed - again.”

Liz shuddered. “Maker witness that.”

* * *
After four days of travelling in the back of the waggon, Liz was finally bored enough to consider riding, but that then involved running the gauntlet of what horse she was going to ride. When the caravan of assorted Chantry persons, Crossroads refugees and Inquisition soldiers and scouts stopped for a lunch break she sought out Tara and together they braved the Seeker. It took ten minutes of fervently polite discussion before Liz’s temper began to fray.

“By the Maker, Cassandra if I get back up on that monster of a horse and some bandit shoots me right off it you’re going to be short one Herald and feeling very foolish.” Liz propped her fists on her hips hoping it would serve to make her look more authoritative rather than a child throwing a tantrum.

“I understand the need for me to look ‘sufficiently blessed’ or whatever,” she continued. “But if I’m on the back of a horse that I need a ladder to mount then I’ll just look ridiculous. Find me one of the prettier mares and I’ll ride that. But we can save the bruisers for the Commander’s men.”

“But—“ Cassandra sighed at the mulish set of Liz’s up-tilted chin and stopped before she wasted her breath. “Very well, I’ll have someone find a more suitable mount.”

The moment the Seeker was out of earshot Liz rounded on Tara, eyes full of mischief. “Pay up,” she crowed as they strolled back towards the road and the rest of the caravan.

Digging into her coin purse, Tara counted out ten silvers into Liz’s outstretched hand, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “Damn I was sure we’d have to break out the combined forces of your adorable puppy-eyes and my darkspawn-felling glare before she cracked. Clearly I underestimated Cass’s susceptibility to your Heraldic Pout.”

“It’s not a pout,” Liz retorted. “It’s my leaderly demeanour.”

Tara raised one eyebrow and held Liz’s gaze until they broke into full-body laughter that had them clanging onto each other as tears streamed down their cheeks. A few of the Chantry sisters nearby frowned at their antics, one even tutting before walking off, undoubtedly to report to Mother Giselle that the supposed Herald of Andraste was engaging in childish fits of giggles.

By the time Cassandra returned, leading a dainty-looking chestnut mare behind her, Tara and Liz had mostly gotten their breath back. They both straightened and tried to look less guilty, only half-succeeding as the Seeker gave them a curious look, tinged with disapproval.

“Will this be suitable, Elizabeth?” She asked flatly.

“You’ll certainly look very leaderly riding her,” Tara remarked in a strangled voice.

Liz choked, unable to stop the cackles of laughter spilling from her lips once more. Tara quickly followed and Cassandra made the same disgusted noise she did whenever they or Varric were being ridiculous before stalking back to her own horse.

It was another five minutes before either woman was sensible enough to find their way back to the waggon to move Liz’s bags to her new mount and for the rest of the afternoon Cassandra shot them dirty looks any time they so much as coughed too loudly.

She also got her revenge by challenging Tara to spar that night and the next two nights before they were to arrive back in Haven, leaving her so thoroughly exhausted and sore that she had no energy to make mischief with Liz during the day. Liz had to give Cassandra credit for her underhanded tactics without undermining the Herald’s image with the others.
Tara never thought she’d see the day she was actually happy to see the peak of Haven’s Chantry catching the sunlight as they rounded the last bend into the valley. Across the lake there were more tents pitched than there had been when they left, the sounds of clanging metal on wood drifting on the wind from the soldiers sparring in lines in front of Haven’s main gate. Snow still lingered this high in the Frostbacks while Spring was taking hold elsewhere, she’d have to make sure she didn’t cut her exposed toes on the ice while she was walking about the village.

Horns heralded the arrival of the caravan and Haven suddenly buzzed with excitement. Dozens of Inquisition uniforms approached the column of horses once it came to a halt outside the bailey, catching hold of reins as their riders dismounted ready to lead them away to the long, narrow building that must have been finished so recently the timbers were barely dry.

From the largest tent came striding Cullen with his serious Commander face on, one hand gripping the pommel of his sword as he marched up to Liz’s horse and snapped a brief salute. He nodded by way of hello to Tara and Cass on either side before speaking to Liz.

“Welcome back Elizabeth. We were worried when we heard about the incident with the rogue Templars but I’m very glad to see you looking so well.” A slight smile cleared some of the severity from Cullen’s expression.

Liz grinned back at him, dismounting her mare with far more grace that Tara could hope to manage. “It’s good to be back, Commander. Although I’d assumed we’d be done with all this snow by now, it’s nearly Cloudreach!”

Cullen huffed a quiet laugh. “I’m afraid winter tends to hold fast a while longer in the Frostbacks. But it’s getting warmer every day so perhaps the snow will be gone by Summerday?”

“Please don’t joke about such things,” Liz said, feigning horror. “I’m already feeling the urge to climb into the hottest bath I can stand and stay there for half a day.”

“Well I wouldn’t want to delay such an endeavour,” Cullen said waving over a stablehand. “If you leave the horses with us, we’ll get them settled while you can seek out your bath.”

Handing over her reins to the somewhat awe-struck girl, Liz gave her a warm smile and set about unfastening her bags from behind the saddle, propping her staff up in the crook of her elbow until she had a hand free to carry it. Once her bags were slung over her shoulder she swung to face Tara.

“You coming or not?” She grinned. “Last one to the cabin gets the dirty bathwater!”

Tara rolled her eyes as Liz took off towards the gate at a sprint. Swinging her leg over her saddle and dropping to the ground, Tara held out her reins to the now thoroughly mind-boggled stablehand and gave her a pat on the shoulder.

“The Herald isn’t as fearsome as the title paints her,” she said with a wink. “And she forgets that I have ways of cheating that she doesn’t.”

It took her a moment or two to lift her saddlebags onto her shoulder, a third to snap a cheeky salute at Cullen who watched her warily and a fourth to focus her mind on the cabin as she called up her magic to winnow her way through the Fade.
Tara inhaled and stepped. Their cabin looked less dusty than she’d expected given that they’d been away for over a month. Someone must have been in to clean a few times judging by the small vase of early spring blooms on each of the tables next to their beds. A new earthy-green rug had been laid in the space in front of the fireplace with a copper bathtub stood in the centre. Tara was tempted to curl her bare toes right into the rug. But not yet.

Thundering footsteps preceded the rush of cold air as Liz finally came bursting through the cabin door, craning to look behind her as though demons were hot on her heels. Still breathless from sprinting and probably laughing she broke into a victory dance.

“You forgot something,” Tara smirked.

Liz let out a shriek, dropping her things to the floor as she realised she wasn’t alone. Stomping over to Tara as she creased into helpless wheezes, Liz jabbed her friend in the shoulder with an accusatory finger.

“Fuck’s sake Tara!” She said. “That’s not fair, I almost jumped clean out of my skin!”

Tara could hardly speak for spluttering. “It’s not my fault you forgot I was a bloody mage! What was I meant to do? Pass up this opportunity?!”

Liz punched her in the bicep. “You could at least have had the decency to run through Haven looking like a maniac with me! Now the entire Inquisition is going to think their Herald is touched in the head!”

“Or you ran so fast, that all anyone saw was a streak of red hair.”

“Shut up and fill the bathtub. You still get to go second and I might consider holding off on my plan to hide nug droppings in your bed.”

“I see the power of being Herald is going to your head, it’s a slippery slope you know,” Tara deadpanned as she waved a hand towards the tub, filling it half-full with snow before slowly melting it.

Gathering her bags from the floor and bolting the cabin door shut, Liz stuck her tongue out at Tara. “I will use my great and terrible power to ensure that no one comes looking for us for at least the next two hours.”

“Andraste bless our benevolent leader.”

* * *

When the knock finally came summoning them both to the Chantry for a meeting with the Advisers, Tara had been teetering on the edge of a nap for nearly ten minutes. The banging on the door had her bolting upright on the bed, her journal tumbling off her chest to land on the floor with a thud. Muttering curses and threats under her breath, Tara staggered to her feet and padded to unbolt the door.

Blinking the light from her eyes, Tara squinted at the lad who’d been sent to fetch them. A scruffily blond Fereldan youth in a scout uniform whose sharp, blue-eyed gaze was oddly familiar. Her memory eventually supplied her with a name as recognition lit the lad’s face.
“Regen! I see you’ve drawn the short stick in having to drag us out of our cosy hideaway, did Cassandra think we were going to try and avoid the meeting?”

“I couldn’t possibly say ser,” Regen replied cheekily. “But I offered to come fetch you an’ th’ Herald.”

Liz appeared at Tara’s side, her hair slightly askew as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “I’m sure I told you to call me Liz, Regen,” she said around a yawn. “When did you get to Haven? I don’t recall seeing you amongst the Inquisition people we rode back with?”

Regen stood a little straighter, a proud smile on his lips. “I came back with Chief Scout Harding an’ a few others a week or two back. She wanted me to have some lessons with one of Sister Nightingale’s people - readin’ and writin’ and other scout stuff y’know? Then I’m goin’ with Harding up to th’ Storm Coast in a few days - there’s been word of Wardens around there that the Nightingale wants us to investigate.”

Tara flinched slightly at the mention of Wardens - she’d be asking Leli about that shortly. A gentle touch to her elbow from Liz had her relaxing once more and she gave her a friend a grateful smile.

“That’s wonderful to hear,” Liz told Regen. “I’m so glad you’re doing so well with the Inquisition. Take care on the Storm Coast, I’d like to know that my first Ward will be safe and sound when I eventually make it there.”

“I’ll do my best… Liz, ser,” he replied bowing his head briefly. “If you please, I don’t think we should keep the Lady Seeker waitin’ too long.”

“Oh you’re absolutely right,” Tara said, grabbing hold of Liz’s arm and steering her out the cabin door. “We don’t want Cass scolding us for being late, I’m still feeling the effects of her last attempt to punish us for being childish.”

Flicking her fingers at the door to shoot the bolt back into place, Tara followed Liz and Regen down the steps and through the village. As they walked Regen chatted non-stop, recounting some of the things he’d seen and done since they left him in Scout Harding’s capable hands. It was heartening to see how Liz’s mercy that first day in the Hinterlands had won the Inquisition a fiercely loyal young scout.

Walking through Haven in just a shirt and breeches felt oddly exposing after weeks of wearing her armour and daggers practically every moment she wasn’t asleep. A prickle of paranoia ran down Tara’s spine as they drew closer to the Chantry. Now would be an opportune time for someone to strike at Liz when her guard was down, supposedly safe while surrounded by Inquisition forces. But how many unknown faces had arrived while they’d been gone? Could Josephine and Leli be certain of everyone who walked within Haven’s walls?

Inside the Chantry was a hive of activity, robed Sisters hurrying in and out of side-rooms with wooden chests and piles of linens, getting Mother Giselle and her entourage unpacked. A few dozen people Tara didn’t know or trust and she had only her magic with which to defend Liz. Her hands itched for a dagger as they made their way down the length of the nave.

The area at the back of the Chantry was empty save for two Inquisition soldiers standing guard outside the War room. So when the door to Josie’s office crashed open and a garbled shout echoed into the hall, Tara didn’t hesitate to act.

One Fade-step put her between Liz and the figure running headlong towards her. Tara had her hand fisted in their shirtfront, wrenching them clear off the ground before they’d even realised there was
someone in the way. Half a dozen voices began shouting around her and the door to the War Room flew open in all the commotion.

Tara fixed her gaze on the young man she’d caught, noting that his feet were dangling several inches off the floor and his expression had yet to comprehend this fact it seemed. His hair was a bright copper colour, more orange than red and standing up odd angles as though it was raked through by anxious hands with regularity. An abundance of freckles stood out on his currently ashen complexion, his sky-blue eyes following Tara’s with a growing awareness of his precarious position.

“Who are you and why are you here?” Tara bit off every word with venom, her voice unrecognisable even to her.

Apparently there was sufficient threat in her tone to get the man talking as a flood of half-stammered pleas came forth.

“Sweet blessed Andraste! I wasn’t going to— I just, Maker’s breath why is there lightning on your hands?! It tickles and not in way I feel all that happy about... how are you holding me up like this? Maker, I didn’t think mages were so strong!” He caught the warning in Tara’s icy expression. “Right! Answering your very salient questions, I’m so sorry. I forgot myself - I just was so excited to see Liz and didn’t think about how it’d look—”

“Still not hearing a name,” Tara snapped.

“I’m Henry!” He blurted.

Tara blinked, head tilting. “Henry?” She parroted. “As in Trevelyan?”

“Yes! I’m Liz’s twin!”

It took every drop of Tara’s will to not drop him in that one dumbstruck moment.

Chapter End Notes

*high-pitched squeals of excitement*
Oh man I can't wait to write the next chapter, it's going to be almost entirely dialogue I'm sure, but fuck me I've been dying to get Henry on the page. AH it's going to be so much fun! ^_^

Is everyone as relieved to be back in Haven as I am? I promise we're only going to be here a few days before the gang hits the road for Val Royeaux (she says knowing full well that could still mean 15k of UTTER NONSENSE).

If you enjoyed I'd really love it if you left a comment or a kudos <3 I have got a bit lax in replying to comments but I promise that every single one makes me grin like a FOOL OF A TOOK.

Until next time folks!
Chapter Twenty-Six - Family Reunions

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year Folks!! I hope everyone had at least a semi-pleasant holiday season and that 2019 is treating you better than 2018.

I'd hoped to get a chapter up before Christmas buuuut that obviously didn't happen. The first half of December was a bit rough & for the rest of the month the words were just not coming how I wanted.

So the ever-wonderful Lady_Savannah had the smashing idea for us to swap chapters since she was having trouble with her latest one too. That's why her name is up there ^^^ as well today - because she probably wrote at least half of this chapter while I did the same for her new chapter in Through Fire or Fury although it's not yet posted.

We hope you enjoy this little experiment of ours (one day you might get to read the cross-over fic we started :P) and maybe we'll do it again in the future if people liked it.

Happy Reading!

(P.S - please send Kitten all the loves. She lives off kudos and comments and knowing that more than just her and me love this fic.

Plus, you know, she’s awesome.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Heart in her throat, too afraid that if she blinked this would all turn out to be a wonderful daydream instead of reality, Liz laid a trembling hand on Tara’s forearm so close to where her hand gripped her brother’s - Henry’s shirt.

“You can let go of him, Tara,” she said softly. “He’s not going to hurt me.”

Nodding faintly, Tara lowered Henry back down to the floor and released him. She took two shaky steps to the side, eyes a little wild as she flexed her right hand several times. The smile she plastered onto her face when she turned to Liz was slightly off, a hair too wide and bordering on a grimace. Tara had reacted on instinct and it scared her more than she was willing to let anyone see.

Shifting her scrutiny from her friend, Liz looked over the rather dishevelled figure that was Henry. A familiar stranger from a time before magic emerged in her life. In his sharp, almost fox-like features she could see flickers of the boy he’d been when she last saw him. The mischievous tilt of his mouth that had twisted into a smirk every time he’d shot some obscurely insulting witticism at one of their oblivious older siblings. The genuine warmth that shone from his eyes when he was with Liz - the only member of the Trevelyan family that Henry truly respected and cared for.

But he’d changed so much. He was a man now, not the ten year old boy he’d been when she was taken away. The last time she’d seen him, he’d been on the porch of their family home, tears drying on both their cheeks, their mother’s hand stopping him from running after the Templars.
And here he was, studying her right back, cataloguing the changes in her.

His slim frame was quivering as though he was holding back from launching himself at her once more. With a beaming smile Liz swung her arms wide in invitation. In a heartbeat Henry swept her up into rib-crushing embrace and twirled them both three full spins before letting Liz get her feet back on solid ground. Mutters surrounded them from the assembled busybodies, which they both ignored. Slackening his grip a fraction, he pressed his forehead to Liz’s and let out an intensely relieved sigh.

“Maker, am I happy to see you sis,” he whispered. “When news reached Denerim about the explosion at the Conclave it felt like my heart had been snatched from my chest and tossed into the ocean still beating.” A shudder wracked his body.

“I don’t think I slept for three days until the next proclamation came about a mage who’d woken up a prisoner but by the next day everyone was praising her as the ‘Herald of Andraste’ because she’d stopped the Breach from growing,” he snorted.

“Even without hearing your name, I just knew it was you, Liz. Only you could wake up with unfathomable magic, have everyone furious at you and then go out of your way to be as helpful as possible.”

Tara choked on her laughter. “You really were obnoxiously helpful considering you were literally dying on your feet and prime suspect for the murder of the Divine. I don’t think I’d have been as mild-mannered about the whole situation if I was in your shoes.”

“You don’t wear shoes often enough to be in mine,” Liz retorted, tipping a nod to Tara’s currently bare feet. “What have you forgotten?”

“What?” Tara looked down. “Oh fuck, not again.”

Stifling a snort as Tara brushed melting snow off her toes, Liz turned back to her current concern. “Henry, as overjoyed as I am to see you - when did you get here? How did you get here? I’m certain I told you to stay in Denerim!”

He looked innocently puzzled. “I never received such a letter, Liz. I’ve been here about two weeks - I didn’t tell anyone who I was, just that I’m a scholar. And I rode a horse, obviously.” She studied his face. There was something… his mouth quirked up. It was a tiny tell she remembered from their childhood whenever he wrapped a lie in a mantle of truth. At least that’s what she hoped it was. How would she know his tells anymore?

Thankfully, Josephine chose this moment to clear her throat. Right, she was meant to be having a meeting. Glancing over at all three Advisors, Liz smiled at Henry and took a half-step back. He’d yet to let go of her, so all that achieved was an awkward wobbling shuffle that was very much against the dignity of the Herald of Andraste. She heard Tara stifle a laugh. “I have to…”

“Right, of course,” he hurriedly released her, straightening his shirt, a blush rising on his cheeks. “We’ll have to…”

She nodded. “Come by our cabin later, we’ll talk properly there.”

He gave a quick, jerky nod in return, relief flashing over his features, before he made a quick retreat, his ears flaming the same colour as her hair.
Liz was obviously not concentrating in the War Council. Her eyes were far away, staring at her clasped hands instead of whoever was talking. Every question had to be repeated. Tara ended up giving their report on the Hinterlands herself, even though Liz had spent an hour sweating over it the night before. It was ordered by importance with numbered lists of items to action and everything.

Eventually, Tara snapped her fingers under Liz’s nose. “Liz! Hellooooo?”

Liz jumped in surprise and blinked up at Tara, who grasped her by the shoulders. “Look, I know what just happened was unexpected and you want to spend the afternoon thinking about it, but we’re in the middle of a damn meeting. So please, get your head out of the fucking clouds and focus, just for the next five minutes?”

Stuttering an apology, Liz firmly put her hands behind her back and turned to face the war table. She floundered for a moment before Leliana gently interrupted.

“To summarise, the Hinterlands are in a much better state and our people have things well in hand. Mother Giselle had been in contact via raven before you returned so we’ve arranged for you to meet with some of the more… reasonable clerics in Val Royeaux. Your boat leaves Jader in a week, and we’ll see to your return journey once your business in Orlais is concluded.”

Tara’s eyes sparkled. “I’ve never been on a ship on the Waking Sea, you know…”

Liz giggled at her, “Yes, of course you’re coming, if you want to.”

“Fuck yes, I want to! I want to eat all the little cakes I’ve heard so much about! Leli, you’ll have to recommend a few places…”

“Oh! There’s one on the Market Plaza that makes these delicious…”

Cullen cleared his throat, rather daringly in Liz’s opinion. She wouldn’t want to interrupt the Nightingale. “If we might return to the matter at hand?”

Properly chastised, they turned their attention to him. “How sure are we that this isn’t a cunning ploy to lure the Herald into a trap? It’s not as if we have any allies in Val Royeaux.”

“It is… unlikely,” Josephine shuffled her papers around. “Mother Giselle is known for her humanitarian works, and Leliana has investigated the clerics you are due to meet. However it’s not outside the realm of possibility…”

Liz nodded sharply. “Good, right, well, I’ll be ready to leave in two days. And now,” she turned to the door, “I think my five minutes are up, yes?” No one raised an objection, so she left the room. As the door fell shut behind her, she heard Tara’s voice.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice those pointed looks at my feet, Leli.”
Two hours later, Liz had eaten a light meal, braided her hair into some semblance of order, unpacked, written three reports and tidied up the cabin. And Henry hadn’t appeared yet. She looked at the cups, laid out with a bottle of decent Antivan red that Josephine had sent over.

Had something happened? Maybe he didn’t know where her house was? No, that was silly. He could ask anyone in Haven. She considered going to look for him, but what if he came when she was out? Dithering, she went to open the door to see if he was outside.

“Oh! Regan!” The lad wheeled round from his post at the top of the cabin steps.

“D’you need somethin’, Your Worsh- Liz?”

“What are you doing out here?” How long had he been stood outside? Liz wondered.

He looked at her oddly. “I’m on duty here. I’m to carry your messages or give aid if you need it.”

Liz smiled at him as an idea occurred to her. “Do you think you could find the scholar Henry for me? He’s late for a meeting.”

Regan saluted so hard he made himself cough, running off without a word. Idly, Liz wondered where Tara was; she hadn’t seen her since she left the war room. Still, she thought as she meandered around the cabin, pointlessly straightening things that were already tidy, perhaps it was best if it was just her and Henry, at least to start...

A knock jolted her out of her thoughts, and she hurried to open the door, only to throw her hands over her mouth, trying desperately to stifle a startled cackle. Henry was for the second time that day being dangled slightly off the ground by his shirt, his collar currently clutched by a burly Inquisition soldier.

Alongside that odd pair stood Regan cheerfully grinning at her. “I found him, my lady! First place I looked!”

“Yes, thank you,” Liz managed to say in a reasonably even tone. Henry’s face, either through embarrassment or his shirt collar twisting tight against his neck, was turning rather red. “That was impressively fast. I think you can let him go now.” Henry was dropped on her doorstep. Ushering him inside, she thanked the soldier and Regan, who almost wriggled like a puppy at her praise.

By the time she shut the door, Henry was helping himself to wine. “Where were you?”

“Hmm?” He didn’t seem at all disconcerted by the manhandling he’d been subjected to as he took a sip from his cup. “Oh, I was in the middle of a fascinating treatise by Enchanter Crowell concerning the nature of certain types of vegetation. Did you know that there are several types of flora that are consistently found only in close proximity to torn or thinned areas of the Veil? That implies a connection to the Fade, of one kind or another, the implications of which are absolutely ___”

“You mean you didn’t come to see me - your twin sister - who you haven’t seen in more than a decade, because you got distracted by… a book?” Privately, she was highly entertained. Of course he had.

“…yes, I suppose I did.” He looked abashed. “But, a very interesting book.”

She couldn’t help it. She laughed and hugged him tight. “I’ve missed you so much, Henry.”
In the time it took for them to finish the bottle of wine Henry managed to catch Liz up on what had happened since they’d last exchanged letters and explain what he’d been doing since he’d arrived in Haven. Henry was just describing how he’d nearly gotten into a shouting match with Adan over potion brewing the other day when Tara Fade-Stepped into the cabin, the flash of violet light startling Henry into dropping his empty cup with a loud clatter.

Liz leapt to her feet as Tara staggered, grabbing hold of her arms and leading her to the other bed and attempting to sit her down. She could smell ale and something slightly stronger on her breath as Tara pulled away and began pacing up and down the middle of the cabin.

When she started to speak it threw Liz slightly as the words that spilled out of Tara’s mouth were at a complete tangent to her agitated movements.

“So I was thinking that I should make a list of all the different kind of little cakes we’re going to want to try while we’re in Val Royeaux.” Tara barely took a breath before continuing to pace, hands gesturing wildly. “I mean, we may only be there for a few days so it makes sense to be as efficient as possible in sampling the patisseries when we’re going to be potentially dealing with actual Inquisition business most of the time. Who knows when we’ll next have chance to eat delicious Orlesian morsels?”

Across the cabin from Liz, Henry threw her a wide-eyed look that asked the same question Liz was thinking - What in the Maker’s name was going on? Stepping into Tara’s line of sight Liz slowly reached out to halt her friend’s frantic steps and gently said.

“Something is bothering you and I’m pretty sure it’s not how many cakes we’ll have time to try in Orlais. You’ve been drinking Tara, what’s wrong?”

Tara tried waving off Liz’s concern. “I forgot that I don’t have a Warden constitution anymore and got through a few too many drinks while I was chatting to this rather handsome mercenary Lieutenant. He was telling me about the Qunari who runs their company so that will be quite the sight when we get to the Storm Coast—”

“We’re going to the Storm Coast?” Liz was struggling to follow her line of thinking.

“We are now,” Tara replied. “This Lieutenant - Cremisius Aclassi - was sent here to offer the services of the Bull’s Chargers company to the Inquisition. Apparently they’re currently up on the Storm Coast dealing with some Tevinter idiots and would like us to come see how they fight and maybe hire them. I went to see Leliana when I left the tavern so we’ll be having another meeting with the Advisors tomorrow.”

Liz nodded. “Right, okay that’s fair enough. But that still doesn’t tell me what has you trying to pace a ditch in the floor. What did Leliana say?”

Tara’s eyes snapped to meet Liz’s for a moment before skittering away to stare at the floor, her hands lifting to rake through her hair several times. Taking three deep breaths she spoke again, this time slower and softly like she didn’t want to say it out loud at all.

“All the Grey Wardens in Ferelden and Orlais have apparently gone missing and no one has any idea why or where they might have gone. Leliana only admitted that she’d known this from the moment I fell out of the fucking Fade because she had gotten word that her scouts had actually
spotted one Warden in the Hinterlands, so we’ll need to head back there as well to find this ‘Blackwall’ chap and ask him where the fuck the rest of his comrades are. Of course he only arrived in the region as we were already leaving.” Tara was nearly spitting her words by the time she finished.

While she didn’t say it, Liz knew exactly why Leliana’s news had rattled Tara so badly. Maker willing, this Warden Blackwall would have information on the person Tara cared most about finding. Liz could imagine how it must hurt to know that Leliana had kept the Wardens’ disappearance a secret for weeks, especially from Tara.

She’d need to be having words with the Spymaster after their meeting tomorrow.

Henry had almost been entirely forgotten in the wake of Tara’s arrival. When he suddenly appeared beside her, Liz flinched without meaning to. He gave her an apologetic smile and kissed her cheek.

“I’ll leave you two to it,” Henry murmured. “I’ll see you again before you leave for Orlais won’t I?”

Liz nodded absently, wrapping her arms around his waist and squeezing briefly. “We’ll find time. Since it could now be a few weeks before I’m back again.”

Henry returned the hug before letting himself out. Turning back to Tara who was scratching distractedly at the lightning-shaped scars tracing both forearms, Liz stilled Tara’s anxious hands and pulled her friend towards the bed.

“We’re going to find him,” Liz said confidently, not needing to state who she meant. “We’ll meet the Chantry Mothrs, we’ll go see these Bull’s Chargers and track down Warden Blackwall and eventually we’ll find him too. Don’t worry yourself too much over this Tara.”

“How can you be sure?” Tara whispered eyes misting slightly.

“I’m the Herald of Andraste, remember?” Liz smirked. “I have spoken it true and it shall be so. Or I’ll be arguing with somebody’s deity.” She winked, prompting a crackle of laughter from Tara.

“Well who am I to argue with the Almighty Herald?”

The boat they took from Jader several days later was considerably smaller than the massive freight ship Liz had once travelled on from Ostwick. The *Esprit de la Mer* was a light brig with blue sails, two masts and only ten crew-members. Still, to Tara it was the most magnificent ship she’d ever seen and her excitement was palpable. She was worse than a child, as Cassandra repeatedly pointed out, investigating every nook and cranny, climbing all around the rigging and asking the crew endless questions about sailing and the sea.

She almost fell overboard while hanging from the stern rail, because she wanted to watch the rudder working. The captain, one Messieur DuLam, had lost patience with her almost before they even caught the evening tide. And of course she never showed a moment’s seasickness.

Liz herself had discovered a rather weak stomach when it came to the sea, but a quick burst of
healing magic every so often kept the nausea at bay. Varric, seeing her first thing in the morning and watching the greenish pallor of her cheeks fade, quickly put two and two together. “I think that’s cheating, Hopeful.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Varric,” she replied loftily, beating a hasty retreat to their cramped berth for a while.

But peace and quiet were in short supply on such a small ship. Tara swung from the foremast, carolling a sea shanty she’d learnt from the crew, while Cassandra paced below like a caged lion, her usual outlet of beating the stuffing out of dummies and recruits denied to her. Below decks was just as bad; Solas brooded darkly in the bow and the cook clattered pans in the galley muttering imprecations about strange elves who kept asking for tea only to grimace through every sip.

When the ship finally docked in Val Royeaux, Tara was the only one of them that still had any enthusiasm for sailing in spite of the eye-watering stench of the harbour water and screeching of gulls as they tussled over the refuse floating between the ships. She practically vaulted over the rail in her hurry to disembark and see her first Orlesian city.

As they left the harbour district and found their way to the main market district an Inquisition scout waved them down, eyes anxious as they gave Liz a shaky salute.

“Your Worship, there is a host of Templars gathered in the Summer Bazaar along with several Revered Mothers who are telling all who will listen that the Templars have come to protect the people… from the Inquisition!”

Liz stared blankly at the scout, unable to think of a response to such news. Beside her Tara clapped her hands over her face and groaned for a full breath. The others waited in amused anticipation for when she dropped her hands back down and loudly complained.

“Why must fucking Templars ruin everything?”

Chapter End Notes

Look Ma! We got to Val Royeaux in one chapter like I promised!!! XD No really, I'm super proud that I managed to get all the things I did into this chapter and not have it end up being 5k. Although there was a very funny moment the other day when Sav sent me what she'd written & I suddenly remembered KREM NEEDED TO BE MENTIONED! I nearly forgot everybody's favourite Lieutenant and I'm sorry. We fixed it though, it's fine.

I'm hoping that I can make this next arc up to the Fall of Haven about the same length as the Haven & Hinterlands arcs so if my plan works we'll be in Skyhold by 120k perhaps XD. I don't want to split up OMAM into several works as we progress through the Inquisition timeline so I hope people don't mind this slowly becoming a beast of a fic - I have this paradoxical fear that while I *love* crash-reading mammoth fics that no one will want to spend hours & hours reading mine. If you *are* down for that then I will appreciate the heck out of you.

If you fancy leaving a comment or a kudos or you wanna guess at which sections of this chapter were written by me or Sav then go right ahead :P
Until next time folks!
“Say, Sparky? What happens if we get to this super secret midnight rendezvous and then these supposed ‘Friends of Red Jenny’ don’t want to talk to us because the Herald isn’t here?”

Indulging a futile glare through the darkness at Varric’s deeply unhelpful and ill-timed question, Tara sniped back, “That’s a potential problem I’ll charm my way through if I have to. It’s not as if Liz wouldn’t have come if she could - she’d probably much rather be creeping through Orlesian back alleys right now instead of being trussed up in a fancy new frock to stand around listening to simpering nobles all night.”

“You’ve got a point there,” Varric laughed. “Maker’s Ass, I’ve never seen the Seeker so disgusted when not looking at me as when that shop keeper tried to sell her a frilly dress! I wish I could’ve drawn it.” He let out a wistful sigh as they lapsed back into silence, only their footsteps softly intruding on the midnight stillness of Val Royeaux’s noble district.

* 

The colossal mess of that morning seemed like days ago already. Their arrival in the Grand Bazaar had immediately drawn the sanctimonious gaze of the Chantry Mothers who directed their accusatory rhetoric at Liz and demanded she give them answers. She had been remarkably calm throughout the entire farce even when a small group of the Templar contingent finally inserted itself into the fray. They’d all flinched when a Templar assaulted the Revered Mother who’d been preaching that they were in fact there to protect them. Tara kept her thoughts on the grim irony of it firmly to herself.

Cassandra was muttering under her breath about Lord Seeker Lucius’ apparent shift in personality and temperament for a solid hour after he verbally excoriated her where half the plaza could hear. One look at Solas during the vitriolic exchange had confirmed Tara’s own suspicions - that the being claiming to be the Lord Seeker was decidedly less than human. Fade energy was wisping off his entire body, not so strongly that most mages or templars would be able to sense it, but enough
that Tara and apparently Solas could detect its presence.

The quick questioning eyebrow lift and muted head-shake was all the discussion they’d needed before resolving to not bring up the Lord Seeker’s identity crisis until they were well clear of Val Royeaux. Whatever it was, Tara had no wish to draw its notice.

Despite their initial denouncement of Liz and the Inquisition, the Chantry Mothers had been sincerely grateful for the healing that Liz provided to those hurt by the Templars’ rough treatment. Whether that gratitude would manifest into a more favourable tale of her being told to the Orlesian laypeople remained to be seen.

For all Liz didn’t claim the title of Herald with any seriousness, her fervent desire to help people is so evident that it draws in others who feel compelled to do their part as well. A merchant woman approached Liz while the crowd in the plaza dispersed and offered to provide supply links to Haven for food and other necessary goods. One letter of introduction to Josie was sent when they next saw the scout that was acting as Leliana’s liaison in the city.

The morning took an even stranger turn when they were leaving the Bazaar and a dark-haired elf in mage robes approached them. Cassandra’s gasp of “Grand Enchanter Fiona?” had Tara’s jaw swiftly hitting the floor. The woman was no taller than Liz and her soft Orlesian-accented voice was nothing like Tara would have imagined. She barely heard Fiona asking Liz to come speak with the Rebel Mages in Redcliffe, she was so lost in thought - trying to wrap her mind around how this unassuming elf had once been a fellow Warden, the Leader of the Mage Rebellion and was also somehow Alistair’s mother. By the time she’d scraped her wits together again, the Enchanter had disappeared and Liz was looking askance at her. Only the sudden growling of Tara’s stomach had saved her from having to give an explanation nobody would believe.

* * *

Tara had gotten her wish, to her rapturous delight, and spent a glorious hour in a cafe devouring all the tiny morsels of food she could stomach. Between her and Liz they ordered almost the entire menu and had two small wrapped baskets of leftovers to carry back when Cassandra finally persuaded them to leave. No comment was made about the plate of tiny cakes that Solas had claimed for himself and indulgently savoured without even a hint of shame.

All that rich food and sugar in their systems meant that Liz and Tara were slightly giggly for a good portion of the afternoon - not ideal when they were waved down by a liveried messenger inviting the Herald to a soiree at the Duc de Ghislain’s mansion on the outskirts of Val Royeaux that evening. Liz turned almost red in the face trying to restrain her laughter while the messenger relayed the invitation thanks to Tara pulling faces from behind the man’s back. They deserved the sound scolding Cassandra gave them afterwards.

An odd little treasure hunt around the market and harbour district left them with another invitation, albeit rather more cryptic, and due to the clashing times of the two it was decided that Liz and Cassandra would attend the soiree, being the two most respectable members of the party while Tara would attend the meeting with these Red Jennies with Varric and Solas for back-up should all things turn on their head.

Which naturally they did within five seconds of them arriving at the designated courtyard.

* * *

“Fuck a nug!” Tara leapt backwards as a fireball screeched a scant few inches from her face before she’d even taken a full step into the second courtyard of whatever noble’s compound they were in.
A second blazed through the space she’d just occupied a moment later.

The half-dozen dozy guards in the first courtyard had barely presented an obstacle beyond five minutes of Tara dancing through them with her blades. But the ostentatiously masked mage who now awaited them might pose a tad more of a challenge.

“Herald of Andraste!” The man cried. “How much did you expend to discover me? It must ‘ave weakened the Inquisition immeasurably!”

Tara gaped at the man’s dramatic declaration for a second before snorting derisively. “First off - I’m too tall to be the Herald. Second, I have less than zero clues as to who the fuck you are. The Inquisition has spent more coin today on desserts than it has on finding you messieur.”

“You don’t fool me,” the mage scoffed. “I’m too important for this to be an accident! My efforts will survive in victories against you elsewhere!” A bowstring twanged behind him and a man’s voice cried out once.

Out of the shadows stepped a blonde elven woman, the longbow in her hands had an arrow already nocked and drawn, aimed square at the pompous prick’s face.

“Just say ‘what’,” she sneered in the thickest Denerim accent to ever assault Orlesian ears.

“What is—” The arrow sprouted in the mage’s eye faster than Tara could follow. Her daggers crackling in her hands as the elf girl loped over to the body and plucked her arrow free from where it’d skewered through the mask’s eyehole.

“Ugh! Squishy one, but you heard me right? Just say what,” she cackled seemingly to herself. “Blah blah blah! Obey me! Arrow in my face!”

She swung to face Tara, sizing her up as she said, “So you followed the notes well enough. Glad to see you’re… well you’re kind of plain really. All that talk and you’re just a person.”

At Tara’s nonplussed expression the girl hurried to add, “I mean, it’s all good innit? The important thing is you glow. You’re the Herald thingy!”

“Er… right,” Tara replied slowly, exchanging confused looks with Varric. “So, why was this guy so determined to melt my face off?”

The girl shrugged. “No idea. I don’t know this idiot from manners. My people just said the Inquisition should look at him.”

Tara was beginning to get the feeling that she was missing at least a third of the context of this conversation. “Your people? As in - elves?”

“No! People-people,” she said it like it made perfect sense. She gestured to the large crates stacked in the middle of the courtyard. “The name’s Sera, this is cover. Get round it.”

When no one moved she elaborated, “For the reinforcements! Don’t worry, someone tipped their equipment shed - they’ve got no breeches!” She winked at Tara as she said it before skipping away to find a spot to hide.

It became clear that her statement was entirely literal when nearly a dozen guards flooded through a nearby gate, all of them missing their breeches and some were distressingly also lacking smalls. Those men were only provided a modicum of modesty by the length of their shirts beneath their chest armour.
Suppressing the wild urge to giggle at the under-dressed Orlesians, Tara simply whipped her daggers up and leapt into motion. As she began cutting a path through the guards she yelled towards the girl - Sera - that was it.

“Couldn’t you have stolen the fucking weapons instead? It’s kinda hard to concentrate with so many pasty Orlesian thighs on show. I’m being blinded here!”

A raucous cackle and the shout of “But no breeches!” was all the response she was going to get it seemed.

Varric chimed in nearby. “Hey! I’m going to be scarred for life with how many ‘Petit Pierres’ I’ve seen tonight. Who runs into a fight with no smalls?” Grimacing he fired two bolts towards a man who was charging for him, naked as a baby from the waist down save for his boots.

With brutal efficiency they took out the guards. Watching the girl from the corner of her eye, Tara was impressed at her skill with a longbow, particularly in such close quarters. Her technique was highly unorthodox but it worked so Tara wasn’t going to judge her for it.

When it was all over Tara wiped her daggers clean on the sleeve of the last guard she’d felled, taking care to avoid glancing below his belt. Muttering a pointless apology she sliced the man’s coinpurse open and transferred the few silvers and handful of coppers into her own purse. She’d need some coin to get all this blood washed out of her gear before they left Val Royeaux.

Across the courtyard, the strange elf girl was scavenging arrows that weren’t broken beyond repair and slotting them back into her quiver, chuntering under her breath as she worked.

Now that she had time to take a breath and properly process what was going on Tara had to stop herself from staring at Sera’s hair. It had been cut so crooked and haphazardly she could only guess that the girl had let a drunk nug hack at it with a rusty spoon. The patched plaidweave leggings she wore were certainly a bold fashion statement yet they somehow worked with the rest of her look.

Steeling herself for another odd conversation, Tara wandered over to the elf and smiled. The grin she got in response lit up the whole of Sera’s face and her infectious laughter bubbled up again.

“Friends really came through with that tip. No breeches!” She crowed before her expression turned more calculating as she folded her arms across her chest. “So, Herald of Andraste - you’re a strange one. I’d like to join.”

Tara was almost nodding until her mind caught up with what Sera had said. “Wait, hold on,” she spluttered. “You should know that I’m not the one people have been calling the Herald of Andraste - that’s Liz. She had to be somewhere else tonight so she sent me in her stead to see what the notes meant.”

Sera tilted her head to one side, looking over Tara as if deciding whether to believe her explanation or not. Nose wrinkling she asked, “So if you’re not the Herald-thingy, who are ya then?”

“My name is Tara, I’m a friend of Liz’s and I’m helping her deal with all this mess. A long time ago I heard of the Friends of Red Jenny in Denerim - so are you a ‘Friend’ or Red Jenny herself? I’m guessing it changes quite often?”

Surprised that Tara already knew of them, Sera grew rapidly more animated. “I’m the Red Jenny here, there’s usually at least one Jenny in a city, not that we get together and have tea like but you get what I mean? Me and my Friends want to help get everything back to normal. I’ll be here and
they’ll be out there looking out for the little people.”

“What, like spies?” Tara asked. For all she’d done a job for the Red Jennies during the Blight it had never been very clear what it was that they actually did as an organisation. Not that it seemed terribly organised either but the Inquisition needed any and all the help it could get.

“Nah like little people keeping an eye and an ear out for bad people doing bad things,” Sera explained. “It was a little person who told me that this prick was up to summat dodgy and since none of them noble cods were gonna do anything about him - I did. The fancy-pants up-high folk never think about anyone littler than them when they’re bustling about making a mess of shite.”

It made a cryptic sort of sense and while their methods were odd to say the least, Tara couldn’t fault the Red Jennies for wanting to help the people who more often than not were left without a voice to seek justice for themselves against those with more power and malice. She’d need to leave it to Liz to make the final decision whether or not to accept Sera’s offer to join the Inquisition.

“Well Sera, I don’t see any good reason why you shouldn’t be able to join the Inquisition,” said Tara. “Liz trusts me to act on her behalf but if you want to meet her yourself and decide if she’s the person you expected then we’ll be in Val Royeaux for another full day at La Petite Sirene inn out near the harbour. The day after tomorrow we’ll be catching a ship to Highever so if you don’t meet Liz before then you can make your way to Haven and I can introduce you when we return in a few weeks.”

Sera mulled over Tara’s offer a bit before clapping her hands together and grinning. “Alright I’d best go pack up my stuff then. I’ll be seeing you weirdy.” She turned to leave.

“Wait!” Tara blurted after her. “One last thing, earlier you said I ‘glowed’ was that just because you thought I was the Herald?”

The elf glanced back and shrugged. “You do glow. But I guess that’s what happens. You walked out of somewhere and now you glow. It’s weird but it’s all good innit? You got someone who can sell all them breeches I nicked yeah?” Before anyone could think to respond, she disappeared into the night.

Varric strolled over to where an overstuffed sack sat next to some boxes and poked a hand inside. Examining the bundles of cloth inside he grunted and turned back to Tara.

“We might get a few silver for them, although we might want to wash them before we try fobbing them off on a merchant. Any idea if the elf is going to reappear before we leave the city?”

“Not a fucking clue,” Tara replied. “I get the feeling we’ll only know when she drops out of the sky. Does anyone else think I glow?”

“Can’t say I’ve noticed Sparky, but then I’m hardly the one to ask.”

Looking to Solas who’d not said a word since they left the inn earlier that evening, Tara asked, “Am I giving off an otherworldly sort of glow? Or is Sera trying to mess with me?”

Fingers drumming against the wood of his staff, Solas pondered the question. Eventually he said mildly, “I think this young woman is going to prove to be a fascinating, yet confounding addition to the Inquisition.”

“I don’t think I’ve gotten a straight answer to a single question I’ve asked tonight,” Tara sighed in exasperation. “Let’s get out of here, I want to sleep before dawn. Solas, just for being unnecessarily vague you get to carry that blasted sack of breeches.”
Liz was still lying awake when she heard the soft click of the latch lifting as Tara crept into the room they were sharing with Cassandra. It had to be nearly three bells past midnight, while Liz had left for the party at the Ghislain mansion an hour or two before the others had set out for their meeting she’d only been back for a little over an hour herself. Cassandra had fallen asleep soon after getting into bed, her snores now a low rumbling refrain on the other side of the room.

There was several minutes of rustling and the occasional grunt as Tara undressed in the dark. When she padded over to the bed and slipped beneath the blankets, Liz rolled over to face her. She wrinkled her nose at the mix of odours that hit her.

“You smell like a bloody pyre,” she murmured. “What happened?”

Tara gave a soft chuff of laughter and replied, “Some Orlesian mage threw fireballs at me and then caught an arrow in the eye. It was all a little bizarre honestly, but we now have one of the Red Jennies joining the Inquisition. An elf girl by the name of Sera, who seems… lively but highly competent with a bow.”

“Are these Friends of Red Jenny going to be useful allies to have?” Liz asked. “I’m sure the advisors will want some kind of justification for why we recruited them.”

“I think they’ll be good for spreading word among the common folk of what the Inquisition is trying to do,” Tara explained. “They seem to have connections with the lower ranks of society and a desire to seek justice for wrong-doing by the noble and powerful.”

Liz nodded in understanding, “So a complete opposite to the type of people I had to spend my evening surrounded by? Maker knows I’d prefer to deal with those who actually need my help rather than being simpered at by nobles whose primary concerns are gossip and the quality of the wine being served.”

Tara muffled a snort behind her hand. “The soiree was as tedious as expected then? Did you meet whoever invited you?”

“First Enchanter Vivienne de Fer of Montsimmard,” Liz stated as dramatically as she could in a whisper. “Supposedly the leader of the last of the Loyal Mages and a staunch supporter of the Circles despite somehow also being a player of the Game, living in the lap of luxury with the patronage of her rumoured lover, Duke Bastien. She has graciously offered the Inquisition her aid and connections.”

“I’m guessing from the tone of your voice that you don’t think much of her? Why would she want to leave her nice, cosy mansion to join the Inquisition? Doesn’t she know we’re holed up in the ass-end of the Frostbacks?” said Tara incredulously.

“I just find it deeply hypocritical that she so vehemently believes mages should be contained in the Circles with the Templars to guard them like potentially wild animals when she clearly hasn’t had to live in a Circle for at least five years or more,” Liz hissed, angrier than she’d even realised she was. “While I can agree that some mages need somewhere safe to learn to control their magic, it shouldn’t have to feel like a prison where they are kept away from the rest of society because they’re too dangerous to be around normal people.”
Liz had to pause to take several slow, deep breaths. Beneath the blankets her fists were clenched tight until Tara reached over and unfurled Liz’s fingers to lace them between her own. She didn’t say anything until Liz began to calm down.

“I take it you’re this upset because as much as you would’ve liked to tell Vivienne to stuff her Loyalist mages, you had to smile and say how much you’d love to have her in the Inquisition.” Tara squeezed Liz’s hands in sympathy.

“Precisely,” Liz muttered. “Cassandra made a point to tell me before we arrived that Vivienne has a lot of sway with the Orlesian nobility so having her support would be invaluable in making the Inquisition seem more legitimate. I’d be hobbling us all out of spite if I turned Vivienne down and I wouldn’t want to face Josephine and Leliana’s wrath if I offended her as well.” She groaned into her pillow.

“I don’t blame you for wanting to avoid that political mire,” Tara chuckled. “Hopefully she’ll flee back to Val Royeaux after a few weeks of living like a barbaric Fereldan in the frigid Frostbacks.”

“Maker, we can only pray for such a miracle. She will probably need a week or two to get herself and her things transported to Haven so we won’t have to travel with her at least. I don’t think we should inform her of who you are until we can be absolutely sure that she isn’t going to cry ‘Demon’ and demand we put you under Templar guard.”

Tara shuddered. “Fuck no, we don’t want that. Probably best not to clue Sera in yet either. It was easier in Haven with people there who’d known me before and could vouch for my identity, but as we recruit new folk it’ll only get harder to convince them. Best I just be introduced as Tara, the slightly unorthodox mercenary who was invited in by Leliana just before the Breach opened. That’s a more palatable story than the truth.”

“Indeed,” Liz agreed. Extracting her hands from Tara’s grasp she rolled over again and hitched the blankets up under her chin. “We can talk more in the morning while we’re writing reports so we’re all on the same page.”

“Goodnight Liz,” Tara said leaning over to drop an almost motherly kiss on her forehead before lying back down.

Liz fell asleep with a smile on her lips and a warmth in her chest.

* * *

After four days at sea, Liz wouldn’t have minded if she didn’t set foot on a ship for another six months - and she’d never again take Sera if a voyage was necessary. The sight of Highever’s docks in late afternoon light had her almost giddy with anticipation to escape the ship and feel solid ground beneath her feet once more. As the crew began scurrying to reef the sails and finish bringing the ship into dock, Liz dashed belowdecks to make sure all her packs were ready to go and that Sera hadn’t left some awful surprise that the Inquisition would have to apologise for later.

Their last day in Val Royeaux had been far more sedate than the previous one, they’d been able to take the time to clean up their gear and have their clothes laundered properly - a luxury they’d not get again until they returned to Haven. Liz, Tara and Cassandra spent part of the morning writing
up reports of the whirlwind events since their arrival to update the Advisors. Varric and Solas headed out into the market district to pick up travelling rations as well as a few other bits and pieces.

While Liz wasn’t in the least bit surprised that Varric returned with a bundle of blank paper and spare quills, she was shocked to learn that Solas had purchased a small sketchbook and charcoal pencils in the same shop. It was an interesting revelation that the often sombre elf was in fact an artist, she’d intended to ask him more about it on the journey to Highever but after Sera’s last minute addition to their party and the subsequent chaos that ensued, Solas had been in no mood to indulge any sort of personal conversation.

At first Liz found Sera’s frank enthusiasm quite refreshing after all the Orlesian double-talk so had been happy for her to join them on the trip to the Storm Coast. She’d appeared out of the pre-dawn mist as they were walking through the docks, startling Cassandra into drawing her sword and prompting Varric to hand Tara several silvers when they recognised the elf girl. She’d stalked right up to Liz, spent a minute looking her up and down before actually speaking.

“Huh, so I guess you both glow. Weird,” she said casually. “Mind if I tag along Lady Herald? I’ve not had chance to see you in action and while your friend there has got some nice moves–” Sera threw a wink in Tara’s direction. “I’d quite like to see yours before I really get in with ya.”

Liz had been thrown by the blatant innuendo for a moment before she’d managed to give her a response and despite Cassandra’s semi-frantic eyebrow waggling she’d granted Sera’s request without asking any further questions. Which was probably the point the trouble started.

It became quickly apparent once the ship had set sail that Sera was five feet five inches of tightly compacted chaotic potential with a short attention span and an almost vitriolic dislike of ‘elfy’ elves and mages - making Solas the prime target of her sharpest comments. They weren’t even half day out of Val Royeaux when a semi-incoherent shouting match occurred between the two elves that drove Solas to shut himself in the men’s cabin for the rest of the journey and Sera to begin plauging the crew until the Captain begged Liz to do something about her before he threw Sera overboard himself.

Within two hours of Liz sitting the elf girl down and trying to talk to her, she was exhausted from trying to follow the wild and confusing tangents their conversation took as well as maintain a polite demeanour when Sera’s more abrupt and semi-offensive opinions came forth. She was younger than Liz and seemingly had the kind of upbringing that would have made Liz pity her had she not been so defensive and rude at times.

Eventually Tara found them and without missing a beat hauled Sera away, grinning wildly as she said “You have to come look at this!” It was only later that Liz realised that Tara had made it her mission to keep the young elf occupied for the rest of the voyage. Asking her for stories about the Red Jennies, pestering her to show her lock-picking tricks - despite Tara already having weeded lessons out of Varric weeks ago - helping her fletch arrows for a spare quiver she’d brought along. A dozen different distractions.

One time Liz was strolling around the deck, avoiding looking at the waves to keep her nausea at bay, she spotted Tara and Sera sitting cross-legged in the bow both staring intently at the wooden knitting needles in their hands and the red yarn that they were attempting to work into… something. As Liz stared at the pair, Cassandra came to stand beside her and muttered with great feeling, “Maker bless that woman.” Liz nodded her vehement agreement.

* * *
The Inquisition had arranged for their mounts and packhorses to meet them in Highever so it was only matter of hiring an additional pony for Sera to ride before they could start the journey along the coast to somewhere south of West Hill where the scout’s camp was reported to be. They managed to get an hour or two of hard riding in before the sun set fully and forced them to set up camp. Liz asked Sera to collect firewood in the hopes that it would give everyone at least half an hour’s peace.

She pulled Tara aside as she was pitching their tent and hugged her tight for so long that Tara began laughing. Liz sighed into the taller woman’s shirt, “You’re a fucking gift and I could kiss you for how you’ve saved everyone’s sanity these past few days.”

Tara grinned at her. “Once you’ve travelled with a people-hating golem, a surly Qunari, an incessantly flirtatious assassin and a perpetually soused dwarf you learn a myriad different ways to keep those violently opposing personalities from murdering each other and driving the rest of us insane at the same time,” she explained with a conspiratorial wink. “One high-energy elf with a penchant for pranks is well within my ability to keep contained.”

“I shall be speaking to Leliana about having a statue built in your honour.”

“Oh fuck, don’t do that. There’s too many statues of me already, I’m trying to keep a low profile remember?”

Tara looked so aghast at the idea Liz knew she’d have to ask Leliana where those statues were and how good of a likeness they were to the Hero. Whether the information would be used to avoid the statues or tease Tara mercilessly was uncertain for the time being.

* * *

It took them another solid day of riding to arrive at the Inquisition camp as the sun was casting its last flickers of green-tinged light across the crashing waves as they battered the shore beneath the cliff the camp was perched atop. Their entire group was travel-weary and cold from the lashings of wind and fine rain that frequently swept over their route down the understandably named Storm Coast. The thought of roaring campfires awaiting them had kept Liz from despairing at the fact she was sodden almost completely through to her smalls.

Scout Harding greeted them as they were dismounting, her freckled face far less cheerful than the last time Liz had seen her, a frown furrowing between her brows and her voice solemn as she spoke.

“Your Worship— ah, Liz. For what it’s worth, welcome to the Storm Coast. I had hoped to have more to report on the rumours of Wardens being in the area but we’ve been facing resistance from a group of bandits who know the terrain a lot better than we do and we’ve not been able to scout very far. We have seen signs of the Mercenary company that Sister Leliana informed us about a little further along the beach so you should have no problem finding them tomorrow...”

“I’m sensing there’s a ‘but’ coming,” Liz said when Harding paused a fraction too long to prevent the lurch of worry in her gut.

“I’m afraid so,” Harding confirmed. “A group of our soldiers went to speak with the bandits’ leader two days ago… and we’ve heard nothing from them since. But… you should also know that Junior Scout Regen went with them. I’m so sorry Liz.”

Chapter End Notes
*ducks*
DON'T BE MAD AT ME THINGS ARE GONNA WORK OUT I PROMISE.

No seriously don't worry about it. I may chuck some shit at my fictional children but I'm not *that* much of a monster sheesh.

Next chapter we'll have looooots to do - Bull & the Chargers to meet, bandits to track down, wayward scouts to locate. Whole bags of fun for the entire family!

And even more excitingly - as of the 2nd of February it will be the One Year Anniversary of the start of Of Mages and Monsters!!! Like holy shit I've been at this for a whole *year*?! It's super mind-boggling to me because most of 2018 was a complete blur so having spent a year on this seems like both a really long time and no time at all.

So I hope you'll stick around as things start to really get exciting! Also comments and kudos are always the highlight of my day so if you feel like leaving one I will greatly appreciate it ^_^

Until next time folks!
Chapter Twenty-Eight - Charging through the Storm Coast

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Evening Folks! I'm kind of a week late but OF MAGES AND MONSTERS IS A WHOLE YEAR OLD!!!! Holy shit!

I've literally not worked on one writing project this consistently for so long in my entire fucking life and I'm still slightly boggled that I've got this far.

So as a mostly accidental treat for the Belated Anniversary chapter - here's 7,000+ words XD. I didn't intend for it to be this massive but considering how I have no real ability to judge how long any of my chapters will end up being, my intentions hardly matter.

I gotta say a *massive* thank you to Lady_Say for today because she proof-read this fucking chonker of a chapter and for being an awesome writing buddy and equally spectacular friend for what has to be at least 10 months (I will have to look back through my comments to see when it will be a year). Dude I can't believe I've only known you since last year, cos it feels like way longer than that. I don't know if I'd have got to this point without you to cheer me on <3

Less important shout-out goes to the staff at my usual coffee shop for not asking me why the fuck I spent 6 hours of my Saturday tucked into the farthest corner hunched over my laptop like a gremlin. I've been mopped into that corner far too many times and it's a fucking miracle I've never actually overstayed closing time and got myself locked in XD

Final thanks to you guys - my readers (boy that feels strange to say) for coming back to this story for a whole year. That anyone at all wanted to read this mass of words I mashed together is incredible and that some people enjoyed it enough to keep reading all this time makes me so happy ^_^.

Hope you enjoy this bumper edition x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Chargers’ breakfast was rudely interrupted by the arrival of a bunch of Tevinter assholes washing up in a rowboat from fuck-knows-where a few hundred yards from their camp. At the sight of a Qunari, the gaudily robed Vints were instantly scrambling for their weapons and leaping from the boat. Half the company was still in the tents as spells started to fly, The Iron Bull signalled for Krem and his squad to force the fight further up the beach before the poor sods who’d had watch all night got caught in the crossfire.

The Iron Bull was aware of the Inquisition camp up on the hill north of their position but since Krem’s return from Haven he’d only seen signs of a scouting party and a small one at that. This damp blustery morning however, a new burgundy flag was being flown above the black Inquisition standard. In the wind it was hard to make out the insignia but its meaning was clear. The Herald
had finally arrived.

They must have caught the camp’s attention by bringing the fight to their doorstep as it were, because it took only a few minutes for a group of armoured people to come running down the bank, weapons drawn ready to join the battle. A handful of shimmering blue barriers appeared over several Chargers and the two tall, dark-haired women - a warrior and a rogue - who let out a war cry in unison before engaging the Vints.

In between swings of his axe and dodging fireballs The Iron Bull tried to pick out which of the Inquisition group was the one they called the ‘Herald’. Blonde elf with the bow was out - his information definitely said human. Krem reported that he’d spoken to a youngish woman who Bull deduced was the dagger-wielding… mage? Rogues weren’t able to flick tiny lightning bolts from their fingers. For that matter neither could most mages he’d ever met. She might not be the Herald but she clearly had the clout to make decisions since she’d told Krem that the Inquisition would consider hiring them without running it past anyone else. Bull needed more information about her, that was for certain.

Cassandra Pentaghast had been known to the Qun for a long time, in part for her proximity to the last two Divines but also for her dragon-slaying feats. It was something special seeing her fight up close, cutting a bloody swathe through the Vints. A feral grin lit The Iron Bull’s face as she shield-bashed one bastard so hard they flew for a solid three seconds before crashing into the water and disappearing like a rock.

That left the tiny red-headed mage stood at the base of the hill as the likely candidate. She had a staff but didn’t seem to be throwing any noticeably offensive spells like the bald elf guy was. A dwarf with an impressive crossbow and equally stunning chest hair stuck close to the young woman, keeping any opportunistic Vints from trying for an easy target. It was a solid bet that she was Elizabeth Trevelyan.

With the additional six fighters from the Inquisition alongside the squad of Chargers it didn’t take long to put down the dozen or so Vints. The Iron Bull tried to approach the Herald once he’d given his axe a cursory wipe-down but in the time it took for him to sluice the worst of the blood off, she’d vanished from her spot away from the battlefield and was offering to help Stitches patch up any injuries. Her hands lit a deep emerald green as she laid them on Krem’s bloodied forearm, a fiercely focused expression on her face the entire time she was healing.

Taking a seat on a sturdy piece of driftwood The Iron Bull watched the Herald work her way round everyone, evidently not caring if the person she was healing was even one of her own. He liked her already.

“She’ll remember to come talk to you in a minute or two,” said a low voice on his left. The dagger-wielding mage plonked herself down and grinned up at him. “Liz isn’t usually one to forget the polite niceties but her Healer’s priorities will trump the Inquisition’s most of the time.”

“You don’t seem all that nervous sitting next to a Qunari, especially considering you’re a mage,” he said, turning slightly so the woman wasn’t entirely in his blind spot.

She shrugged. “You’re not my first Qunari. I travelled with one a long time ago - grumpy guy but I think I made him smile at least once. That’s quite a rack you have, by the way,” she winked.

The Iron Bull belly-laughed at that. It took gumption to flirt with a Qunari you’d just met. “People usually find them quite distracting, they’re never sure whether they ought to stare at the horns, the eye-patch or the chest. Most can’t look higher than my boots without turning colours.”
“I’d imagine most people stand about eye-level with your navel so staring at your feet is just the safest option,” the mage remarked. “It’s hardly wise to piss off a Qunari when their weapons are at least half as tall as I am. I once tried to lift a Sten’s broadsword and damn near dislocated my shoulders doing it.”

Eyebrow lifting, Bull turned fully to look harder at the woman so casually admitting to having even touched a qunari weapon without getting split in two by it. “Who are you?” He asked. “Krem made it sound like you were the Herald’s lieutenant but if I didn’t know better I’d think you were the one in charge.”

The mage laughed and shook her head. “Fuck no, I’m not taking charge of this clusterfuck of a situation. I’m more than happy to help fix it but if someone even thinks about slapping me with a ridiculous title then I’m legging it. I’m just Tara, lone merc of limited repute. I found myself in Haven when everything went to the void and got asked to stay when the Inquisition formed.”

Under the casual tone was a thread of something else - evasiveness, at least part of what she said was a falsehood but he couldn’t pinpoint which detail it was. And if he wanted to get the Chargers hired, The Iron Bull knew poking at this Tara woman was going to be a mistake. He could wait. Earn a little trust first.

A light Marcher-accented voice broke the silence that was creeping towards awkward. “Maker, I’m so sorry to keep you waiting, I got completely sidetracked over there!”

Up close the redhead was even tinier than Bull thought, she was a head shorter than Tara and would very likely only reach as high as his waist if he stood up off the log. Less intimidating if he stayed sat down.

“Don’t worry about it,” he told her, flashing a smile. “Tara here said you’d be over eventually so we were just chatting.”

“Oh good, well I’m guessing introductions are in order. I’m Elizabeth Trevelyan - Liz to most people.” She stuck out a hand that was almost comically tiny next to Bull’s as he carefully returned the handshake. Only the slightest tension in her face - interesting.

“Nice to meet you Liz, I’m The Iron Bull. You’ve met some of the Chargers of course,” He gestured towards Krem and the others busy with readying a pyre for the Vint corpses.

Liz threw a quick look back and smiled. “They make a very effective group, although I confess I’d thought a Mercenary Company would be somewhat larger?”

Bull nodded. “This is just Krem’s squad, there’s another squad back down the beach where we camped last night and the other half of the company is a way inland at the base camp we established to operate out of in Ferelden. Didn’t think bringing everyone down here was a good idea, would be pretty cramped.”

“Ah, that makes sense, moving a large group around such hilly country would be a logistical nightmare,” said Liz in a serious tone that sounded strange coming from someone as young as she was. “We’ve had to leave our mounts at the camp, bringing them down even that first bank would’ve spooked at least one into falling and breaking a leg.”

Iron Bull had to give the woman credit, she took the surprise of hearing that he was Ben-Hassrath quite well. Incredulous that he’d admitted it so casually but impressed by his honesty. Tara however, had inhaled sharply beside him, her weight shifting away ever so slightly. Not scared but wary for sure.
Liz looked to Tara for her opinion and whatever their relationship was, it mattered enough that she sought some kind of approval before agreeing to hire Bull and the Chargers. Tara had given it without hesitation. It was hard not to respect someone who didn’t let their own personal feelings affect their judgement in times like these.

Once their conversation was done, Bull rounded up Krem and his squad and brought them up to speed. “We got hired- I’ll be travelling with the Inquisition lot. Return to camp, somebody gather my stuff and bring it back here while the rest of you get everything packed up. Head to Base Camp and get everyone else ready to leave. I want you guys to meet us at Calenhad docks - we’ll be stopping in the Hinterlands on the way back to Haven, the Herald has got a few things that she wants some extra muscle for.”

“Sure thing Boss,” said Krem. “I’ll make sure your finest Orlesian silks are folded up proper for you.”

Cuffing Krem lightly upside the head, Bull grinned and shooed them away. The Vint bonfire was burning nicely and Liz had gathered her other companions and was clearly telling them what Bull had said based on the glares he was now getting from the Seeker and the elven mage.

While they waited for Bull’s travel gear, Liz introduced him to the people he didn’t already have names for. Varric Tethras was someone else the Qun knew about - mostly for his involvement in the death of the previous Arishok and some weird shit involving Vints in Seheron a few years back. The two elves were Sera and Solas and from the six feet of separation they maintained at all times Bull reckoned they’d be the first to start snapping at each other when they got moving. Sera looked curious, like she wanted to ask Bull questions but didn’t know which to ask first.

He’d get a better feel for everyone once they started moving. Nothing brought out personalities like travelling in the rain.

* * *

It had been longer than he could remember since he’d seen anything as stunning as the epic battle raging on the beach before them. A giant of all creatures - which they’d clearly missed in their scouting - was grappling with a magnificent *ataashi*. Deep roars and ear-rending shrieks echoed along the coast, the ground itself trembling as the two massive creatures circled and lunged at each other.

Their whole group stood transfixed, staring across the cove, unwilling to venture any closer in case they were noticed by either beast and drawn into a fight they couldn’t hope to win. As they watched, the dragon opened its maw and a blinding ball of lightning coalesced at the back of its mouth. It spat the ball at the giant, an agonised bellow bursting from the creature as the lighting seared across its chest before crashing into the shallow waves behind. Violet ripples of electricity danced over the surface of the water almost all the way to where they stood. No paddling while that *ataashi* was around unless you wanted to get cooked.

Bull had deliberately stood at the back of the group to guard the rear while also avoiding blocking anyone’s view of the dragon fight. A skittering sound of boots on pebbles behind his left shoulder had him pivoting round, hand reaching for his axe before freezing. *When had Tara gotten past him?* The rogue-mage looked pale as she quietly took up a spot beside Bull, swigging from a waterskin then wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She made no move to announce her
presence but there was no mistaking the sour, acidic smell that lingered on her breath. Relaxing his posture, Bull absently wondered what had brought that on. More questions to ask later.

It was almost a shame to watch the dragon fly away when it finally struck a killing blow to the giant. In the rain it was hard to see but it headed towards an island about a mile from the shore, with any luck it wouldn’t be coming back near the mainland for a while. Tara quietly let out a sigh of relief that brought a brief smile to Bull’s face.

* * *

“You doing okay there, Tiny?” Varric shouted to the qunari. He’d taken a nasty fall putting down the last shade and was still half-sprawled on the slippery rocks below Varric’s less treacherous perch higher up on the path.

Shooting a quizzical look up him, The Iron Bull growled his reply, “I’ll be alright once I get back on something that isn’t drunken rock clusters. Those bastards sure know how to catch you off guard don’t they? Is that what you guys do every day?”

Digging a healing potion from his belt pouch, Varric clambered down to offer it to the qunari since there was no way he’d be able to help haul him back to his feet. “Rifts aren’t an everyday occurrence, Thank the Maker, but they sure do take a lot to put down all the demons so Hopeful can stitch it back together. The lava slug was a new one to me though.” He was mighty glad he’d not gotten too close to whatever sort of demon that was.

Iron Bull grunted his thanks as he gulped down the potion, handing the empty bottle back to Varric afterwards. He rotated his left ankle a few times before carefully levering himself back onto his feet, using the shaft of his great-axe to keep his balance. Once upright he clapped a hand on Varric’s shoulder, staggering the dwarf slightly. “Thanks Big Guy. I appreciate it.”

Rolling his shoulder a few times Varric replied, “No problem. I’m just glad that for once I’m not fighting against a qunari. Demons don’t inspire quite the same kind of fear as a qunari charging you down with a weapon that could cleave you in two.”

The Iron Bull chuckled, a deep rumbling sound that would’ve be menacing if not for the attempted wink he shot Varric’s way. “So… what’s the story with the Boss and Tara?” He asked off-handedly, looking over Varric’s shoulder. “They look pretty cosy - they together?”

Varric swung around to look at the two women stood out on the rickety dock that ran along part of the rocky platform. He could see why Tiny was curious, Tara had Hopeful’s left hand held in both of hers, thumbs pressing into the palm like she was massaging out a cramp. Sparky looked concerned, more so than you’d expect a colleague to be, or a recent acquaintance. They were too far away for their words to carry over the crashing waves but whatever Hopeful was saying, Sparky didn’t like it very much. Something to check up on later.

Turning back to the Iron Bull he shrugged, “I think it’s more like a sisterly bond they’ve got going on, rather than anything juicier. Folk gossip because they share a cabin and a bed sometimes, but I know Sparky has her heart set on a particular guy just as soon as she gets chance to find him.”

“If Long-distance sweethearts?” Iron Bull smirked.

“If something like that,” Varric hedged. Couldn’t go telling the Qunari spy the biggest secret in
Thedas. Maker alone knows how *that* epic tale was going to turn out but he had hopes that he’d get to see Sparky reunited with her Warden before the end.

Sidling over towards the Seeker where she was cleaning demon ichor from her her sword, Varric caught her attention and spoke quickly before she snapped at him. “I think that last rift took a bit more out of Hopeful than she expected. It might be worth suggesting we rest a little before heading back - there’s a hut up on that side of the hill. Good vantage point and might have some interesting stuff inside.”

Cassandra narrowed her eyes for a moment, as if trying to gauge any other motive he might have before slowly nodding and standing up. “I believe that might be a good idea. I shall speak to Elizabeth. Thank you, Varric.”

Biting back the urge to tease the Seeker for actually thanking him, Varric opted to watch her walk away in silence. When she reached Hopeful and started talking, Sparky looked over at him and flashed a grateful smile. Of course she’d realise where the idea had come from.

As they all clambered up the path to the wooden walkway that led to the hut, Sparky let out a squeal and darted away towards the massive dwarven statue that towered over the whole tiny peninsular. She stopped halfway along the narrow plateau where a weird metal contraption stood on a plinth - it was another of those star puzzle things they’d seen in the Hinterlands?

Tara waved at them and shouted, “I’m going to take a crack at this, you carry on up to the hut. Sera you want to see how this works? It’s brilliant fun.”

The blonde elf grinned and raced after her. “What the heck is it? What does it do?”

*  

For the next twenty minutes Varric watched Sparky fiddle with the puzzle, seeming to stop and start again at least half a dozen times. When the wind shifted towards them he could hear streams of curses coming from her mouth and cackles of laughter from Sera.

Eventually she gave up, flinging her arms up and stomping away from it, gesturing for Sera to give it a try. The elf stepped up to the plinth and put her eye to the viewing glass, hand grasping the two dials on either side. Varric couldn’t make out what exactly she did but barely a minute later the machine lit up and the main sphere started spinning rapidly until two beams of white light shot out towards the mainland, aiming at two different places.

The surprise was plain on Sparky’s face, her mouth hung open as Sera turned round and dusted off her hands. On seeing Tara’s face she shrugged and Varric got the impression she had expected it to be harder. The elf apparently had more smarts than she’d cared to show them. Well folk did tend to underestimate elves.

Hopeful came to stand beside him, looking less peaky than she had after closing the rift. She still flexed her left hand down at her side every so often like it pained her. “I take it they finally figured it out,” she said.

Varric laughed. “Sera did. Sparky looked about ready to blast the whole thing apart. Where do you want to head once we get back over to the mainland?”

Liz fiddled with the end of her braid, “I think we should try looking further inland and up into the hills. There’s a lot of forest to cover and I’d like to at least find the soldiers’ trail before we stop for the night.”
Reaching over to place his hand on Hopeful’s shoulder, almost of a height with his own, Varric tried to reassure her. “We’ll find them, don’t worry.”

She sighed heavily. “I’m more worried about what state we’ll find them in if these bandits didn’t take kindly to their presence on the coast.”

“It’ll be alright Hopeful.”

It took barely an hour for Varric to regret ever uttering those words.

* * *

They were dead. Corpses left strewn like so much rubbish in a ruined hovel. Four lives snuffed out for nothing more than trying to peacefully speak with the bandits’ leader. This was senseless murder. Four souls who would never return to their families. More casualties of the Inquisition.

Liz couldn’t drag her eyes away from the body at her feet. Around her was a fog of soft voices, incomprehensible through the roaring in her ears. Like the Waking Sea was rushing in to sweep the whole hut down to the depths. To wash away her failure. These soldiers joined the Inquisition because they believed in its cause and because they believed in her and they died for that.

How many more people were going to die for her? Hundreds were lost at the Conclave and several dozen more in the days after until she stabilised the Breach. But every life lost since then was in service of the Inquisition and at least a sliver of responsibility for each one fell on her shoulders. Already the weight was dragging her down. One day it could drown her completely.

Hands clamped onto her shoulders, shaking her free of the dark spiral of her thoughts. Her head snapped up and there was Tara, eyes swimming with concern and worry for her as she crushed Liz into a hug. A shuddering breath cleaved through her chest, not quite a sob but too close for comfort.

Against her hair, Liz heard Tara murmur “It’s not on you. Their deaths are not your fault. They were not children, they knew the risks when they joined a military organisation in the middle of a war. We cannot save everyone but we can seek justice for these murders.”

“How?” She sighed into Tara’s torso. “We can only repay violence by bandits with more violence. What good does that do?”

“This group aren’t true bandits,” Tara replied. “They call themselves the Blades of Hessarian and apparently that means they have some sort of honour code, which their current leader is making a mockery of judging by the tone of the notes that someone left for us.”

Liz stepped back out of Tara’s arms, brow creasing in confusion. “What do these Blades want from us?”

Handing over several sheets of parchment, Tara explained as Liz read through them. “They’re clearly not happy with the decisions their leader is making, but their code states that a new leader can only be accepted if they challenge the old one to a fight to the death. There’s also an amulet that must be worn when the challenge is made.”

On one sheet was a detailed drawing of something called Mercy’s Crest. It gave rough estimates of
sizing and materials required to create a replica. Another page was a map of the area that charted a route directly to what appeared to be the Blades’ camp. It had many more details marked that didn’t appear on the map the Inquisition had been able to find. They’d need to compare the two closely. But first they needed to put a plan in motion.

“So we need to get this crest forged as quickly as possible,” said Liz, her voice sounding more steady than she felt. “If we sent the drawing to Scout Harding now, how soon do you think we could be able to challenge the Blades’ Leader?”

Tara drummed her fingers on her chin. “If Harding is as competent as I think she is I’d reckon she can find someone to make it within a day or two. It’s not a huge piece of metal to work and it doesn’t need to be master craftsmanship, just close enough to the drawing to be recognised by the Blades.”

Liz nodded, straightening her spine. “And in the meantime we keep moving and looking for Regen. He’s not here and there are no signs that he might have been injured and fled. We have to hope that he was clever enough to stay out of sight when the soldiers made contact.”

“He’s a smart kid and good at sneaking around forests - remember how he led us through the Hinterlands? While he might not know the Storm coast very well I reckon he can fend for himself while he learns the terrain. We’ll find him Liz.” Tara gave her hand a squeeze and smiled.

“Maker, I hope so.”

Tara headed outside to wave down the raven of Leliana’s that inevitably followed them about wherever they went. She’d make sure to write Scout Harding a note on the back of the drawing to let her know where the soldiers’ bodies are so the Inquisition could take them back for a proper funeral.

Sticking her head out the door Liz called out, “Iron Bull could you help me with something?”

The huge qunari had to stoop and sidle sideways through the door to get inside the hut but he did it without even a frown of complaint. His eye quickly took in the bloody scene as he looked to Liz. “What do you need Boss?”

“I want to lay the bodies out together in a line. I don’t want to leave them here like this and I’m going to place a preservation spell on them so they won’t rot before Harding can retrieve them.”

“Sure thing, just tell me where you want them to go.” It was the work of a few minutes for the Iron Bull to gently lift and carry the four bodies to the shadiest corner of the hut and lay them next to one another, arms folded across their chests.

When Liz summoned her magic to cast the preservation spell, out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed the Iron Bull taking a step away from her. Once she was done she spoke softly to him, “If it’s any consolation my magic is almost entirely healing-focused, I can light a candle aggressively if I really try and maybe freeze a cup of water but you won’t ever have to worry about me sprouting lightning or fireballs.”

The surprise only appeared on the qunari’s face for a moment before being replaced with an easy smile. “Good to know, Boss. I’m guessing there’s a good reason Varric calls Tara ‘Sparky’ then?”

“Oh definitely,” said Liz. “I’d suggest you ask Varric to tell you about what happened when we cleared a camp of rogue Templars out in the Hinterlands but it might make you rather wary of her and she doesn’t like people being afraid of her.”
The Iron Bull only nodded in response and they left the hut. The rest of the group was milling around near the cabin; Cassandra watched Tara as she released Leliana’s raven to find Scout Harding, Sera was doing handstands and cartwheels while Varric laughed and Solas sat cross-legged with his back against a tree seemingly meditating.

Summoning all the confidence she could muster, Liz pitched her voice to carry. “Let’s get moving again. We can cover a good deal of ground before nightfall and I think there’s at least one other rift along the beach that we’ll need to close. We can avoid the Blades’ hideout until we are able to challenge them, now that we know where exactly it is. Our priorities until then are searching for Junior Scout Regen and any signs of Grey Wardens in the area.”

* *

By the time Liz crawled into her bedroll that night, her whole body felt leaden, her marked hand prickling occasionally after having closed the second rift earlier. It was less painful that the first but still enough to make her wince afterwards. She’d been distracted from the mark by the arduous hour they then spent fighting through giant spiders and annoyingly nimble deepstalkers to traverse the cave system that cut through the hillside when the pebble beach disappeared abruptly.

They were all spattered with gore and webbing when they finally emerged on the other side of the hill. Thankfully there was a clear, flat area at the base of the slope that was far enough from the shore that they’d not be showered with spray all night. Tents were quickly pitched and a cookfire started while they took turns bathing the day’s mess off their bodies and their clothes as best they could.

Liz had sat quietly by the fire for most of the evening, Tara beside her making notes in her journal and peering at the map in companionable silence. At one point the Iron Bull tried to ask about the scars tracing up Tara’s forearms where they disappeared under her shirt sleeves.

Tara had been nonchalant in her answer, face oddly calm as she traced a finger over one of the silvery branching lines. “Casting Tempest without a staff hurts like you wouldn’t believe the first time you do it.” Not waiting for Iron Bull’s reaction she gathered up her papers and ducked into the tent, staying there until it came time for the first watch and everyone settled down to sleep.

She’d ruffled Liz’s hair as she slipped outside, whispering that there was still lots of the coast to search and they’d have better luck tomorrow.

As much as Liz appreciated the reassurance it didn’t make it any easier to fall asleep with all the possible scenarios of what had actually happened to Regen whirling round her head. They had to find him, she was not going to leave the coast until he was safe and sound.

* * *

The next morning wasn’t quite as wet as the previous although the wind still lashed them with seaspray as they broke down the camp. Slashes of sunshine cut through the clouds every so often, reflecting off the waves like glittering gems. Tara climbed a mound near the campsite and found another of the infernal skulls-on-a-stick, after marking it on her map she faced out to sea and just stood there, feeling the wind against her skin. There was comfort in a cold breeze. There’d been no wind or weather of any kind in the Fade.
Their morning was spent walking a long circuitous route sweeping the hills east of them. Then they followed the wide but shallow river that emptied into the Waking Sea several miles inland until they found themselves in a vast cavern that was home to more spiders and a rift to boot. Tara could readily face giant spiders without flinching, she’d fought alongside Morrigan in that form often enough. And if she thought about punching the witch in her smug mouth every time she fought a spider she didn’t mention to anyone if they saw the savage smile on her face.

What was more unsettling to face were the demons that circled the rift. Several ice wraiths lobbed bolts of sharp cold energy at anyone stood still long enough which was frustrating enough as only fire spells proved truly effective against them. But worse than that - there was a despair demon.

At the first unholy shriek from the ragged creature Tara had stumbled, turning her fall into a roll before anyone noticed. For the rest of the fight she kept one eye firmly on the despair demon, wincing whenever it blasted streams of blistering cold towards Cassandra or the Iron Bull.

She only realised she’d lost track of it when a ice-hot spear of pain hit her back hard enough to send her sprawling on the mossy ground. Screaming flashes of white overwhelmed her mind as she fought to take a breath with frozen lungs. A yawning emptiness spread across her chest until she lost consciousness entirely.

Liz was crouched over her when Tara came to, face pale as she worried her lower lip with her teeth. Hauling her into a sitting position she pressed a rejuvenation potion into Tara’s hand and urged her to drink. She’d started coughing which prompted Liz to press a blue-wreathed hand against her back which soothed the jagged feeling until she was able to take a proper deep breath again.

“What the fuck happened?” Liz whispered shakily. “I never saw you go down, it was only once I’d shut the rift that I realised you weren’t there.” Her voice cracked slightly and she looked dangerously close to tears.

Tara shut her eyes for a moment and tried to think. She rubbed at the cold still radiating from her chest before clearing her throat. “I’m not entirely sure - I think the despair demon caught me off-guard and I didn’t remember to barrier myself. I didn’t expect it would hit me that hard. I’ll be alright once I warm up properly.”

Liz’s worry didn’t fade from her expression. “We’ll rest a while here before heading back downstream. I can ask Solas if he knows any warming spells if you like?”

“As long as they don’t involve setting me on fire or anything,” Tara tried to joke until she began coughing again.

“Maker’s sake Tara, your jokes are going to be the death of you,” Liz huffed before she realised quite what she’d said. “Shit, I’m sorry—”

Tara waved off her apology. “Don’t worry, I’d want to die having the last laugh anyway.” She stuck her tongue out at Liz and got the giggle she wanted.

Wrapping her in a fiercely gentle hug Liz sighed against Tara’s shoulder. “You weren’t kidding when you said we’d keep scaring the shit out of each other like this.”

“Nope. It comes with the job, I’m afraid. Frequent brushes with peril and near-death are all part and parcel of trying to fix the world.”

“Pity no one told me before I got catapulted into the Fade.”

They both laughed at Liz’s weary declaration until Solas approached them to offer his assistance.
Tara kept a smile on her face during their break and didn’t make any further comments about what happened after they left the cave and trekked back along the opposite bank of the river.

Tara felt slightly off-balance as they made their way up to the area marked as Westridge on their map. Her chest still ached a little and the air was turning colder as the afternoon wore on. They pushed through a thick copse of trees and found small clearing with an old firepit in front of cabin that was missing half the roof and door. On the lintel post, familiar markings were carved into the wood, a crude shape Tara knew was meant to be a griffon.

Stepping into the half-ruined shack set the hairs on the back of Tara’s neck standing on end. A weird wrench in her gut like she was missing something and shouldn’t be intruding in this place. She wasn’t a Warden anymore so what business had she snooping round a Grey Warden camp? The near-illegible notes she’d found at the two other hidden nooks had mentioned there being darkspawn movement beneath the coast but Tara couldn’t sense anything blighted anywhere. Her taint had died with the Archdemon after all.

There was another page in the same handwriting swept under the rough cot stood beneath the slightly functional section of the hut’s roof. If Tara ever met this careless Warden she’d give the man a properly bound journal so he wouldn’t keep leaving his private writings strewn across Ferelden for all and sundry to read. He did seem to question the necessity of their hunt - for whatever reason the Wardens had disappeared it was possible that not all of them went willingly. Was Alistair the only supposed deserter they were tracking?

Tucking the page into her own journal with the rest, Tara turned her attention to the tarp-covered crate in the corner of the hut. The lid had been lifted recently judging by the small puddle of water collected on the bottom. The supplies inside looked rough but were mostly still usable; a skin of brackish water, a waxed pouch of jerky strips that were tough as shit but edible and a larger container filled with round biscuits of way-bread that would probably need soaking for an hour before you’d be able to bite through them.

Someone had rummaged through the crate by the looks of the remaining supplies, there was space enough for at least two or three times what was present. Was there still a Warden roaming the coast or had someone else been desperate enough to filch from a Warden cache? Could Regen have made it this far alone? If so at least he’d have something to eat.

In another corner sat a smaller metal-banded chest - locked until Tara dug out her picks and tickled it open. She didn’t know what she’d expected to find inside but what lay on the top of assorted detritus sent her heart stumbling against her ribs, air whooshing from her lungs like she’d been sucker-punched. An engraved silver badge the size of her palm bearing the rampant griffon heraldry of the Grey Wardens and the title of ‘Warden Commander’ beneath its talons.

The metal was scratched and dinged in places but bore a shine that told Tara it had not been languishing in this musty chest for years but a few months at most. Oh, what a terrifyingly thrilling realisation that was. With trembling fingers she picked up the badge, her quickened breaths misting over the cold metal as she half-dared herself to turn it over. Duncan’s Warden-Constable badge had had his name etched into the back when they’d retrieved it from the battlefield at Ostagar - would this badge declare its owner too?

Mindful of the watchful eyes outside the hut, Tara took a fortifying breath and flipped the badge over in her hand, the exhale catching in her throat as some chaotic mix of emotions began churning in her chest. There it was, irrefutably etched in silver - A. Theirin. She fought down the warring urges to cry and laugh at the same time, pressing the badge to her lips a moment before hurrying to tuck it away in her belt pouch where it couldn’t get lost.
One chunk of abandoned metal was not the man she sought but Maker it felt like a victory to find even a sliver of proof that Alistair had been here. Alive and able to make the decision to leave behind a token that could betray his identity to those who hunted him. It was enough to give Tara hope that one day she’d see him again. Maker willing.

* * *

**Tara’s Field Guide to the Storm Coast**

1. **Meet the Mercenaries** - Iron Bull is quite the character. Chargers seem highly competent. Will rejoin us at Calenhad docks. Mind what you say.

2. **Hunt for Wardens** - Well at least a couple have been in the area some time in the last few months. So has my favourite idiot. I hope he’s somewhere safer now.

3. **Find the missing soldiers** - Too late, four dead but no sign of Regen. Lace handling the bodies.

4. **Deal with the bandits** - Blades of Hessarian is a very fancy name for murdering bastards. At least their leader is - somebody clearly wants us to oust him since they left us detailed instructions of how to challenge him and the token Liz needs to wear when she does. Lace getting it crafted - should be ready soon.

5. **Rifts** - fighting on wet, rocky surfaces is not my idea of a fun time, especially when trying to avoid getting your face melted off by a fucking Rage demon. These ones seem to be taking it out of Liz more than before. Keep an eye on her.

6. **Occulara** - Still more of these freaky fucking skulls. Four of them. Lace mentioned that she’d seen Regen examining the one at the base camp, the kid’s braver than me it seems. Couldn’t pay me to actually look through it.

7. **Astrariums!** - More of the beautiful puzzle things. One was fiddly as fuck so Sera ended up doing it but we found a mighty fancy bow in the odd little cave it pointed to once I did all three. Sera nabbed it in a heartbeat.

8. **Creepy cabin in the woods** - So a mage definitely lives there and has spells locking the door to the basement. All of us got the heebie-jeebies inside and left before our breaking and entering was discovered.

9. **Resources** - 2 good logging sites and a quarry marked on the map. My pack is now at least half full of spindleweed, plus several bundles of elfroot, prophet’s laurel and black lotus. Really should get Lace to ship some of it back to Adan so I’m not lugging it around all the bloody time.

**Miscellaneous**

- Some very interesting notes on the dwarven ruins on this part of the coast as well as some local tales. Found a vase that had some kind of shanty sheet music hidden inside, taking it back for Maryden. Oddly found a book on the Qun which should make for an interesting read.
- A sheaf of Grey Warden Treaties. Who the fuck left those out here?
- Another nifty veilfire rune - sketched it out to test later.
- Two bottles of Warden Conscription Ale. Both taste fucking foul. I reckon you need a Warden’s constitution to stomach more than one mouthful of that swill.
- Dragons can spit lightning. And other related nightmares.
- Dragonlings are just about tolerable but still horse-sized bitey bastards.
- Bears. Fucking bears. Fought: 6. Successfully Avoided: 1. Did Ferelden get *invaded* by bears after the Blight? Or did I just manage to avoid meeting every single one of them?
- Glowing red doors to Dwarven caverns aren’t good right? (Didn’t want to test how sealed it was)

* * *
A raucous caw startled the whole camp the following morning as they sat around eating breakfast. The raven that dropped down beside Liz had a small leather pouch tied to one of its legs which it held out for her to remove. Once relieved of its burden the raven hopped up onto one of the tents and waited until Liz opened the pouch and emptied it onto her palm. The metal amulet had been delicately wrought from a yellow-tinged metal and looked exactly how she remembered the drawing of Mercy’s Crest.

Clutching it tight in her hand, Liz looked to the others.

“Pack quickly, we’re going straight up the beach as fast as we can. The Blades will answer to the Inquisition today.”

Chapter End Notes

*slumps over into a puddle of brain goo*

My dudes this chapter took an unreasonable amount of work to get out of my head. Considering how much less shit there is to do on the Storm Coast compared to the Hinterlands I spent so long planning & mapping out the stuff that happened in this chapter and what will happen in Ch. 29 it’s slightly ridiculous. I have pages & pages of notes, scene outlines, hours spent playing the actual Game to essentially walk-through the route and *more* time spent tracing that damn route on a map of the Storm Coast in Paint!

Am I taking this fic writing thing too seriously? *Maybe*
Will I stop being this Extra about it? *Fuck no*

Also I have *tentatively* allocated chapter numbers for the rest of the Haven arc and Chapter 40 is what I got to and depending on how on-track my writing schedule is, we could be at that point by June. Sooo.... OMAM is gonna take at least another year, maybe two to finish. But there is so much good stuff to come. :D

Before I go, if you enjoyed this chapter please drop a kudos or a comment, I appreciate the ever-loving heck out of every one I get. Maybe let me know what things you hope might be happening in OMAM? :P
Chapter Twenty-Nine - Am I not Merciful?

Chapter Notes

Sooo... evening folks! It's MArch?!

Totally didn't mean to vanish for a month, but that's what happened. Well my updates vanished - I was still here inhaling fics like a fiend instead of writing my own damn fic. Mental health dips are a fucking ballache yo.

This chapter is not everything that I originally outlined but it is already long enough that if I did try to write the last day of Storm Coast stuff to go into this it might have taken me another 2 weeks to finish and it'd be like 8k or something crazy. So I decided to shunt the other half of my outline to become Chapter 30 and posting this lot before I lose the will to live.

I'm hoping that the next chapter won't take me another month to write *prays to the fucking universe* and that you like this chapter after taking an AGE to claw it from my brain.

Thanks for Reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun was creeping close to its zenith as Liz tried to settle her nerves before they made the final approach to the log-walled camp the Blades of Hessarian called home. Clammy handed she reached for her waterskin and took several long gulps, throat parched from the forced march she’d insisted on in her fervent desire to get this challenge over and done with. Liz glanced down at her chest where the Mercy’s Crest rested against her sternum, it had bounced in time with her footsteps the entire way, counting down the minutes until she’d be facing down the leader of a cultish militia. Maker defend her, she hoped she was up to the task.

Liz wasn’t the only one taking respite after their hurried morning. The Iron Bull had perched himself on a tree stump and was vigorously working his knuckles in the muscles of his left leg - the one which Liz only realised in that moment had a brace strapped around the ankle. She cursed herself under her breath. If she’d not been so preoccupied with worry these past few days she would’ve noticed how the obviously battle-worn qunari might be feeling the worst of the harsh pace on treacherous pebble beaches.

Guilt churning in her stomach Liz marched over to the Iron Bull, not missing how he quickly stopped massaging his leg when she entered his field of vision. How many times had he hidden his pain from her these past two days?

“What do you need, Boss?” His tone was casual like it was most times he spoke to her but Liz reckoned she could discern the thread of discomfort in the mild question now she was aware of it.

“You’re hurting and it’s my fault,” Liz said, frowning as she planted her hands on her hips. “And you’re hiding that you’re in pain from me and I don’t like that. Will you let me heal you, Iron
The massive qunari eyed her with a carefully neutral expression. His hands with their two missing fingers were large enough to span Liz’s entire waist easily, yet they were slowly clenching around the baggy fabric of the Iron Bull’s trousers as though he was wary of her.

“I didn’t want to trouble you over a bit of knee pain,” he said eventually not meeting her eyes.

“But it’s not just your knee I bet,” Liz shot back. “We just marched fifteen miles up pebble beaches in three hours. My legs are screaming and I’ve not got an ankle brace to be careful of, your entire left side must be in agony.”

“I’ve marched further with worse injuries before,” Iron Bull tried to protest.

“Well you don’t have to now!” Liz snapped in exasperation. She stepped closer and jabbed the qunari in the shoulder with her finger. “If you’re meant to be my ‘frontline bodyguard’ I’d rather like it if I don’t find out two days too late that I’ve run you ragged and had no chance to heal you. Maker’s sake, Iron Bull! I don’t need people hiding things from me that I’m in a position to help with!”

It was only when muffled laughter burst from behind her that Liz realised she was half-shouting at the Iron Bull and the fearsome warrior who could probably snap her in half without even blinking, was actually leaning away from her with a genuinely sheepish expression on his face.

“I’d never thought I’d see the day when one of you qunari were intimidated by a woman a fifth your size,” Varric chuckled.

Iron Bull shot a glare at the dwarf, “She’s bas-saarebas it’s good self-preservation to be wary of them.”

Liz staggered back a step, caught off-guard by how much Iron Bull’s remark hurt. She didn’t want to pressure him into accepting healing if he was truly scared of mages.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable, Iron Bull,” she said softly, ducking her head. “I’ll not ask again if you don’t want me to heal you with magic.”

Quickly reading her shift in mood, the qunari reached out, hand gently tilting Liz’s chin up so he could look her in the eye. “I’m the one who should be apologising, Boss. I’ve not worked with a mage healer before and most healing potions and pain tonics don’t do much for my leg except take the edge off. So if you want to take a look at it, go right ahead.”

“Are you sure? It wouldn’t hurt at all but if you’re not comfortable with me using magic on you then I won’t,” Liz said.

Gaze steady, the Iron Bull nodded. “I trust that you won’t hurt me, Boss.” He let go of Liz’s chin and sat back straight on the tree stump, left leg extended out towards her.

Flashing him a reassuring smile, Liz knelt down and placed both hands on the qunari’s knee. Closing her eyes, she called up her magic and focused it on Iron Bull’s leg, scanning from his skin all the way down through his muscles into his bones. A hiss escaped her at the extent of the trauma haphazardly healed in the past and the fresh signs of muscle tearing and stress in the joints. Letting the spell go, Liz opened her eyes and heaved out a sigh.

“Whatever the void happened to your ankle I can’t do much to fix that - the bones are partly fused together so I’d have to shatter it all over again to try and heal it properly which is not something I’d
consider doing when you’re not going to be able to stay off your feet for however long it takes to heal. But the muscle injury and general pain I should be able to ease enough that you can walk and fight without needing to compensate for the bad ankle too much.”

Iron Bull’s one visible eyebrow lifted incredulously. “You got all that from one quick look? How long would it take to fix me up enough to go challenging those Blades?”

Liz pondered a moment. “Maybe a minute or two? It’s not too tricky fixing muscles, if I had to heal something like an open sword wound then it’d be a much longer process to make sure everything is sealed up right and no infection gets in. And it’s going to be me challenging the Blades’ leader.”

That declaration had Cassandra spluttering a protest somewhere behind her. “Herald— Elizabeth,” she corrected as Liz twisted to frown at her. “Surely it would be wise to have either Iron Bull or myself challenge in your stead. We don’t know what sort of fighter this person will be and you… forgive me but you are primarily a healer, not an offensive mage.”

“I know that, Cassandra,” Liz replied. “But if we want to gain the respect of the Blades I will need to show that the Herald of Andraste is worthy of it by facing their leader myself, even if I am just a healer. If they underestimate me then all the better.”

“It could work,” Tara spoke up. “If Liz keeps up a barrier and avoids taking too many hits she could wear them out enough to take them down herself. And if it looks like she might get overpowered then one of us can step in to help her.” There was a slight mischievous gleam in her eyes as she emphasised the ‘if’ - Tara at least remembered that Liz could do some unexpected things with her magic.

Liz caught her friend’s eye and grinned. “So if we’re agreed on the plan I’d like to sort Iron Bull’s leg now please.” Pivoting back to look up at the qunari she sought his permission to begin healing. “May I?”

“Sure, Boss,” he shrugged. “If it won’t tire you out too much.”

Not bothering to respond to the second statement beyond wrinkling her nose, Liz put her hands back on Iron Bull’s leg and sank into her magic once more. Directing her attention to the damaged muscles, she carefully knit the strands back together and strengthened the tissue around them to protect it from re-injury. Throughout the rest of the leg muscles she gently warmed and worked out the deep knots that were causing discomfort and tightness.

A low groan rumbled in Iron Bull’s chest, his posture relaxing as the tension eased in his leg. Liz bit back a giggle at his response, focusing next on his knee soothing the inflammation in the tendons so the joint could move easier when walked upon. To finish she sent a burst of strengthening magic into the mess of ill-healed bones in Iron Bull’s ankle in the hopes that it would make it less painful even if it would do nothing to repair the trauma itself.

Standing back up was a little trickier than Liz had anticipated, her own knees having seized up from being knelt down for several minutes. Strong hands took hold of her upper arms and lifted her whole body until her feet were actually dangling a foot clear of the ground. Her head shot up to see the smug expression on the Iron Bull’s craggy face as he held her like she weighed nothing at all.

“That’s quite the gift you have,” he drawled. “My leg hasn’t felt this good in years. Could other mages do that heating massage thing you did?”

“Maybe if they’ve good control over how much heat they can generate and how precisely they can apply it,” Liz replied. “Most healers and Spirit Healers in particular train their magic to work far
“Huh, I didn’t consider that. Thank you, Boss. I’ll be sure to come to you next time my leg acts up if it’s that easy to fix it up.”

“You’d better, Iron Bull,” Liz admonished. “Could you put me down now? I’m not sure I like being this far off the ground.”

*  

When faced with the sneering brute of a man sprawled in a roughly hewn throne inside the Blades’ camp, a two-hander broadsword laid across his knees that was nearly as long as she was tall; Liz felt her conviction wavering for a heartbeat or three.

“You know there’s no shame in letting Cass or Iron Bull fight the challenge in your stead,” Tara murmured into her right ear. “That guy is going to have a lot of reach and power in his swings but he’ll likely be slow enough to dodge most of them. If he gets close enough to get his hands on you then you’ll be in big trouble.”

Liz forced herself to keep taking deep breaths. “What will complicate matters is if he releases those war hounds as the fight begins,” she whispered back, tilting her head towards the two large cages either side of the throne with their growling occupants. “Can you keep them contained without killing them?”

“Yes, so long as no one tries to interfere with me. If any of them are pure mabari I might be able to calm them but if they’re not they might be too vicious to retrain.”

“We can deal with that after, just keep them from taking chunks out of me,” said Liz, settling her shoulders and adjusting her white-knuckled grip on her staff. “I need to fight him without distraction.”

Tara gave her shoulder a firm squeeze. “The moment you need me to step in, I will. Keep your barrier strong, dodge as much as you can, jab your staff blade at whatever soft bits of him you can reach and when you see your chance to end it - take it - don’t hesitate, because he won’t.”

Nodding sharply, Liz took a decisive step forward and approached the Leader of the Blades of Hessarian. The hard-faced warrior looked almost amused by the sight of her, lazily pushing himself to his feet to tower a full foot taller. Coming to sudden stop outside the reach of his sword, Liz planted her feet and pitched her voice to carry.

“I am Elizabeth Trevelyan, and I am here to challenge the Blades of Hessarian. You have murdered soldiers of the Inquisition without cause and I seek justice for these deaths!”

The laughter that erupted from a handful of the Blades and their leader wasn’t wholly unexpected but had Liz gritting her teeth all the same. They could only see a little girl with a stick trying to look fierce.

She’d have to disabuse them of such assumptions.
The Iron Bull had to hand to the Boss, she had a lot of gumption facing down a warrior three times her size armed with only a mage’s staff. He didn’t catch all of what Tara had whispered to her but she’d at least told Liz to dodge. Whatever else she managed to bring to the fight it had to be enough to outlast the other guy.

“I am Wulfric, Leader of the Blades of Hessarian and I accept your challenge. Foolish and fleeting as it may be!” The man pointed his two-hander sword at Liz as he sneered his reply.

A shimmering blue light appeared like a bubble around Liz and Wulfric roared a battlecry, yanking a chain that hauled the doors of the war dog cages open. When a second burst of magic flared to stop the hounds from launching themselves at Liz, the warrior’s face twisted with rage as he swung back his sword with enough force to cleave the woman in two.

But the blow collided with the barrier two feet away from Liz’s body, blade kicking up sparks as it skittered off-course. The barrier flickered and Liz cried out at the impact even as she held steady.

Spinning with the momentum, Wulfric hefted his two-hander to scythe through the air at hip height - which was more like mid-torso on Liz. Bull watched her dip her staff and crouch, eyes locked on the blade whistling her way, waiting for the last second to dive forward and roll clear.

After several minutes of Liz alternately dodging and standing her ground as Wulfric attacked and swore, both were breathing heavy but Liz was looking pale, her barrier visibly wavering. Bull wondered at how much longer her magic would hold out, she was tiring fast and dodging slower each time she did it. Had healing him deprived Liz of the edge she needed to win this fight?

“Give it up girl!” Wulfric shouted, baring his teeth in a vicious smile. “You can’t defeat me, but I shall make your death swift if you cast aside that pathetic stick!”

Bull couldn’t quite read the expressions flitting over Liz’s face but as her jaw clenched he saw resolve solidify in her eyes. The tension radiating from her companions was palpable, Cassandra’s gauntlets creaking as she gripped her sword, ready to rip it from its sheath in an instant. While Tara’s attention was mostly focused on maintaining the spell she was already working, Bull felt a crackling energy building in the air around them, his skin prickling with unease.

A collective intake of breath whipped through the group as Liz lifted her chin and let her staff drop to the floor, her barrier fading away leaving her stood defenceless. Cassandra took an abortive step forward, beginning to draw her sword but halting at Tara’s hissed “Wait!” Bull looked closer at Liz’s empty hands and grinned.

Wulfric looked smug, so confident in his inevitable victory that he didn’t immediately move to strike the final blow, unaware of the deliberate gestures Liz was making with her left hand held behind her back. The flare of blue was faint and vanished quickly, whatever she did it wasn’t something anyone without magic could identify.

Swinging his broadsword up high over his head like a headsman’s axe, Wulfric took three long strides towards Liz, eyes alight, a roar building in his throat as he brought the blade down— until his foot triggered Liz’s trap. A circular glyph flared to life beneath him, locking his whole body in place, halting the sword’s descent.

The instant Wulfric froze Liz darted forward, brow furrowed with concentration, eyes hard as she thrust her right palm towards his chest, dark green light wreathing her hand. Horror crept onto the man’s face a moment before Liz clenched her fist like she was ripping something from the air.

Wulfric’s face fell slack, his whole body slumping like a puppeteer had quit yanking his strings.
Liz moved to one side, flicking a hand towards the ground, dismissing the magic that was holding him upright. By the time Wulfric’s lifeless body hit the floor everyone except Tara and Solas had taken a step backwards.

Bull didn’t mean to flinch back, the Boss looked pretty damn unhappy about what she’d done but shit he didn’t know she could do whatever that spell was. Tara had expected the fight to end like that he realised, so Liz must have used that spell before as a last resort. It did the job though even if it scared the shit out of most of the Blades - and Bull to a lesser extent. He took a moment to shake out his shoulders and relax before Liz noticed and started apologising again.

Tara was the first person to move and approach Liz, pulling her into a quick hug and whispering something in her ear before stepping back and addressing the camp in an impressive parade-ground voice.

“Blades of Hessarian! Your leader, Wulfric is dead by the hand of the Herald of Andraste! The rules of your company state that you owe her your allegiance as your new Leader. Who will be first to swear to her?”

That night’s camp was a far more raucous affair than the previous two nights as the Blades of Hessarian asked their new leader to stay for what passed as a feast in war-torn lands. Harsh home-brewed liquor was making the rounds and many a toast was made to honour the Herald’s victory. Varric was happy to nurse a flagon of semi-drinkable ale and watch Hopeful wander from group to group, talking for a little while, getting to know her newly acquired band of loyal fighters.

After the shock of Wulfric’s death had worn off slightly, the rest of the Blades eagerly swore their allegiance to Liz when Tara called on them. Several of the warriors carried the corpse away to a quickly-built pyre outside the camp’s walls, leaving Tara to approach the war hound cages and try to calm their still snarling occupants. It quickly became apparent that only one of the six dogs was a pure-bred mabari, capable of understanding Tara’s instructions to ignore whatever orders had been previously given. The rest of the hounds had been trained to savage almost everyone who came too close and there was little Tara could do to reverse such mistreatment, much to her obvious dismay.

A difficult decision was made and with the sombre assistance of Liz, the five dogs were put into a deep sleep so they wouldn’t feel anything when their hearts were stopped entirely. Tara was fighting back tears as she released the mabari from its cage and led it towards the rough stable block to scrub the heavily-caked filth from its fur. When they reappeared nearly an hour later both Tara and the mabari were grinning, although it seemed like Tara got as much of a bath as the war hound judging from the state of her water-logged shirt.

The mabari followed Tara around the camp like a duckling for the rest of the day, with its stump of a tail wagging hard enough to make even the sternest-faced Blade smile as they passed. As night fell, the pair found a spot by the campfire Tara sitting cross-legged on the ground while the mabari sprawled out beside her, head resting on Tara’s thigh so the woman could bestow scratches as required.

Varric was far enough away that he couldn’t hear anything Tara was saying but he was near certain that the woman had been talking to the mabari almost non-stop, in much the same manner that
Hawke used to talk to his own Goose - like precocious child rather than a mere animal. Her lips were constantly moving, face animated and left hand gesturing every so often as though she was telling the mabari a story. Varric’s hands itched for some paper and quill to scribble down a description of the scene.

The log he was sat on creaked ominously as The Iron Bull carefully sat down beside him. The qunari was holding a flask containing something so potent Varric could feel his nose hairs burning from five feet away. After a couple moments of silence the Iron Bull took a swig and exhaled heavily. Swivelling towards Varric, he tilted his head in the direction of the fire and the pair cosied up next to it.

“Sooo… what’s the betting that we’ll have another party member when we leave tomorrow?” Iron Bull smirked. “Will the Boss mind a four-legged tag-a-long?"

Taking a sip of his ale, Varric pondered what would be the least revealing answer he could give. Admitting that Tara technically already had a mabari and probably wouldn’t want a replacement any time soon would lead to questions he definitely shouldn’t answer. Especially not to a qunari spy. He opted to shrug.

“Nah, Hopeful wouldn’t mind but I reckon that mabari is just glad to have someone willing to talk to them. Sparky probably doesn’t want to deprive the Blades of a valuable member of the company just for companionship.”

“She certainly looks pretty damn happy to be talking to a dog,” said Iron Bull. “Did she spend a lot of time working alone as a merc?” He was fishing now, prodding for information on the biggest unknown in the group.

“I’ve only known the woman for a month or two,” Varric replied evenly. “She doesn’t talk much about what she did before joining the Inquisition.” He honestly didn’t want to ask what she’d been doing in the Fade since the Blight, he didn’t need that sort of headache.

The Iron Bull lifted his one visible eyebrow, “You’re not even the slightest bit curious about what her story is?” He said incredulously. “I thought you were the kind of guy who lived for wheedling tales of weird shit out of strangers? A woman who wields magic daggers like it’s normal surely has a damn good story to tell.”

“Maybe so,” Varric shrugged taking another sip of his ale. “But Sparky won’t thank me for pestering her until she spills all of whatever is bottled up in that head of hers - I’d rather not get zapped if it’s all the same to you. One day maybe we’ll get to hear her story, and of course then I’ll be ready to write it down if she lets me. Just be patient, Tiny.”

“If you say so, Big Guy,” Iron Bull rumbled before levering himself off the log, wandering in the direction of a group of Blades who had been eyeing the massive qunari for most of the evening. Whatever expression was on Iron Bull’s face as he approached them it was enough to send a wave of pink rushing into the cheeks of the previously stoic-faced fighters.

Varric chuckled under his breath. Those Blades were probably in for quite an exciting night. For him however, it was time to give Bianca her evening once-over and try to get enough sleep to ease the lingering ache from that morning’s quick march up the coast. He found the tent he usually shared with Solas pitched in a corner away from the noise, the elven mage already tucked up in his bedroll with his eyes closed. Parties were definitely not his thing.
Finally finished with meeting every individual Blade in the camp, Liz let her posture slump and heaved out a deep sigh. Maker only knew how much talking she’d done over the last few hours, summoning a little magic she ran her fingers over her throat to soothe away the soreness that had slowly turned her voice to something nearly as gravelly as the Iron Bull’s. Spotting Tara by the main campfire, Liz staggered over and pretty much collapsed onto the ground beside her with a groan.

“Long day huh?” Tara grinned at her. The mabari dozing with its head in Tara’s lap opened one eye to peer over at the new person before settling down again.

“I feel like today has lasted a whole week,” Liz muttered, gently reaching to scratch behind one of the war hound’s speckled ears. “I want to sleep for a day and a half but we still have to find that urchin Ward of mine - I asked the Blades and none of them recall seeing Regen when they captured the Inquisition soldiers or anywhere in the woods since then. Where the fuck is he, Tara?” Her voice dropped to a pained whisper.

The older woman gave her a sad smile, slinging her arm around Liz’s shoulders and pulling her into a side-hug. “We will find him, don’t worry. We can split up into smaller teams and head out in different directions in the morning to scour the coast again. You go with Iron Bull, Varric can go with Solas and I’ll take Cass and Sera - each group will have a mage so when one of us finds Regen we can send up a signal to call off the search.”

Liz rested her head on Tara’s shoulder, relief seeping through her body. “I should have known you’d come up with the perfect plan in no time at all. I might actually be able to sleep tonight now.”

Tara laughed. “That’s what I’m here for, finding lost things and making your life easier any way I can. There might also be an apostate living in the hills so I’d like to track them down to see if they’re going to be a threat to the Blades and any ongoing Inquisition presence.”

“That sounds sensible,” Liz nodded. “You and Cass ought to be able to deal with them if they do prove to be too dangerous to be left to roam. Where did Sera disappear to anyway? I haven’t seen her for hours, I know Cass was holed up inside talking supplies with the Blades’ logistics person but it seems awfully quiet and I don’t know whether to be concerned by that.”

“I think I saw her heading outside the encampment with a few of the younger Blades while it was still light,” Tara replied. “There’s some targets set up out at the base of the hill so Sera was probably showing off her bow skills or something. If they’re causing mayhem at least they’re doing it outside the camp where they won’t disturb the rest of us.”

Liz grimaced at the thought of what shenanigans the young elf could be getting up to where no one could see her. “Well so long as she’s back for when we need to leave tomorrow I won’t worry too hard about it. What will be happening with your new friend here? Coming with us or staying with the Blades?”

Glancing down at the mabari in her lap, Tara smiled wistfully as she answered, “As much as I’d love to adopt my Lady Grace here, she really belongs with the Blades. I’ve spoken to a young man - Gregor - about the proper way to care for mabari and how to incorporate them into fighting units so she should fare better than when that vile prick Wulfric was in charge.” The mabari in question lifted her head to swipe a slobbery tongue over Tara’s hand, prompting giggles from both women.
“Yes, I know, I’m going to miss you too. I shall have to ask the Blades to send me reports of how you’re doing after we leave.”

Liz’s heart clenched at the longing on Tara’s face as Lady Grace barked happily, standing up and bumping her snout against Tara’s cheek. There was a sudden hitch in her throat before Tara flung her arms around the stocky russet war hound, eyes shining as she buried her face against the short scruff of the mabari’s neck. After a minute or two Tara relinquished her grip and spoke solemnly to Lady Grace.

“Now tomorrow you shall begin your new life as noble hound of the Blades of Hessarian. But for one night would you mind keeping me company? It’s been so many years since I’ve been able to sleep alongside my Warden and my Barkly—” Her voice cracked and she struggled to finish her sentence. Intelligent enough to understand the request, Lady Grace bobbed her head eagerly, tugging at Tara’s shirt sleeve until she stood up, laughing faintly as she swiped at her eyes.

“You coming, Liz?” Tara asked, holding out a hand to her. “It’ll be nice and cosy with all of us puppy-piled in the tent. And Lady Grace promises not to snore too loudly don’t you?” The mabari huffed at her, somehow managing to actually look offended at the suggestion she would snore at all.

Liz smiled up at her friend, gripping Tara’s forearm as she easily hauled her back onto her feet. She dusted off her clothes and gestured for the others to lead the way. “Time for bed then.”

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know if it’s just me being hormonal but this last section had me getting oddly emotional?? Like Tara really fucking misses her mabari (and Alistair duh) and it’s giving me FEELINGS. Ugh I should probably write some Blight era fluff to deal with this shit or whatever to tide me over until I can finally write the OMAM chapters where the the Serious Feelings™ come out to play.

Anyway! I may have been very slapdash with my proof-reading of this chapter because it’s been written over like a month and I’m mildly sick of looking at it. So if there’s some glaring error or something that makes no sense because I should have gone back & added another section in then please poke me.

Random aside: It was so fucking tedious trying to write the Blades Challenge fight when the old leader has no name that I made one up for him rather than make you suffer through twelve weird-ass descriptors that took up like 30 more words than was necessary and an egregious amount of possessive apostrophes. You’re welcome.

If you enjoyed reading this in spite of my shoddy editing, then please leave a kudos or a comment ^_^ Every email I get is a little nugget of happiness so I appreciate the heck out of all you who have left one previously.

Have a lovely evening y’all
Chapter Thirty - Cruising Lake Calenhad

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Goooood Evening Folks!

We're at Chapter 30! Wow!
It's not a significant chapter plot-wise but yay round numbers, and thank fuck I finally got it done because there were a few moments when I considered sacking off everything I'd written for this chapter (for the *2nd* time) and just moving ahead. But that would then require me to write all new stuff which would delay me posting even further so... we've got this as it is.

I hope my frustration with the damn thing isn't super obvious XD I just wanna start getting to the exciting bits!! That's kinda why this is so short, it's mostly just transitional scenes.

All the cookies to Lady_Sav as always for not getting utterly sick of me whinging about my failed attempts to wring words out of my rock-brain these last few weeks.

I'd like to say it won't be another 3+ weeks until I next update but I wouldn't bet my life on it!

Either way I hope you enjoy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

15 Cloudreach 9:41 - Calenhad Docks

Nightingale,

Herald departed Storm Coast yesterday after locating Junior Scout Regen - not too worse for wear considering his six days alone in the wilderness. The bandit threat has been resolved with four Inquisition fatalities - the militia known as the Blades of Hessarian were responsible for the deaths of our soldiers but since the Herald challenged their leader and defeated him, the group now swears allegiance to Liz and pledges to do the Inquisition’s bidding in her name. A lieutenant has been appointed to liaise with the Inquisition and relay information from the coast as necessary.

All rifts have been closed and a dangerous apostate has been neutralised. There is a dragon in the area but it seems to be nesting on an island offshore so shouldn’t pose an imminent threat to people on the Storm Coast.

The mercenary company - the Bull’s Chargers - is accompanying the Herald and her team to the Hinterlands so they will likely return to Haven when she does. My scouting team will be journeying with the Herald some of the way, the ship that has been chartered to transport us across Lake Calenhad will be docking at the mouth of the river that flows from Haven before continuing on to a viable docking point east of Redcliffe.

Expect my team within five days with more detailed reports on the Storm Coast and the Blades of
Hessian.
Regards,
Scout Harding.

* * *

**Un-Fucking the Hinterlands - List the Fifth!**

1. **Close the Rifts** - We left a few from the last time we were here and I’m sure there’s going to be some we haven’t even found. If Liz is up to it we should attempt to close as many as we can.

2. **Find Warden Blackwall** - Leliana’s intel says that he should be somewhere in the vicinity of Lake Luthias. Will be first port-of-call. Hope he knows something.

3. **Speak to Fiona in Redcliffe** - Hopefully we’ll be able to make some progress in getting mages to help close the Breach after we speak to the Grand Enchanter.

4. **Healer for the Crossroads** - While we’re in Redcliffe we need to see if there’s a competent healer we can recruit to assist the Crossroads now that Mother Giselle’s flock has gone.

5. **Smuggler Tanner** - Still need to find this one and ask a few questions about her schemes.

6. **Astrariums** - I think there is still one we haven’t found and if the Storm Coast was any indication there will probably be some interesting loot hidden away somewhere as well.

7. **Occularum** - Regen went and did what I was too cowardly to do; look through those fucking skulls and find whatever they were meant to locate. He had a whole sack full of eerie glowing shards of something when Liz found him. No idea what they’re for but we can get a scout in the Hinterlands to start rounding up the shards there and ship them back to Haven for further analysis.

8. **Clear out Villa in Hafter’s Woods** - There’s apparently a mercenary company holed up in there. Could send Bull’s Chargers to oust them and mop up whatever is left afterwards?

* * *

“Tara, are you coming down? I think the Chargers are about to crack open some of their ale casks and Bull is gearing up to tell them about Regen and the Bear.”

Jerking her attention away from the slowly shrinking tower Tara had been staring at mindlessly, she peered over the side of the crow’s nest at Liz on the deck below. Wedging her journal in the waistband of her breeches to free up her hands, she clambered down the metal rungs hammered into the mast. Liz looked Tara over once she was on solid ground, a faint wrinkle between her brows, eyes concerned.

“Are you alright?” Liz asked reaching out to touch her arm. “You’ve been up there since we set sail.”

Tara sighed, running a hand through her wind-snarled hair. It was almost past her jaw now, longer than it’d been in years, she’d always kept it short before… back at Kinloch. “It’s strange being so close to the Circle again,” she said eventually looking back to where the tower would be if there was light to see it.

“The last time I was at Calenhad docks was ten years ago, after we’d just cleared a horde of
demons and blood mages from Kinloch Hold. I spent half my life in that tower and here I am just sailing past it like it’s nothing. Like it isn’t the place where everything began, where my best friend betrayed me, where Duncan conscripted me and saved me from tranquility,” she swallowed, her throat tight at the memory. “I didn’t expect to feel this overwrought about being back here but apparently I have more feelings about what that place means to me than I knew.”

Liz nodded, squeezing Tara’s hand. “That’s perfectly understandable, I know I’d have difficulty going back to Ostwick and seeing the Circle there again. It was a huge part of your life, and since you left you’ve not exactly had the opportunity to look back on how those years shaped who you are today. When we get back to Haven, if you like, we can swap more Circle stories since we can’t do that on the road now we have the new folk with us.”

“I’d like that,” Tara replied softly. “It was hard to explain what life was like inside the Circle to people who’d never lived there. Ali understood somewhat having been a templar recruit, but he was trained at a Chantry monastery and never served at a Circle. You at least understand the strange mix of relief of having left there and the longing to go back just because it was familiar.”

“You’re right,” Liz admitted. “As happy as I am to be free of the Circle, able to travel and see my family, there are days when I miss the routine of classes, learning to use my magic and the comfort of being surrounded by so many people just like me.”

“Exactly. I hate that I miss it sometimes,” Tara scrubbed her hand over the back of her neck and sighed. “I can brood later, we have some Chargers to meet don’t we?”

Slinging an arm around Tara’s waist, Liz gave her friend a squeeze and grinned. “Only the primary squad I think, there’s not enough room in the galley for the whole company and us without it getting very cosy.”

“So it’ll be about as busy as the apprentice dorms down there?” Tara laughed.

“Pretty much, yeah.”

* * *

Krem was passing out the last cups of ale from the first cask they’d brought up from the hold as the Boss arrived with Tara in tow. Quickly changing course he came to a stop in front of the two women, presenting two small tankards with a bow of his head.

“Your Worship,” Krem said, passing the first to Liz with a grin.

He held out the second to Tara and Bull watched his Lieutenant’s expression turn mischievous. “I’d recommend you drink this a little slower than you did back in Haven; the Chargers only buy the strong stuff so it’d be a shame to have to scrape you off the floor and tuck you into bed before the night is barely begun even if you are an adorable drunk.” The last bit was punctuated with a deliberate wink and a smirk that tended to lead to Krem sharing a bed with whomever he aimed it at.

Tara’s reaction was unexpected. She froze, arm outstretched to take the cup from Krem’s hand, jaw dropping open as she slowly blinked at the Vint. It was a good ten seconds before she snapped her teeth together, swallowing hard enough for Bull to see the movement of her throat across the room. A blush was spreading across Tara’s sharp cheekbones, prompting a ripple of laughter round the
room at her being rendered utterly speechless by the Chargers’ Lieutenant. When she snatched up the cup and took a generous gulp the laughter grew louder. Her unsteady exhale dissolved into a fit of giggles.

“I shall take that under advisement, Cremisius,” Tara managed to sputter, shooting a glare at Liz beside her who looked fit to burst into hysterics. “Now if you’ll excuse me I need to sit down and pray that the ship sinks before I embarrass myself further.” Stepping around Krem she beelined for an empty seat in a corner, hauling her legs up to form an extra barrier between her an everyone else as she rested her ale on top of her knees.

Unfazed by Tara’s abrupt departure from the conversation and the implicit rejection of his offer, Krem held out his forearm to Liz and led her to a spot near to Bull before taking his own seat on Bull’s left side. Satisfied that everyone was finally settled in, Bull began the story.

“So there we were, the Boss and I, wading across that big river on the coast, when this roar echoes down the ravine followed by a shriek of ‘Fuck you too!’…”

* * *

As the night wore on, the ale casks ran dry, the stories got wilder as the tellers got drunker and most of the Chargers stumbled out of the galley over the course of a few hours to find their bedrolls. Tara stayed ensconced in her chosen corner nursing her original cup of ale, content to just listen to the tales Iron Bull told his Chargers about the last few days he’d spent with the Inquisition. Cassandra and Solas had slipped out after they’d heard the dramatic retelling of Regen being rescued from up a tree like a wayward cat. Liz had contributed details to that first story with relish until the poor lad was near scarlet in the face.

The Iron Bull had earned the young scout’s admiration by letting him ride atop the qunari’s shoulders back to the Inquisition camp and enduring the countless questions Regen had about The Chargers, the Qun and every other topic he could think of. When their group rejoined the mercenary company at Calenhad docks and brief introductions were made as they boarded the ship, Regen met Krem and became his second shadow.

It had been deeply amusing watching the Tevinter warrior move about the deck with the blond lad trailing behind him, eager to offer assistance with whatever tasks Krem had. To his credit, Krem hadn’t told Regen to leave him alone despite looking rather bemused by the attention. Instead he’d treated the lad almost like a squire, explaining things as he went, demonstrating how he cared for his gear, even taking the time to walk Regen through some self-defence moves. Scout Harding would have a tricky time persuading her junior scout to return to Haven with the others now he’d gotten so fervently attached to the Chargers.

Tara could just about make out a ruffled mess of blond hair leaning against Krem’s side across the galley, Regen had probably fallen asleep over an hour ago in spite of the raucous noise and the soft-hearted Lieutenant hadn’t dared to move since. It wouldn’t be long before he’d try to stand without waking the lad and carry him to wherever the scouts were bunking for the night; the remaining stragglers in the galley looked about ready to drop, Liz included.

Draining the last of her mostly warm ale, Tara swung her feet off her chair and loped across the room to where Liz half-slumped against the Iron Bull’s right side, no doubt lulled into dozing by the immense amount of body heat the qunari put out.
“Come on, sleepyhead let’s get you tucked into bed,” Tara grinned, lightly shaking Liz’s shoulder until her eyes opened. “Serrah Iron Bull can’t move while you’re using his arm as a pillow.”

Liz blinked owlishly at her, not registering what she said at first until she swivelled her head and saw the expanse of grey skin she was leaned against. Jerking fully upright she started stammering apologies much to the Iron Bull’s amusement.

“It’s okay, Boss,” he smiled lazily. “It happens more often than you’d expect considering how intimidated people usually are by me.”

“Even so, I didn’t mean to trap you here.” Liz replied, cheeks flushing as Tara pulled her to her feet.

“Nah, I could’ve moved any time I liked and you’d only have noticed when you woke up in the morning in your own bedroll,” The Iron Bull smirked shooting Liz a wink.

“Good to know,” she said faintly as Tara succumbed to giggles.

* * *

16 Cloudreach 9:41, Lake Calenhad to Haven

Dear Henry,

Since we’ve got a solid day or so of sailing until we arrive back in the Hinterlands, I thought I’d write you a quick letter since I know you should actually be where I send it this time. This voyage down the length of Lake Calenhad is far less nauseating that the journey we had sailing to and from Val Royeaux, but I suppose that’s to be expected since the Waking Sea is far more turbulent than an inland lake.

The weather is also a lot pleasanter now we’re away from the Storm Coast - aptly named as it is. Our gear has finally had a chance to dry out fully in the sun we’ve had today. It’s a milder spring than I’ve been used to in Ostwick but strolling around the deck with the sun warming my skin and the cool breeze keeping the sails full is incredibly peaceful.

We’re going to be bringing back a whole mercenary company - headed by a qunari! I can’t recall from your letters if you’ve ever met one but the Iron Bull is quite an impressive figure. Easily two feet taller than me with horns wider than my arms can span and the strength to wield an axe that almost certainly weighs half as much as I do. He’s also got an eye-patch that makes it tricky to know if he’s winking at you or merely blinking but based on how many times he’s flirted with nearly everyone in our group I’d reckon that winking is the more likely intention.

I heard him mention to Tara a particular preference for red-heads so I think you may very well be a prospect for some flirtation when we get back to Haven - of course if that’s not something you’d welcome then I know the Iron Bull won’t push it if you tell him so. He’s more gentlemanly than almost every Templar I’ve ever met.

I’m slightly apprehensive of how we’ll be received in Redcliffe by Grand Enchanter Fiona and the rebel mages. While we have been invited they might still be suspicious of our intentions and want us to provide assurances that any association with the Inquisition isn’t going to impinge on their hard-won freedom. It’s doubtful that Cullen will be happy if I promise them such safety without consulting him and the other advisers first. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, I suppose.
Anyway, I hope you're doing well and I look forward to seeing you when we return in a week or so. After so many years apart, these last few weeks have been far too long a separation. Don’t worry I won’t start dragging you out into the field with us, unless you want to of course.

All my love,
Liz

* * *

The rest of the journey across Lake Calenhad was thankfully uneventful and Liz had chance to catch up on writing reports to send back to Haven with Scout Harding when the ship made a midnight stop on the western shore of the lake. The Ferelden Captain of this ship was mercifully far less aggrieved by the presence of Sera and the Chargers whose combined antics might have driven an Orlesian into fits of the vapours. Captain Agneshka was a stern-faced woman in her fifties who’d not baulked at answering Tara’s questions about the wind runes the ship used to hurry their passage over the water instead of oarsmen.

As they disembarked the ship at a dock east of Lady Shayna’s valley that was just about long enough to pull the ship alongside without running it aground, Liz made sure to thank the Captain for the smooth and speedy voyage when she handed over the rest of the coin the Inquisition owed for hiring out the ship. The crew and the Chargers spent the better part of an hour carefully wrangling all the mounts up from the hold and back onto solid ground with only a few bruised feet and unfortunate slips in the inevitable piles of manure that fouled the deck by the end.

Travelling through the Hinterlands was far less fraught with potential danger now their group numbered upwards of thirty mounted fighters, it might have been slight slower taking the paths that were wide enough to fit at least two columns of riders but they met no resistance as they passed through the Crossroads to take the West Road out to Fort Connor. Liz had initially intended for them to stay at the Inquisition camp just below Lake Luthias since it was close to where Warden Blackwall had been seen, but with the Chargers accompanying them it made more sense for them to spend the night in the now empty Fort Connor as its intact outer walls and main hall gave them somewhere secure to picket the mounts as well as a solid roof over their heads.

A squad of the Chargers ventured out to hunt down a couple of ram that were cooked up over two large fires in the courtyard as the sun slipped below the surrounding hills. More ale casks were breached and the evening was far livelier than aboard the ship now that the entire mercenary company was in one place. Several instruments were produced from somewhere in the Chargers’ supplies and they were treated to numerous songs of a bawdy nature that had most of the Inquisition group howling with laughter until Cassandra’s disapproving scowls finally prompted Liz to send everyone who wasn’t on first watch to bed so they’d be ready to head out in the morning without too much grumbling.

Settling into her bedroll beside Tara that night, surrounded by the sounds of two dozen other people slowly drifting to sleep, Liz grinned at her friend, receiving a soft chuff of laughter in response. It was the closest either of them would get to being in the Apprentice dormitories ever again and for one night at least they could enjoy the sense of camaraderie without the fear of Templars watching for suspicious activity. Although Liz did wonder about some of the muffled noises from the furthest corners of the main hall. Nothing she wanted to investigate too closely based on how she’d seen the Chargers interacting earlier - they were a close-knit group with some even closer it seemed.
Tomorrow they’d find Warden Blackwall and hopefully some answers.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand we're back in the Hinterlands! Maker be willing it's only going to be a short stay XD

I'm not sure yet whether I'll be putting *all* the Redcliffe stuff in the next chapter along with recruiting Blackwall because it could make it a mahoosive chonk of chapter. We'll see how easily the words come for it I suppose - I'd like to keep the ball rolling as we head into the next half dozen chapters because ACTION & PLOT THINGS ARE GONNA BE HAPPENING!

If I've missed any dumb typos let me know, after how long I've been staring at this document over the last few weeks I've gone mildly blind to it.

If by some wildly good luck you've enjoyed reading this, I'd love it if you left a kudos or comment letting me know which bit in particular you liked cos I might be motivated to write more bits like it in the future :P

Until next time folks
Chapter Thirty-One - What Can One Grey Warden Do?

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Oh hey it's me! Your friendly neighbourhood Fire_Kitten back with a chapter after many moons of silence!

I had vague hopes of being able to get this posted while it was still April, but alas I did not. Hence why I'm here staying up past my Grown-Ass Adult bedtime posting it now. You're welcome :P

It always ends up being scenes that I think will be straightforward that end up suddenly going slightly different to how I initially planned and I have to spend waaaay too long thinking through all the emotional beats and making sure they're falling correctly. I've certainly tried to get it right but we'll see if it lands.

As you might expect I gotta give all the cookies to my best gal Lady_Say for helping me shake this chapter into making sense. It's a pretty belated birthday present but y'all should totally go check out her latest chapter of Through Fire or Fury

Anyways I hope you enjoy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Do you think that's him?"

Tara took the spyglass from Liz and pointed it across the lake where a group of men appeared to be doing weapons training. "The grubby, bearded guy? I can't see the crest on his breastplate with how dingy the metal is but it could be a griffon. He's not in the standard Warden blues but if they're wanting to play least-in-sight then strutting about the hills in bright blue and shining silver armour is only going to draw unwanted attention."

"What d'you suppose he's doing with those lads?" Varric asked, looking through his own spyglass. "They look more the sort to be wielding farm tools not those rusty toothpick swords they're holding. Now seems like a pretty odd time to be holding lessons when the world is going to shit."

"Why don't we just go over there and ask, rather than spying from across the water?" Cassandra muttered under her breath.

"Always with the sensible suggestions, Seeker," said Varric, collapsing his spyglass and tucking it into a pocket. "Should all of us go or just a few? Because I reckon having Tiny stride up with that axe might cause a panic. If us archers stay here as well we can provide the long-range cover should anything go to shit."

Liz nodded, flashing Varric a bright smile. "That should cover us for all eventualities. Tara and Cassandra for melee, Solas and I for mid-range magic, you and Sera for long-range and Iron Bull for the last resort."

"Something truly unprecedented would have to happen for us to need the Iron Bull to come
charging in," Tara laughed.

"Well, it's always worth planning for the worst - as recent experience has taught us all," Liz pointed out.

Tara couldn't argue with that logic.

The group split and Cassandra took the lead across the wooden walkway traversing Lake Luthias, head twitching back and forth as she watched the group by the cabin for any signs that they'd spotted the Inquisition party.

The old wooden boards creaked loudly enough that it was undoubtedly a good idea to have left Iron Bull on the other side of the lake. It wouldn't make for a professional introduction if they all took a dip in the lake when the walkway collapsed under the qunari's considerable bulk.

Tara considered that it was possibly a mark against this Warden Blackwall that he didn't spot the obviously well-armed group of people approaching in broad daylight over open water until Liz was close enough to call out to him.

“Blackwall? Warden Blackwall?”

The warrior spun round at Liz’s shout, expression hardening into a wary frown as he strode closer.

“Who are you? How do you know my name?” He demanded, eyes taking in their group and the obviously high quality of their weapons and armour.

Liz stepped out between Tara and Cassandra, her posture almost rigidly straight as she endeavoured to seem non-threatening. She left her staff in its holster on her back.

“We’re with the Inquisition and we’re—”

The rest of whatever Liz was about to say was lost as the whistle of an arrow reached their ears nearly too late for anyone to do anything - except Blackwall.

With an impressive burst of speed he closed the gap between him and Liz and brought up his rough shield in time for the arrow to thud into wood rather than Liz’s torso.

A long moment of stunned silence echoed across the clearing as Liz rocked back on her heels, blood draining from her face in horror at the near miss.

Tara hadn’t even been remotely ready to throw up a barrier or Step in front of Liz to take the hit instead. It was only by Andraste’s Grace and the quick reflexes of Warden Blackwall that they hadn’t just lost their Herald.

Time to curse her idiocy for being unprepared would have to be scheduled later, as a second group of fighters charged up behind the rag-tag bunch of farmers that Blackwall had been training. Not the most competent-looking bandits they'd seen but more than enough of a threat to civilians who barely knew which end of a sword to hold.

Ripping the arrow from his shield, Blackwall told a still gaping Liz, "Help, or get out! We’re dealing with these idiots first."

A manic laugh bubbled up in Tara's chest. Of course they were going to fucking help, what kind of heartless monsters did this Warden think they were? Throwing herself into fights to help complete strangers was practically her sole purpose in life at this point. Not that she could tell him that.
Teeth bared in a feral grin, she unsheathed her daggers then turned to Cass. "Race you there!" She yelled before stepping across the clearing into the midst of the fight, startling both sides into exclamations.

Tara stood in the middle, staring down one of the bandits, too confused by her abrupt appearance to attack until twin battle-cries came roaring closer. Cassandra and Blackwall barrelled through the circle of fighters with their swords and shields, and Tara lashed out her daggers, cutting down the frozen bandit first.

Glowing barriers sprung up over the wannabe swordsmen, giving them a chance to survive the short but frantic battle. Liz and Solas stood back by the cabin, providing magical support but not offensive magic - in such close quarters it would be too easy for Solas to accidentally scorch an ally as well as the bandits.

Between the combined might of Cassandra, Warden Blackwall and Tara's unceasing whirl of daggers the bulk of the bandits fell quickly, with the outlying archers getting steadily picked off by Varric and Sera from their vantage point across the lake.

There was little opportunity for Blackwall's recruits to even cross blades with the bandits. When the last one slumped off Cassandra's sword onto the bloodied and muddied ground, the clearing fell quiet, no one wanting to be the first to breathe out a sigh of relief.

Tara was the one to break the silence, "Well! That was quite exhilarating!" She summoned ice to her hand and sluiced the blood off her blades while Warden Blackwall stared blankly at her, unsure what response to make.

Eventually he shook himself and turned to assess his recruits, all terribly confused by the sudden whirlwind fight but alive and unharmed.

"Good work conscripts, even if this shouldn't have happened. They could've— well, thieves are made, not born. Take back what they stole and go back to your families. You saved yourselves," Blackwall told them, punctuating his speech with gestures with his dripping sword.

It rather seemed like we did the saving, Tara thought, biting back the urge to mutter the comment to Cassandra as the recruits rifled through the pockets of the fallen bandits for whatever coin and trinkets they could find.

Once the bodies had been thoroughly looted the men gave a final salute to the Warden before hurrying to leave the area. Several of them startled as the Iron Bull and the others approached the cabin from the other direction, coming to investigate now the fight was over.

Warden Blackwall finally turned his attention back to Liz, a frown rumpling his brow.

"Now, how do you know my name? Who are you people?" His Marcher accented voice was gravelly and slightly accusatory.

Liz flashed him a wan smile "We're agents of the Inquisition," she said. "We're looking into the disappearance of the Grey Wardens in connection with the Divine's murder. You seem to be the only Warden we can find."

It was hard to see what emotions were playing out on Blackwall's face beneath the thick beard but his response was frosty.

"You think the Grey Wardens had something to do with the Divine's death? No-- you're asking because you don't know. But one thing I'll tell you, no Warden killed the Divine. Our purpose isn't
Why didn't anyone tell me that before I decided who got to rule Orzammar? Tara just about managed to turn the crack of laughter that nearly burst from her into a mangled cough that earned her a blistering look from Cassandra. It took every scrap of her willpower to keep her composure.

Shaking her head slightly Liz replied, "I'm aware that Wardens don't usually interfere in the normal workings of Thedas, but the timing of their disappearance is too conspicuous to be ignored. Have you had any contact with either the Ferelden or Orlesian Wardens recently?"

"No, I've travelled alone for months, trying to recruit people for the Wardens. But obviously with the Archdemon a decade dead nobody is all that keen to join up," Blackwall shrugged.

"I was passing through the area when bandits hit those farms, so I conscripted their victims and told them to fight back. Grey Wardens can inspire you to be better than you are and in these uncertain times we could all use a little inspiration."

The wistful sincerity in Blackwall’s voice should have been moving but Tara had to press her lips together firmly to keep a smirk contained. The Grey Wardens were hardly the most virtuous group of fighters in Thedas - many were fucking criminals conscripted to avoid the executioner and provide another body to beat back the darkspawn that nobody would care enough to miss.

Liz’s gaze slid over to Tara, eyes narrowing as she huffed out a sharp breath. "So if everyone else has gone missing, why haven't you?" She looked back at Blackwall.

The Warden shrugged again, "Maybe I was going to, but a runner with the new directive got lost. They could have all retreated to our headquarters in Weisshaupt - that's a long way north in the Anderfels."

'Weisshaupt didn't give a solitary shit about Ferelden when there was only two Wardens to tackle an entire fucking Blight by themselves,' Tara thought bitterly. ‘Why would they bother calling every Warden in just as the sky gets torn asunder?’ She wished she'd had chance to learn more about how the Grey Wardens worked and communicated outside of the Blights.

Liz straightened her back and smoothed her expression, her jaw slightly tensed. "Thank you for your time Warden Blackwall, but you've given me nothing I can work with." She sighed, turning to walk away.

"Wait!" Blackwall threw out a hand towards her, "Agent? Did you say? Maybe I don't know where the Wardens have gone, but I could still be of use to the Inquisition. I have copies of Grey Warden treaties that you could use to demand supplies and troops - people have to honour those treaties."

"During a Blight," Tara cut in sharply. And an old piece of paper didn't mean folk would actually help without dragging their heels the entire fucking way.

"It might not be a Blight but there's a hole in the sky and demons stalking the world - surely that's catastrophe enough to warrant using Warden treaties?" Blackwall replied, glancing at Tara before aiming his plea at Liz.

Liz tilted her head slightly. "Maybe so. The Inquisition has lots of capable fighters already though - what can one Grey Warden do?"

Blackwall straightened himself up and declared "Save the fucking world if pressed."

This time Tara couldn't hold back the cackles that erupted so forcefully she almost folded herself
double. Her hands gripped her thighs as her entire torso shook with breathless laughter. Tears started streaming down her face, the jumble of emotions overwhelming her system to the point that she must have looked like she'd lost her mind.

"I don't see what's so funny," said Blackwall, sounding more than a little offended. "Does the Inquisition want my help or not?"

"Of course!" Liz answered quickly, no doubt wishing she was close enough to kick Tara. "Please excuse my friend. Tara, go and see if there are any usable supplies in that cabin while I finish speaking to the Warden."

The hard tone of Liz's voice jolted Tara upright, her laughter dying in her mouth as she snapped her jaw shut. Not trusting her own voice to stay steady she gave a wary nod and Stepped quickly from the clearing into the cabin.

Once inside, she spun round until she spotted the intact bed in one corner. Tara half-collapsed onto the straw-stuffed mattress and snatched up a pillow to muffle the noise as she helplessly dissolved back into hysterical giggles.

* * *

“What the fuck was that?”

The door slamming startled Tara out of the exhausted doze she’d slipped into once she’d finally gotten her breath back and stopped laughing. As she peeled open her eyes she saw Liz stood at the foot of the bed, hands propped on her hips, looking genuinely angry at Tara.

“Liz… I—”

She cut Tara off before she could attempt an explanation. “You almost cost us a vital ally with that performance, what the void is wrong with you? I thought you wanted to find Alistair but instead you’d prefer to alienate one of the very people who might know where he is?”

Tara lay stunned as Liz shouted at her, any responses she might have given seeming wholly inadequate now. A sickening lurch of shame had her throat tightening and her eyes prickling for a completely different reason.

Swallowing hard past the knot of tears that threatened to spill over, Tara ducked her head and rolled off the bed. With brisk, jerky movements she adjusted her footwraps and swept her pack onto her shoulder as she straightened up.

She didn’t meet Liz’s eyes as she murmured, “I’ll apologise to Warden Blackwall for my rudeness.”

“Yes, you will,” Liz said shortly. “But not right now. I managed to persuade him that the Inquisition was in fact worthy of dedicating his sword to, but when I mentioned that we were heading on to Redcliffe to meet with the mages he said he’d prefer not to enter the town himself.”

Tara blinked in confusion. “So is he going straight to Haven alone then?”

“He’s going to track down and join the Chargers along with the Iron Bull and Sera to help them
clear out Hafter’s wood and the villa,” Liz explained. “We’re not going to get a good reception walking into a town full of mages with a Qunari and Sera is jumpy enough around just you, me and Solas. They’ll be more use out here.”

Tara nodded stiffly. “We’d best get moving then. Redcliffe is at least a half day’s ride north if we don’t run into trouble.” The hollow flatness in her voice had Liz frowning at her again but she didn’t say anything more.

Stepping carefully around her, Tara made her way to the door and swung it open. Gesturing for Liz to go first she bowed her head, “I’ll endeavour to better control my emotions in future, Herald. I am deeply sorry for disappointing you.”

A crack appeared in Liz’s taut expression, hurt flickering in and out of her eyes as her mouth opened slightly. But she took a breath and closed it again, striding out of the cabin without looking back at Tara.

Shoving the sharp ache in her chest down along with the mess of thoughts that clamoured for her attention, Tara followed Liz and softly shut the door behind her.

Cassandra, Varric and Solas were stood a little way away from the cabin, their expressions all studiously neutral and giving no indication of whether or not they heard Liz shouting.

In a firm voice Liz spoke to the Seeker, “We’ll get the horses and ride for that rift that’s on the edge of Dennet’s farmland. It’s too risky to leave there now that people are coming back into the area.”

“Of course Herald,” Cassandra replied, taking point to walk back over the walkway with Liz close behind.

Tara waited until the two other women were almost out of view before moving. Varric had hung back, face softening into a slight smile as he reached up to pat her arm.

“It was kinda funny, Sparky.”

* * *

It was an uncomfortably quiet ride from the lake back down to the road and up into Dennet’s land. Varric kept glancing back over his shoulder at where Sparky’s horse trailed some distance behind the rest of the group. Liz was riding alongside Chuckles apparently happy to hear tales from the Fade.

Whatever Hopeful had said to Tara it had rattled her so badly she hadn’t said two words since stepping out of that cabin. Varric didn’t think he’d ever seen the two women go longer than an hour without cracking jokes together or grinning at each other for no discernible reason. This wall of silence between them stood solid even after two and a half hours of riding through the countryside in beautiful sunshine.

They hitched up the horses at the top of the slope that led down the waterfall where the rift hung high above the ravine. Varric watched Tara roll her wrists a few times, expression oddly blank as she reached up to free her daggers. Sparky wasn’t in a good place to be going up against demons just then.
But Liz wasn’t looking at her still and that worried Varric even more. This was going to go tits up for sure.

When they reached the bottom of the slope, just out of range of the rift the Seeker gripped Liz’s shoulder for a moment.

“Stay as far back as you can and disrupt the rift whenever you get the opportunity,” she said softly.”

Hopeful nodded, flexing her Marked hand before gripping tight onto her staff.

Varric readied Bianca and shot another concerned look at Sparky - her face was eerily still but her daggers were steady and flickers of lightning were dancing over the blades.

Maker help him, he hoped this fight wouldn’t turn into a shitshow.

But it did.

* * *

It took Liz far too long to realise what was wrong.

The second wave of demons just would not die and she was burning through mana keeping barriers up over Varric and Solas and flinging healing spells at Cassandra whenever she looked shaky.

Eventually, finally, the last demon fell and she thrust up her left palm, gritting her teeth as she hauled the rift closed with every ounce of her will. Pain crackled up her forearm as the fade-green light dissipated, hissing out a curse she shook out the limb.

“Everyone alright?” Liz picked her way closer to the river, down from her rocky perch where she’d avoided the notice of the Terror demons although the three Despair demons they’d faced had tried to assail her barriers. The air was still chilly from their achingly strong ice attacks.

Varric had Bianca primed in his hands, eyes darting everywhere, seemingly searching the ravine for something. His next words stopped Liz’s heart cold.

“Guys, has anyone seen Sparky?”

Liz couldn’t draw in enough air to soothe the paralysing terror that hooked into her chest. She pressed her shaking hands over her mouth to hold back the sudden urge to be sick.

In her petty anger and frustration she’d not looked at Tara once during the fight. She hadn’t even noticed her closest friend was missing and that frightened Liz to her core. Far more than the near miss of the bandits’ arrow had shaken her that morning.

“Find her,” she gasped. “Oh Maker help me, we need to find her quickly. Who saw her last?”

Varric shot her a strange look, “I lost track of her when that frosty little bastard started dancing all over the place. That was before the second wave started.”

Liz staggered as she half-threw herself forward, kicking up water in her desperate rush to get to the other bank where the Despair demons had circled back to a few times. There were several massive
boulders at the foot of the cliff, lots of places where a person could be hidden from view.

She heard the others follow in her wake, Varric and Cassandra both calling Tara’s name with panic in their voices. Magic tingled across her skin as Solas cast some kind of tracking spell.

“There!” Solas cried as a pulse of light shot up from behind a boulder near the base of the cliff.

As Liz sprinted for the beacon she spotted one of Tara’s daggers piercing a limp pile of frost-limned rags on the ground. Finding a small glass vial in her belt pouch, she began to stoop when Varric gently took the tube from her fingers and waved her on as he quickly used the dagger to scoop up some of the demon’s remains to take back for Minaeve to analyse.

The ground leading away from the demon was churned up as though someone had tried to drag themselves to safety even as they were pursued by another Despair demon if the shards of ice and frost-bitten dirt tracing the tracks were any indication.

Liz’s steps slowed the closer she came to the rock, heart tripping against her ribs as she took tiny gulps of air if only to keep herself from fainting. Her mind raced with all the awful possibilities that might await her, how badly injured would Tara be? Would she be clinging onto life by a mere thread? Would Liz have to tell Leliana that she’d failed to protect the Hero of Ferelden because she was too focused on her duty to the Inquisition?

Steeling herself, Liz took the final few steps around the edge of the boulder and dropped to her knees with a sob.

Tara’s body lay face-down in a narrow rocky hollow, just far enough into the shelter to be almost completely hidden unless stood face-on to the entrance. In the gloom Liz could make out the hilt of Tara’s other dagger clasped in one hand, while the fingers of her other hand were caked in dirt and what looked like blood.

But that was the least of Liz’s concerns. She focused for a second, casting the space into sharp relief as a magelight blinked into being above her head. And Maker she wished she could unsee everything.

Three deep lines had been gouged from Tara’s right shoulder down across to her left hip, scoring clean through the hardened leather armour save for where the end of a dagger sheath had provided a sliver of extra protection. The wounds were raw and bloody but coated in a thick layer of frost that had seemingly kept Tara from bleeding out before she’d killed the demon and crawled away.

With an unsteady hand, Liz cast out a diagnostic spell and shuddered a sigh of relief on finding Tara’s heart to be still beating. However it was far slower that it ought to be and each ragged breath that passed between Tara’s ashen lips was followed by a terrible silence like it would be the last.

“Elizabeth, we must begin the process of cleansing and healing Tara’s wounds immediately before they fester,” Solas’ voice was soft so not to startle her when he laid a hand on her shoulder. “Her body’s temperature is dangerously low but it might be prudent to wait until after to warm her again - she could bleed heavily if we do it before her back is healed.”

Liz nodded absently as she mentally tallied up what healing potions they had between them and how many they’d need on top of the raw Spirit Healing she’d have to bring to bear to restore Tara to health.

“Can you move her with magic?” Liz asked Solas. “I don’t want to drag her legs but there’s no way I can squeeze past to try lifting her shoulders from inside.”
“Indeed I can,” the elf replied, steering Liz to the side of the hollow’s opening before turning his attention to Tara.

A soft, green glow appeared around his hands, with a careful gesture the spell enveloped Tara’s prone body and slowly lifted her a few inches clear of the ground while keeping her head still. Solas took tiny steps backward, drawing Tara out steadily until her whole body was clear of the hollow. Rotating his hands palm-down, Solas gently lowered her and released the spell.

In full daylight Tara’s injuries were all the more harrowing to behold and Liz scrambled on her hands and knees to her friend’s side. Looking up, she found Cassandra and Varric several paces away seemingly awaiting instruction.

“Fetch the horses and find every single healing potion and scrap of elfroot we have,” she said more sharply than she intended. “Ready several blankets and some rope too - once I’ve got Tara’s back healed we’re going to need to move her somewhere more secure. We’ll probably have to tie her across her saddle since she’ll be in no condition to sit astride.”

“Of course, Hopeful,” Varric replied, holstering Bianca to free up his hands. “Is it worth riding over to Dennet’s place to see if his wife has more supplies we could buy off her?”

Liz shook her head, “I’d rather not impose on them if we don’t absolutely have to - we can restock our supplies in the Crossroads if not in Redcliffe. We can’t delay meeting with the mages for long but we might need to let Tara rest a day.”

“Understood,” Cassandra cut in. “We shall bring the mounts as quickly as we can.” Before Varric could make any further response she grabbed the scruff of his coat and began hauling back across the river.

Liz turned to Solas, finding him already laying out several bottles from his own pack beside Tara’s head, the sleeves of his tunic pushed back to his elbows exposing pale, freckled forearms.

“Should we remove Tara’s armour or simply cut open the back?” He enquired as he examined the claw tracks more closely. “I imagine her shirt will be beyond salvaging but her leather armour might be cleaned and mended if we can unfasten it without harming her further.”

Catching her lower lip between her teeth, Liz chewed on it as she thought over what Tara would prefer her to do. She imagined that her friend would rather replace her armour in Haven when she had the time to fit it properly and all the tools close at hand, rather than rely on finding something suitable out here in the Hinterlands to protect her against whatever dangers they might face before they leave.

“Save the armour,” she told Solas. “I’ve already got enough to apologise to her about, let’s spare ourselves from having to tell her we ruined her leathers more than the demon already did.”


* * *

The next few hours were intensely tiring if rather educational for Solas. Between him and Elizabeth they exposed Tara’s lacerated back and set about cleansing the quickly festering wounds. It took at least three potions to scour all the demonic poison from the three long gouges, which
should have been agonising as the potion smoked and hissed when in contact with the tainted flesh. Yet Tara barely twitched.

It concerned Elizabeth how unresponsive Tara was throughout the entire healing process; Solas hoped his theory that her consciousness had retreated deep into the Fade to protect itself held true. It seemed the most logical reason for her almost deathlike stillness, and was more reassuring that other possibilities that Solas had not wished to mention to the Herald.

When Varric and Cassandra returned with the mounts, Solas assessed the full scope of their potion inventory and set aside several lyrium potions for Elizabeth and a few restorative draughts to replenish any blood that Tara might have lost. The vast majority of the healing was to be done by Elizabeth herself, repairing the damage to Tara’s back from the deepest sections where the claws gouged almost down to the bone all the way up to the faintly frost-bitten skin which was likely to lead to scarring no matter how much magic was brought to bear.

Solas made sure to monitor Elizabeth closely as she sunk deep into healing, both hands alight with cool blue resting gently on Tara’s back. It had been a long, long time since he’d seen a Spirit Healer of such proficiency tackle so complex of a healing without needing to share some of the task with another mage.

Considering the close proximity of a rift until quite recently, Solas was taken aback by the number of spirits clamouring to assist Elizabeth from the Fade. She was able to call on nearly half a dozen different spirits, including Hope and Peace, as she worked, allowing her to stretch her own mana far further than she would have been able to with only one spirit helping her. It certainly prevented her from needing to poison herself through drinking too many lyrium potions.

Even so, by the time Elizabeth had managed to heal Tara to the point that it was safe for them to move her away from the ravine, the younger mage was exhausted enough to need tying to her own saddle when they set out for somewhere closer to Redcliffe to camp for the night.

Cassandra led them to an abandoned cabin which they’d passed by on their first trip to the Hinterlands and still possessed a lockable door. Tara and Elizabeth were transferred from their horses onto cots inside that were serviceable considering how long they might have stood unused, Tara was laid out on her front again to avoid unnecessary pressure on freshly healed wounds.

Varric dedicated himself to preparing dinner and later Elizabeth roused herself enough to inhale two full bowls of the resulting stew before falling back into deep sleep. However Solas was only able to coax Tara into reflexively swallowing a few mouthfuls of water over the course of the evening. She’d be in dire need of food to replenish her strength when she woke.

Solas intended to make sure that she didn’t remain hidden away in the Fade for too long, it would do Tara no good to linger where she may be just as vulnerable to demons as she was stood next to the rift.

On waking in the Fade Solas quickly realised that Tara’s mind had fled some distance from where she had fallen unconscious. It took him a few attempts to track her down but eventually he found himself at the mouth of the cave just outside the westernmost edge of the Hinterlands where they’d taken refuge one night.

Sat next to a memory of the fire they’d lit inside the cave was Tara, the white sections of her hair catching the oddly coloured flickers of light as it hung loose from its usual tie. Opposite her was a Spirit which immediately lurched upright on bird-like feet when Solas set foot inside the cave.

It drifted across the cave towards Tara and swept the woman into brief embrace before vanishing.
Confused by the spirit’s abrupt departure, Tara looked around sharply.

“What the fuck, Solas?” She glared at him as he stepped closer. “You don’t see me scaring off your friends when you’re trying to get some quiet time in the Fade.”

“Ir Abelas falon,” replied Solas with a slight nod. “I did not expect that you would be here with someone else - particularly after the events of earlier today. I only wished to ensure that your mind was undamaged since your physical body was quite severely injured.”

Tara’s expression tightened, her jaw clenching slightly as her eyes narrowed. She folded her arms across her chest. “Is my body still hurt?”

“Can’t you tell?” Solas asked, puzzled. “Surely you maintain a tether between your spirit and your body so you can find your way back through the Fade?”

“Maybe I do, but I’m not terribly eager to know how much pain I’ll be in when I wake up.” Tara replied defensively. “Also I’ve not been so far from myself since I left the Fade, I’ve not exactly had chance to figure out all the nuances of being a Dreamer.”

“Elizabeth was able to heal your wounds almost entirely,” added Solas. “There is some scarring and I imagine you will have some discomfort from being immobile for some time but you should not fear returning to your body.”

“Oh.”

“If you were also concerned that Elizabeth still bears any ill feeling towards you after your disagreement, I can assure you that she was devastated to find you so grievously wounded,” Solas gently explained. “She will be wanting to make several apologies to you as soon as you wake up.”

A flush appeared on Tara’s cheeks. “Oh. I see. Well then, I’ll probably have to see about finding my way back.”

Solas chuckled, “I can guide you if you wish?”

Tara shook her head, “Nah, I can manage. I need to find Curiosity again to say goodbye anyway. Just let Liz know that you’ve seen me and that I’m on my way.”

Before Solas could reply Tara made a shooing gesture with her hands and physically ejected him from her space in the Fade.

It had been quite some time since anyone had done that to him.

Chapter End Notes

Someday, I will make a chapter plan and give myself a deadline and actually produce that chapter on time. IN MY DREAMS.

Hoo boy this one became oddly emosh for Tara - I feel like I owe her a bushel of hugs.

But NEXT TIME, Redcliffe! WTF Fiona! DORIAN!!! Plus y’know probably a solid dozen other little things that I’ll cram in because I ain’t one for missing out the subplotty bits. Maybe when I wake up with this chapter no longer a lump in my brain I
can have fun writing the next one.

If you've got some thoughts you wanna share or simply want to let me know you're still here reading then please leave a comment or a kudos. It will be lovely to wake up tomorrow to emails from AO3 ^_^ And I'd kinda recommend you subscribe if you want to keep following along because I literally have no schedule & you might never find this again XD

Night folks x
Chapter Thirty-Two - Follow the Redcliffe Road

Chapter by Fire_Kitten

Chapter Notes

Stop the Presses! I'm posting twice in one month! By the skin of my teeth but we'll just ignore that shall we?

Hello! I hope everyone is doing well and that y'all ain't as mind-boggled by the fact that it's almost *JUNE* as I am. What the shit where is this year going?

I was hoping this chapter would be all of the Redcliffe stuff but since I'm going to be on a wee holiday from tomorrow until Friday, I wanted to post today and I have only maybe a third of what was planned written already. So it's a shorter chapter today and hopefully another one in a week or so (MAKER BE WILLING).

Usual Thanks go to Lady_Say for so helpfully pointing out that I could just split the chapter rather than stress myself to hell trying to get everything written. I was being a Dumb Kitten. She posted a new chapter of Through Fire or Fury the other day and it's a tad saucy at the end so you should go read that.

I hope you enjoy reading and I apologise that Dorian isn't making his debut this time. NEXT CHAPTER I PROMISE <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Varric had never been so happy to hear somebody cursing the Maker’s danglies as he was when Sparky finally woke up. Quickly he stirred up the cookpot hanging over the fire and spooned out a bowlful of porridge that he carried over to the cot where Tara lay. As he drew level with her head he got the welcome sight of bleary brown eyes squinting up at him.

“How you feeling, Sparky?” Varric grinned at her, in spite of the lingering worries he felt about yesterday’s incidents.

Tara groaned, her whole face scrunching up tight as she levered her torso off the cot. “Like I’ve been trampled by a herd of druffalo with knives strapped to their hooves.”

As she sat up the blankets that had been draped over her back started to slide, drawing her attention to the fact that she was lacking any sort of clothing on her top half. “Shit.” She snatched up the corners of the blanket and hastily crossed them over her torso. “Sorry if you caught an eyeful,” Tara muttered to Varric’s deep amusement.

“Don’t worry yourself,” he laughed, his head tilted back, averting his gaze. “I guessed it might happen. The rafters in this place look remarkably sturdy don’t you think?”

He got a soft chuff of laughter in response. Risking a glance he could now only see one of Sparky’s arms protruding from the blanket, with its silvered network of lightning-wrought scars branching up from her fingers, over her muscled forearm to where they tapered into nothing past the swell of her bicep.
“Is that breakfast or lunch in there?” She asked, gesturing to the bowl in Varric’s hand.

“Breakfast,” he replied, digging a spoon from his pocket and handing both over. “A little later than usual but it’s still an hour or two off midday yet.”

Carefully gripping the bowl with the hand that also seemed to be clutching the blanket, Sparky started shovelling the porridge into her mouth with a speed that belied the fact she normally referred to it as ‘morning mush’ while wrinkling her nose. It took her little more than a minute to finish the whole bowl, but she’d had a major healing done only the previous day.

Varric plucked the bowl from her hand and went to refill it from the cookpot. There was probably enough left to do a third portion if she wanted it; he’d been instructed to try and get as much food into Tara as possible without bullying her into it. Maker knows they didn’t want her fainting while they were in Redcliffe.

As he handed the porridge back to her, Sparky finally asked the question he’d been expecting from the moment she opened her eyes. “So… where is… everyone?” Who she really meant was obvious as well as the question she didn’t ask.

“Hopeful and the others went to scour the Witchwood for elfroot and other herbs, to top up our supplies and gather some surplus we can offer up to the mages in Redcliffe. It’s likely they’re running low if they’ve not run out entirely.”

The stiff set of Sparky’s shoulders didn’t ease at all and she was staring down at the bowl in her hands as she ate mechanically until the spoon scraped bare wood once more. This time she held out the bowl, giving a slight nod as Varric took it and emptied the rest of the cookpot.

“You know,” he began, pausing to get Sparky to look at him. As her wary eyes met his, he continued. “Even when Hopeful was facing down a Pride demon, barely two hours conscious after being hauled up a mountain through the snow, I don’t think she looked as utterly terrified as she did yesterday when she realised you were missing.”

Tara’s eyes widened, her cheeks flushing. “You’re kidding me,” she whispered.

“I shit you not,” Varric said, thrusting the bowl back into her hand. “You scared the shit out of all of us, Sparky. Nobody had seen you for nearly twenty damn minutes and when we did find you in that hidey-hole you crawled into… Maker’s balls, you were in a bad way.” He tried to shake the image from his mind.

“Hopeful and Chuckles spent three hours working on your back before you were stable enough to be moved here. I’ve only ever seen Blondie go for longer when Spirit Healing and he has two distinct advantages over Liz that kept him from dropping dead of exhaustion. She certainly impressed Solas that’s for sure.”

Tara looked slightly shell-shocked to hear the lengths that Liz went to for her, which sent an unexpected pang through Varric’s chest. Had yesterday shaken her so badly that she was no longer certain in her relationship with Hopeful? It was easy to forget sometimes that they’d only known each other for two and a half months.

Pasting a bright smile on his face, Varric gestured for Sparky to keep eating. “Finish that, then you can get dressed and ready to go for when the others return. I’ll pop outside and clean out the cookpot so you’ve got some privacy.”

Tara nodded absently as she dug her spoon back into the porridge, brow furrowing with whatever
thoughts were whirling through her head. Dousing the small fire in the brazier, Varric hunted up some cloth rags to wrap the handle so he could carry the pot without burning his palm. He took his sweet time scrubbing it out at the water pump beside the steps up to the cabin.

When Varric finally headed back inside, Tara was on her feet. She had a fresh shirt half-tucked into her leather trousers as she tied back the snowy sections of her hair into a style so similar to how Blondie used to wear his, it sparked a smile across his face.

“You’re looking much more like yourself, Sparky,” he grinned. “I know for sure that I could stand to go at least a month or two without seeing you so badly hurt again.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, easing a knot of worry in his gut that had been pulled tight since yesterday morning. On the cot was her leather jerkin, she picked it and turned it round to show the three lines of stitches where the demon’s claws had slashed through the armour.

“Who did this?” Tara asked. “It’s damn fine work. I can’t work such neat, little stitches on cotton handkerchiefs let alone fucking toughened leather.” Her voice was full of awe as she ran her fingertips over the line of stitches.

Varric coughed back a laugh. “It was Cassandra.”

Tara dropped the jerkin. “Fuck off, she never!”

“On my life, she did,” Varric swore. “But she’ll kill me if she finds out I told you, so forget I said anything.”

She mimed buttoning her lips. “What armour?”

By the third loop they’d taken around the Witchwood there was not a scrap of elfroot left to find. Liz could confidently admit to herself that she was definitely putting off returning to the cabin where they’d left Varric and Tara. Thankfully both Cassandra and Solas were too polite to call her on her delaying tactics. Biting back a sigh, she resettled her pack on her shoulders, now brimming with healing herbs she’d need to deal with later.

“We should head back,” Liz said. “Tara might be awake by now.” Maker she’d hoped so.

Cassandra gave her a solemn nod. “Of course, Elizabeth.” She took the lead back along the path to the Redcliffe road with Liz falling into her usual place in the middle.

The journey seemed to pass in a blink Liz was so deep in her thoughts, practising what she wanted to say to Tara when she saw her again. But when they reached the cabin and saw Varric and Tara sat on the porch outside, the entire speech she’d planned flew from her mind.

Tara shot to her feet when she saw Liz, stumbling down the steps before stopping short, hesitating as though not sure of her reception. Heart aching at the wary expression on Tara’s face, Liz launched herself forward flinging her arms around the taller woman’s middle and squeezing as gently as she could.

It took a moment or two for Tara’s shock at being so readily embraced to fade and for her arms to
close around Liz. A long breath shuddered out from her chest taking with it all the tension in Tara’s body. Liz felt her inhale and clear her throat.

“If you’re about to start apologising to me for yesterday, I’m going to tickle you mercilessly,” Liz said before Tara could speak.

Tara spluttered out a startled laugh. “You know that only works as a threat if you know where I’m actually ticklish,” she replied, looking down at Liz with a smirk. “Why am I not allowed to apologise? I fucked up yesterday, in more ways than one. I let you down badly, you were justified in getting mad at me—”

Liz cut in, “I was not justified in speaking to you the way I did, not in private and especially not in front of everyone else. You are a respected member of the Inquisition and my dearest friend and I reprimanded you like a naughty child.” She sighed. “It was me who let you down and it almost got you killed - I am so deeply sorry, Tara.”

Pulling Liz in close and pressing her cheek against her hair, Tara murmured, “You’re the closest thing I have to a sister, Liz, and sometimes that means I might accidentally annoy the shit out of you for a very stupid reason. Yesterday was an unfortunate example of how I don’t always react to a situation how you’d expect. I’d like to say it won’t happen again but it’s entirely possible that it will.”

“I can handle you laughing at inadvisable moments but I really would rather not find you in the state I did ever again,” Liz said seriously. “What happened at the rift will not happen again so long as I’m breathing, I promise you that.”

Tara didn’t have a ready response to that declaration but her arms tightened briefly as her shaky exhale tickled across Liz’s scalp. Finally extracting herself from the hug she gripped Liz’s shoulders and gave her a faintly watery smile.

“I think it’s high time we set off for Redcliffe before you have me all misty-eyed in broad daylight. I’m going to need to keep a low profile once we’re in the village itself since I have no way of knowing how long people’s memories are and how recognisable I’ll be.”

Liz nodded. “I think there’s some sort of cowl in one of the supply packs that you could wear to cover your hair and obscure some of your face. It might get a bit stuffy but it’d probably be less eye-catching than wearing a full helm around loads of mages.”

“Sounds good to me,” Tara replied. “Let’s get mounted up.”

* 

“What the ever-loving fuck was going on with that rift?”

Liz fervently agreed with Tara’s exclamation, shaking out her half-numb hand grimacing at the prickling sensation that raced up her left arm. Yesterday’s rift had been a slog but it was nowhere near as peculiar as that was.

Their ride to Redcliffe was hindered by the presence of a rift outside the lowered portcullis that cut off the village from the rest of the Hinterlands. An Inquisition scout armed with a bow was attempting to pick off the demons coming through the rift from the other side of the gate without
much luck.

What had become quickly apparent when they’d dismounted and engaged the demons was that the rift was affecting the area around it in alarming ways. Liz stood far enough back that she didn’t experience anything odd but watching Tara suddenly turn into a deadly blur while Cassandra’s swings were slowed to a fraction of the speed she normally fought with, had her questioning what the void was going on.

The demons themselves weren’t all that powerful but with the rift behaving so strangely there had been a few close shaves when the changes in speed had left them vulnerable for a moment too long. Hastily cast barriers and occasional healing spells had thankfully kept them all from serious harm.

Once the rift was closed the Inquisition scout had the portcullis raised and thanked Liz profusely. But the news they passed along was equally as bewildering as the rift had been.

“What do you mean no one’s expecting us?” She asked incredulously. “It’s a fortnight since Grand Enchanter Fiona invited us, that’s ample time for her to have travelled back from Val Royeaux by ship. She wouldn’t have forgotten to tell anyone surely?”

“I don’ know, Your Worship,” the young scout shrugged. “All I heard was that the mages were mighty surprised when we told them the Herald was coming.”

Liz pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. “This day is getting progressively more and more confusing and I’d like for it to stop already. Let’s just go find Fiona and see what’s going on.”

Leaving the horses hitched just inside the portcullis with the Scout to guard them; they set out along the road towards the village proper. As they passed a half-ruined stone structure, Tara double-took and darted away from the road without saying a word. Standing the centre of what appeared to have been a windmill, she closed her eyes, taking several slow breaths as Liz and the others watched bemusedly.

“You alright there, Sparky?” Varric called to her after nearly a minute.

Opening her eyes again, Tara nodded, “Just meeting some old memories. I hadn’t realised this windmill had been destroyed when the darkspawn attacked. Although I’m surprised it wasn’t rebuilt considering its proximity to the village.”

Giving the structure a last look around she rejoined the group, reaching out to give Liz’s hand a quick squeeze before walking on ahead. Whenever she spotted some elfroot or embrium, she whipped out her belt-knife and sliced through the stem in a strangely graceful swooping motion that didn’t slow her down as she walked. Tara had filled a small sack with herbs by the time the road brought them to their destination.

A set of wooden gates opened onto a large square from which the village of Redcliffe spread towards the lake to the North and the towering sandstone cliffs that cupped the village on both sides. Redcliffe castle was about half a mile away, its outer walls built right up to the western cliff faces as the road sloped up to the plateau that looked over the rest of the village. It was a formidable structure and Liz could see how it had withstood almost every attack brought to bear in recent history.

Glancing over at Tara, Liz watched her friend’s face turn towards the castle in the distance, her eyes unfocused and faraway as though she was looking at the Redcliffe she remembered from ten years ago rather than what stood there now beneath clear, sunny skies. From what she’d heard, Liz imagined that it was a vast improvement on the swathes of undead that were terrorising the village
every night when Tara first visited.

When it seemed like half a minute had passed without Tara blinking, Liz reached to clasp her hand and squeezed it three times in quick succession. Inhaling sharply, Tara broke free of whatever memory had swept her up, head snapping round to meet Liz’s concerned gaze. For half a heartbeat Tara almost lost, before a smile quirked up one corner of her mouth and she returned the three hand squeezes.

“It’s really fucking strange being here again,” Tara leaned down to whisper. “A lot looks how I remember but then half the village looks like it was torn down and rebuilt after the Blight. The castle and the Chantry at least are still stood where I last saw them.”

Liz grinned. She was going to make a joke but noticed that a young elven mage had approached them, hands fluttering nervously as he bowed slightly in her direction.

“Apologies, Agents of the Inquisition, but Magister Alexius is now in charge of the rebel mages and won’t be available for another hour. But you are welcome to speak with the former Grand Enchanter up at the tavern in the meantime.”

Several jaws dropped open in unison as the words registered. Cassandra stepped forward, hand clamped around her sword hilt, eyes blazing.

“What do you mean ‘former Grand Enchanter’?” She cried. “How long has a Tevinter Magister been in Redcliffe? Where is the Arl?”

Audibly gulping, the elven man bowed again, stammering out a response. “I’m sorry, Enchanter Fiona should be able to assist you until the Magister arrives. I… must go.” Without waiting for a reply, the mage turned and scurried back into the village, leaving Liz and the others gaping like simpletons in the gateway.

“Unexpected Tevinters doing something nefarious in Ferelden,” Tara muttered under her breath as she adjusted the cowl covering her head. “Another thing I wish wasn’t so familiar.”

Liz sighed and rubbed a hand over her face. “I guess we should take a look around the village while we wait? Going to the tavern immediately isn’t a good idea - I know I want to shake Fiona and ask what the fuck is going on, but Cassandra looks about ready to stab someone.” That earned her Cassandra’s usual disgruntled noise but she made no attempt to refute the statement.

Liz cast a glance behind to where Solas and Varric stood, inviting them to venture an opinion. Neither looked entirely comfortable at the prospect of entering the village but Varric shrugged and said “At least it’s not surprise Qunari.” Solas merely resettled his grip on his staff.

“Welcome to Redcliffe, everyone,” Tara said dryly.

Chapter End Notes

*jazz hands*
It’s been an odd old time the last week or two, a lot of this was written earlier in the month so my proof-read was haphazard at best XD.

Now this isn’t going to mean much without context, but last week I got to meet the
person who is technically responsible for me falling head-first into this Dragon Age Obsession and OH BOY what an emosh day that was, for more reasons that just the DA connection. I did *not* have the balls to tell her the name of my fic but I did recommend one of my favs that she hadn't heard of which was great XD.

So yea feeling kinda weirdly grateful for what this fandom has brought into my life. I've still got a long way to go with this story so I'm hoping people stick with me for the whole journey and that I make it worth your while. ^_^

Have a good evening folks, until next time x

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**End Notes**

Thank you, thank you, thank you if you get this far! If you enjoyed this chapter and want to nag my procrastination-inclined ass into hurrying up with the next one, please leave a comment and I will be endlessly grateful. No really I might get emotional. This is only the second thing I've posted and I'm high-key freaking the fuck out about trying to write what is looking to be a pretty complex story with all of the plot and relationship stuff I want to get in.

Okay until next time then!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!