Summary
rara avis
[rahr-uh ah-vis]
origin. latin (tevene)
noun, plural rarae aves
1. a rare person or thing; rarity.
2. literal, a rare bird

When Dr. Alberta Marieve Shaw left work on Christmas Eve, she was planning on a quiet
evening at home before heading off to sit on a beach in the Caribbean for a week, but, things
do not go according to plan. She finds herself in a completely foreign world, like nothing she
has ever experienced. At first, it seems that nothing in her past or training could have
prepared her for this, but perhaps she is better suited to this world than she initially thought.
She must navigate a war between mages and Templars, the brutality of Thedas itself, and the
whims of a powerful Inquisitor to survive and find her way home.

Notes

Musical Accompaniment Playlist available on Spotify if you are so inclined. Search for “Rara
Avis by Convenient_Coma.”
Tags new and improved after reading AO3’s tagging guide.
Thunder Snow

Everything you can imagine is real.
-Pablo Picasso

Musical accompaniment:
“Christmas Eve/Sarajevo” - Trans-Siberian Orchestra
“Bittersweet” - Big Head Todd and the Monsters

"Hey, Merry Christmas, Doc!"

Doctor Berta Shaw looked up from the laptop in front of her to see the last of the nurses headed out the back door of the office into the swirling snow outside. “Merry Christmas to you too, guys. Have a great weekend.”

"Thanks for the treats!” One of the nurses held up the basket of goodies that Berta had put together for each of the support staff in the office containing, amongst the bacon jam, Russian tea, peppermint bark, and butter cookies, Berta's highly sought-after dark chocolate sea salt almond toffee.

"Don't stay too late..."

Berta shook her head. "I've just got a couple more loads to take out to the car and then I'm off." At this the nurses all put down their baskets and charged into her office, each grabbing at least one box. Berta protested that she could do it herself, but the nurses wouldn’t hear of it and gathered up the remaining boxes before Berta could stop them. She held the back door open and remotely opened her Pilot, popping the back hatch for the nurses to each shove their load in on top of the already packed cargo area and then auto closing the back door, hovering near the rear entrance to the office, out of the deep snow, her OR clogs not providing much in the way of traction, holding the door open so the nurses could come back to grab their Christmas baskets. The nurses said their goodbyes again, wishing Berta and each other happy holidays and making the tired joke of “see you next year!” Berta waved them off and then hustled back inside, brushing the snow off her scrub pants and sweatshirt.

She returned to the laptop perched on the nursing station counter, balancing on one foot, slipping her other foot out of her clog, resting it against the inside of her knee, and finished her note from her last patient of the day. The laptop sang its shutdown song as she closed it and added it to the pile of other computer equipment at the nurses’ station. She almost skipped down the hall to her office, realizing that she was, as of this moment, officially on vacation, her chest suffused with a pleasant lightness at the realization that she had no responsibilities for a week. The week leading up to the holiday had been as slow as usual, no one wanting to schedule their elective or semi-elective surgeries just before Christmas, but this week had been positively glacial between the heavy snows and building so many blocks into the office schedule in preparation for moving into the brand-new space behind the hospital. Next week, the company she and her partners had hired would move all the medical equipment and old patient charts and computers to their new digs, a glossy space with lots of blond wood and frosted glass. Her new personal office would have a window looking out over the wetland preserve behind the hospital, but she would still miss this, her little cubby for the last six years. Joining this group had been like a homecoming for her after spending two years feeling like a fish out of water in academics and then six months in Africa where she had been baptized by fire in refugee camps in Liberia. She had spent so many hours in this space, finishing charts, doing continuing medical education on her computer or squeezing in lunch at her desk between patients. This was her home away from home and the detritus of the last six years was now packed up in the back of her car, all her medical books, from a leather-bound copy of Gray's Anatomy, a gift from her
college mentor on her acceptance to medical school, to a battered edition of Sabiston's Textbook of Surgery from her residency. She had loaded four boxes of expired medical supplies that she had been donating to her old friends in Medicins Sans Frontieres, several pairs of scrubs that she'd inadvertently stolen from the hospital, a pillow and blanket she used when she napped at the office on call, a few paperbacks she had received from the nurses but never got around to reading, her gym bag and running gear, random office supplies from her desk and entire drawer of cheap trinkets from drug reps. It had all been gathered up and loaded into her car. She figured she could unpack and sort through it all over the weekend.

She looked around her barren office. It seemed much dingier now that it was empty. The sagging couch and sputtering mini fridge were destined for the dumpster. She took one last look through the drawers in her creaking and impossibly heavy wooden desk and a last glance in the closet, catching a view of herself in the little cracked mirror that had been left screwed to the inside of the closet door by the last occupant, an old retired surgeon known as Mac. She had found the mirror funny, imagining her predecessor waxing his mustache in its reflection. She looked at her own face now, chin length ash brown hair, pale green eyes and a face that was plain, but that she couldn’t be bothered to adorn with makeup. She closed the closet door, leaving the mirror and everything it had seen for the wrecking crew.

She donned her scarf, looping it up around her ears, pulling on her floppy black snow hat and her bright red faux fur lined parka. She pulled her keys and fleece gloves out of the pockets. She was tired enough to just trudge through the snow in her patent leather OR clogs, but thoughts of wet socks made her lace into her waterproof Bean boots instead. She turned out the lights and locked the office door for the last time, then hustled out to her car to get out of the cold. She plugged in her cell phone, and started up the music, her special mix of random genres and eras that she liked to listen to in the car and in the OR, provided that the anesthesiologist was amenable. She backed out of her parking space and into the main road, headed south to home. The streets were deserted between the snow and the upcoming holiday.

"Hey Siri, call Santiago, mobile."

"Calling Santiago, mobile," the computerized voice answered back. It rang twice.

"Go for Santiago," came the mildly Spanish accented male voice.

"Hey, Santi." Berta couldn't help but smile. "Ready for sign out?"

"Shoot. Let me guess, a no hitter?"

"Couldn't be further from the truth. It was busy this morning. Lots of ER consults. Sent one kid to Maine Medical for an irreducible intussusception, referred another kid to GI for foreign body retrieval, Christmas tree light bulb, and said we'd follow along on a nursing home transfer for SBO versus ileus. His name is Manigeault. He's got an NG tube and he's on 4G. Took two to the OR. First is an 11-year-old male, last name Gagnon. Totally unremarkable, unruptured appendicitis. I post-oped him at 4 pm and he was tolerating liquids, had bowel sounds and was afebrile. He's on 3 north. Second one was a 68-year-old female, Charbeneau, acute chole. I had to do her open."

"That sucks."

"Well, her gallbladder had been hot for a couple of days. It wasn't as friable as I'd thought once I got in there so everything else went fine. I left two drains in, just in case. She's got hypertension and mild COPD but at post op she was resting comfortably, and her pressures were fine. Her temp was 39 but coming down from earlier." She was driving through the small downtown now, looking at the white lights on all the trees along Main Street. All the shops were closed for the holiday.
"So that's all she wrote," she said. "I put the patients on your consult list in Soarian, so you should be all set. Merry Christmas."

"Yeah, Merry fucking Christmas to me." He laughed.

"Hey, I offered to swap with you," she protested.

"No, with the wife and kids in Guate, I'd rather be here. I'll take you up on it if I draw the short straw next year."

Berta smiled. "Ok. May the force be with you, amigo."

"Y con tu tambien, Berta." He hung up.

She drove south past the end of downtown and into the edge of the historic district. Old Victorians towered over the street, their rooftops sugar coated with snow and twinkling lights and candles in the windows. She sang along with her music, singing harmony to an old Big Head Todd and the Monster's melody. "It's bittersweet, more sweet than bitter, bitter than sweet..."

She took a deep breath, letting herself relax, thinking about the week ahead. She really needed this vacation. Tonight, she planned on leftovers Chinese, a glass of wine and a bubble bath. Tomorrow she'd open the small pile of presents that had accumulated under her tree and make herself a nice Christmas dinner for one. The next day she'd unload her car, sort through the boxes and pack. Monday, she was flying out to Grand Cayman to spend the rest of the week sipping exotic drinks on a white sand beach, eating shrimp, getting massages and sleeping as much as she wanted, preferably pool side. If she was feeling really self-indulgent, she might schedule a manicure.

Further south, the main road veered to the right, but she kept going straight, leaving the well plowed road and headed into snow that was untouched except by the wind. The snow had been coming down hard earlier, but the snow plows clearly hadn't passed this way in a while. As she drove along, looking out at the cemetery with its frosted tombstones in the streetlights, there was a deep rumbling that at first, she could barely hear. She looked up through the windshield, seeing a faint flash in the low clouds.

Cool, she thought. Thunder snow.

She drove carefully along the road past the cemetery now looking out over the snow-covered fields of the old farm south of town. There was another crack of lightning and rumbling thunder, closer this time, loud enough to easily hear over the music.

There was a loud bang and a flash of light, shockingly green, in the road in front of her. Berta instinctively slammed on the brakes, the anti-skid mechanism kicking in immediately, jittering but not stopping the car as it slid sideways towards the light, the wheels spinning on the coating of slush under the fresh snow, the car sliding sideways. Berta winced against the brightness, almost closing her eyes as the car skidded into the light. She felt time slow down, the way it does when terrible things happen, the rear tires sliding off the road, pitching backwards and spinning, dropping out of control, her stomach flipping like she was on a roller coaster. Then suddenly the car stopped hard, her seat belt holding her, keeping her from being slammed into the passenger seat. The car rocked back and settled at an angle, the passenger side tilted up to 45 degrees, her shoulder leaning heavily against the driver side door. Her headlights were plunged into the snow, casting a short but eerie glow in front of the car. She took a deep breath, mentally checking over herself to make sure she was alright and blew out, letting her lips make a raspberry.

"Well, fuck." She turned the ignition off and stuck the keys in her pocket, turning the headlights off.
as well. She squinted into the blowing snow and night surrounding the car. There was a green glow on the snow around her, very faint. The street lights were out. A transformer must have blown with the lightning strike and knocked out the power. She grabbed her phone, turning off the music. Triple A response time was probably not stellar on the Friday before Christmas. No service. She sighed. "Double fuck."

She was close enough to walk home. It was less than a quarter mile and she could call the towing service from there and maybe meet them at the car in the morning. So much for my relaxing evening, she thought. She unbuckled the seat belt, bracing herself against the door, reaching into the passenger seat to grab her work bag. She unlocked the driver door and let it open, falling out into the snow and immediately sinking nearly up to her thighs. She shivered, the snow quickly soaking through the thin fabric of her scrubs. She pulled the strap of her work bag over her head, leaving her hands free to slam the car door shut behind her and lock it. She could see a faint green light coming from the far side of the embankment in the direction of the road. She started slogging through the snow, heading up the embankment, using her gloved hands to help pull herself along. It was a lot steeper than she thought from always looking at it from the road, but she’d never been at the bottom of the ditch before. The wind was rising again, the snow swirling around her as she struggled up the embankment, spinning miniature tornadoes of snowflakes, chasing her up the hill. When she reached the top, she came up short, unable to understand what her eyes were seeing.

Where she thought the road was, there was nothing but a smooth expanse of untouched snow. That was strange enough but even weirder was the twisting column of iridescent green light hovering above the ground, turning slowly, humming and crackling. She took a step closer, stumbling in the snow, her mouth agape, and bright beams of green light shot out of the column, ending in glowing verdant pools on the snow around it, arcing with a crackling sound like electricity. She shielded her eyes, thinking she should get away from whatever this phenomenon was, but unsure of which direction to run and unable to move quickly in the deep snow. There was a snapping, popping sound and where the pools of light had been there was now something alive and moving. Ghosts, she thought, I'm seeing ghosts. I must have head trauma, I'm hallucinating and I'm seeing ghosts. The hooded, floating figure to her left made a screaming noise and swung a bare, pale, rotting arm at her, its naked, dirty feet hanging out of the gray, tattered robe it wore. She fell backward away from it. Laying in the snow, staring up into where its face should have been in the dark cowl it wore, she had the detached thought that she was being attacked by Dementors. In the next moment, a bright line of pulsing white shot out of the creature toward her. There was an overwhelming, painful cold, and she was unable to breathe, like her lungs had frozen solid inside her chest, and then nothing.
Refugees

Let no one be discouraged by the belief there is nothing one person can do against the enormous array of the world's ills, misery, ignorance, and violence.
-Robert Francis Kennedy

Musical accompaniment:
"Le Monde D'Aujourd'hui" - TSR Crew

Berta opened her eyes. There was a canvas roof over her, murmuring voices around her and her head hurt. She stared up at the fabric. I'm in a tent, she thought. What am I doing in a tent? She turned to look to her left, towards the voices, her head screaming in agony. There were two other cots in the tent, besides the one upon which she was lying. There was a body on the cot closest to her, a blanket pulled up over the face, with a single bloody arm extending limply from under the blanket, partially covered in a torn sleeve and a dirty finger-less glove. On the far cot there was a woman half sitting, half lying back, holding her abdomen and crying. She was dressed in a peasant style blouse and long skirt. There was a figure kneeling next to the bed, speaking softly to her, the voice just below Berta's ability to hear the words.

"Uh, excuse me?" Berta slowly sat up, holding her head with one hand.

The figure said something to the crying woman, who slowly nodded and relaxed back onto the cot, rolling away to face the far wall of the tent. The figure turned to Berta, an African American woman with a tall, sculpted hat and white and red robes with a gilded pattern on the chest.

"My child, you are finally awake," she said in heavily French accented English.

Berta blinked slowly, looking at her outfit. "That's quite a hat." The words were out before she could censor herself.

The woman looked slightly annoyed. "I am Mother Giselle. Who are you?"

Berta shook her head slightly. Given the woman’s accent she switched to French. "I’m Doctor Berta Shaw. Where am I?"

The woman arched an eyebrow in surprise. “You are Orlesian?”

Berta looked at her, confused, unsure how to answer. “No, I guess,” she continued in French.

Mother Giselle frowned. “Well, no matter. In answer to your question, you are in the refugee camp outside Skyhold."

Berta looked at her blankly. Refugees? Was this some kind of flashback to Africa? "That doesn't help me much." She sat slowly, swinging her legs over the edge of the cot. "I was on my way home and there was this green light..."

"Yes, the Herald found you by a rift."

Berta felt like she was talking to a schizophrenic; all the words were in a grammatically correct arrangement, but they still didn't make any sense.

A man burst into the tent, a metal helmet on his head, wearing a breast plate, leather jerkin and boots,
looking like a particularly well-dressed attendee at a renaissance fair.

"Mother Giselle," he saluted, speaking in English. "You asked me to get you when..." He trailed off, looking at Berta, his eyes looking her up and down.

Mother Giselle tipped her head to Berta. "We will speak later." And then in English to the soldier, "Watch her." Mother Giselle left the tent briskly.

Berta shifted uncomfortably under the soldier's gaze. "Hey." She nodded and smiled awkwardly. The soldier frowned at her and rested a hand on the sword at his belt. It looked startlingly real.

"That's pretty cool," she said trying to make conversation. "Where'd you have that made?"

He kept frowning. "It is standard Inquisition issue."

"Like 'no-one-expects-the-Spanish-Inquisition' inquisition?" Berta started to laugh. The soldier frowned more deeply. "Ok, sorry." She looked again at his sword and the large knife on his other hip and decided that laughing at him was probably not in her best interest.

Her head was throbbing. She had no idea how long she had been unconscious. She looked around the cot. Her work bag and coat were nowhere to be found. She was still wearing her scrubs and her favorite college sweatshirt. She felt under her sweatshirt. Her pen was there, and her hospital ID badge was still clipped to her scrub top. Thankfully she still had her boots on her feet.

Suddenly from outside the tent, there was a female voice screaming. "Help me, please someone help me!"

Berta ears pricked up and she looked at the soldier. "Aren't you gonna check that out?" she asked, incredulous.

"Mother Giselle told me to watch you."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, how 'bout you watch me check that out?" Berta stood quickly, ignoring her headache and dashed past the soldier out of the tent. The scene before her was one of chaos. There were tents like the one she had just exited lined up as far as the eye could see lining either side of a muddy track. There were towering snow-covered peaks around them, like nothing from New Hampshire. Berta felt her jaw dropping. The last time she saw mountains like this she was in Switzerland. And on a peak not far away, towering over the valley, there was a castle, straight out of a fairy tale. Or maybe Germany. We are definitely not in Kansas anymore, she thought.

She was brought back to the moment by the screaming in front of her. There was a man, laying on his back on the ground to one side of the track, his face practically blue and a woman, kneeling at his side. She was the one screaming for help. Berta started toward her but the soldier who had followed her grabbed her arm roughly. Berta ripped her arm out of his grasp and snarled at him, "I am going to help them. Don't try to stop me."

She raced to the couple's side, putting her hand on the woman's arm saying, "I'm a doctor."

The words did not have the desired effect as the woman was still hysterical, gripping the man's hand and crying. Berta looked at his face, his blue lips and sunken eyes. She felt his pulse. It was rapid and thready. "What happened?"

The woman shook her head. "He was injured and then he just fell down. I don't know!"

"Did he hurt anywhere?"
"His chest, he said he was hurt in his chest."

Berta pushed his shirt up to inspect his chest. The right side of his chest was swollen looking and bruised. Berta touched him gently, her fingers running along his ribs, feeling a rice crispie-like crunching as she pushed on his chest wall. Damn it, what I wouldn't give for my stethoscope right now, she thought, wishing she had her bag. She percussed his chest, tapping her fingers along the right side and left sides, hearing the increased hollowness on the right. She felt the base of his throat. His trachea was definitely shifted to the left. Damn, tension pneumo, she thought.

She looked at the soldier. "Do you have a medical tent? Medical supplies?" All she got was a blank stare. "This man has a collapsed lung. He needs a chest tube. Do you have any doctors here?" Berta looked back at the man. He was going to die in short order if his lung wasn't re-expanded. She looked back at the soldier. "Give me your knife." He looked stupidly at her. Berta was out of patience. "Unless you want this man to die, give me your knife."

The soldier unsheathed his knife and handed it to her. Berta reached under her sweat shirt and pulled out her pen, hooking it on the outside of the neck of her sweatshirt so it wouldn't roll onto the muddy ground, thinking that she had only seen something like what she planned on an old re-run of MASH. Berta pulled the collar of the man's shirt down, exposing his collar bone. He was thin, thank goodness, and Berta felt his ribs. She pointed the knife against the skin and the woman with her patient screamed, "What are you doing?" grabbing at her hand.

"I'm saving his life. Now let go of my hand." Berta looked at the soldier and nodded meaningfully at the woman. The soldier went immediately to her side, holding her hands. Berta focused again on the second intercostal space and made a centimeter and a half incision, deep enough to know she was just at the deep margin of the rib. She handed the knife back to the soldier and grabbed her pen, thinking that Montblanc would probably not be advertising this as an approved use of their writing implements any time soon. She unscrewed the top of the pen from base and pulled the ink cartridge from it, leaving the top of the pen hollow. She slipped the ink cartridge and bottom of the pen into her back pocket. She pushed the tip into the incision, gently at first and then slightly harder, until she felt a pop as it broke through the lining of the chest wall. There was a rush of air out of the pen as his lung and heart shifted back into their proper places in his chest. The man took a gasping breath and the color slowly returned to his face. The soldier released the woman's hands and she gripped the man's hand, weeping openly.

Berta rested back with her hands on her knees, wiping the blood off on her scrubs and looked at the soldier. "He still needs medical attention. His lung is still collapsed, it's just not..." She trailed off, not knowing how to explain what she'd done to these people. Who were they? And where were they? She looked around them again, paying more attention to the details. There were other soldiers, dressed similarly to the soldier watching her, erecting more tents, carrying firewood and directing foot traffic. The foot traffic was a hodgepodge of people, young and old, men and women. Berta saw a family walking past, a man, thin and drawn looking, his arm protectively around the woman with him who had a baby clutched to her chest and held the hand of a little girl who was probably about four. They all had pointed ears.

Berta stared openly, unable to help herself, noticing other things too, the rough spun fabric of their clothes, the cloak around the man’s shoulders, the fabric rag doll in the little girl’s hands. The man saw Berta staring, pulled his family closer, and gave her a dirty look.

“Here, help me...” the soldier was saying, trying to get Berta’s patient to his feet. “We can take him to the healers.”

Berta nodded. “Healers, right.” That sounded like a move in the right direction. Berta got the man’s
arm around her shoulder, the other around the soldier.

“Lead the way,” she said.

They joined the foot traffic headed away from the castle in the distance. Berta had to watch her feet carefully in the slick mud, thankful for her boots. She saw other pointed eared refugees but made an effort not to stare. There were others who at first, she thought were children but then she realized were short stocky adults once she saw the full bushy beard on one. And facial tattoos. Great, Vulcans and dwarves with gang signs. Things were getting weirder by the minute.

“Mother Giselle!” the soldier hollered.

The woman turned from the soldiers she was addressing and saw them approaching. Berta was pleasantly surprised that she seemed more concerned with the man they carried than the soldier disobeying her, gesturing to an empty cot for them to deposit their patient.

Mother Giselle looked the man over and gestured to a young man wearing green fur trimmed robes and carrying a pole with what looked like a bunch of sticks tied to one end.

"Mikel, help him," she commanded.

Mikel held the pole in one hand and reached the other out towards the man, his eyes closing dramatically. Berta chewed her lip, literally and figuratively fighting to keep her mouth shut. She had just saved this man's life and now some guy was going to wave his hand and perform a faith healing? This was going to go nowhere fast.

Berta's patient gasped and raised his hand to his chest, his brow furrowing. Berta almost rolled her eyes. He was either playing along or really thought this was helping him.

Mikel frowned seriously and drew his hand away. "I think I have done all I can."

Berta stepped forward to check her handiwork before asking Mother Giselle about any other healers, but she stopped short. Her incision, previously visible at the neck of the man's shirt was gone. Not just healed, but completely gone. The pen top lay there, inert against his skin. She picked it up and found a small amount of blood on it still. She lifted his shirt quickly, sure her eyes were deceiving her, finding no trace of the necessary wound she had made. The bruising of his chest was gone. She let his shirt go, looking into his face and the woman with him, not sure what to say. "I- I'm glad you're alright." The man nodded and held the woman's hand.

"Rest," Mother Giselle intoned. "That is what you need now." She pulled Berta away by her elbow, the soldier following them, until they were out of earshot of the couple.

Mother Giselle looked severely at the soldier who slumped guiltily. "I thank you for bringing him. But now, take her back to the tent and keep her there this time. Nightingale’s orders." The guard nodded and grabbed Berta's arm to lead her away.

Berta ripped her arm out of the soldier's grasp for a second time. "Don't touch me," she said fiercely. "Mother Giselle..."

Mother Giselle tried her severe look on Berta but with no effect.

Berta cleared her throat and took a step towards the priestess. "I don't..." She trailed off thinking again that she didn't know where she was or what was going on but realizing that pointing that out was probably useless. "I can't do, whatever that was," she said gesturing back towards her patient, "but I can see that you have a lot of wounded and I can help." She looked around her at the misery.
and chaos and shook her head. "Please don't make me go back and sit in that tent when I can see that you need the help here."

Mother Giselle looked at her, considering. "What can you do to help?"

Berta gestured back to her patient. "That man? He would have died if I hadn't cut into his chest. He would have died before he even got here."

Mother Giselle tilted her head curiously. "You are a surgeon?"

"Yes," Berta gasped in relief, feeling stupid that she hadn't used the word before. "I am a surgeon."

Mother Giselle nodded sagely. "Well, I suppose we need all the help we can. Just don't let me catch you using your quackery to make anything worse."

Berta tried to take her seriously and shook her head. "No, ma'am."

"And no going on and on about balancing the humors."

Berta blinked. Was she serious? "I wouldn't dream of it."

Mother Giselle looked resigned. "Stay with her," she said to the soldier, who saluted with way more enthusiasm than Berta thought was warranted. "And let me know immediately if there are any...problems."

"Yes, Mother!"

Mother Giselle nodded to them both and took her leave, heading toward a cluster of refugees, awaiting someone to tell them where to go.

Berta turned to the soldier and gave her best disarming smile. "Well, if you are to be my shadow, I should at least know your name."

The soldier bowed, sweeping his arm across his waist. Berta tried not to laugh. "I'm Jim."

"Nice to meet you." She extended her hand. He looked at her hand, puzzled. She sighed. Of course, he didn't know what a hand shake was. She put her hands on her hips looked around the camp, trying to figure out where to go next, hoping that whatever it was would involve washing her bloodied hands. "Well, Jim, let's go do some good."
You have power over your mind not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.
-Marcus Aurelius

Musical Accompaniment:
"This Is My World" - Esterly (feat. Austin Jenckes)

The next two hours were busy in a way that Berta could only remember being when she was an intern in the ER or following particularly heavy fighting along the border in the Ivorian civil war. She had cleaned scrapes, stitched up lacerations, and stretched her brain back to her orthopedics rotation, setting bone fragments that once near each other could be healed by the mages. Mages. She was having a hard time believing what she had seen, the supernatural power of these men and women who could seal wounds without a touch and staunch bleeding with eyes closed. But they had limits. Infection seemed particularly tricky for them and they couldn't conjure flesh from thin air. Once a limb was severed, there was no getting it back. Berta found herself relegated to the more minor injuries but even those could be challenging without anything resembling the bandages, sutures or dressings she was accustomed to using, even in field conditions. She felt that she was engaging in personal sacrilege, tending to wounds without gloves and, depending on whether there was a runner available, water for hand washing between patients. But the worst thing so far had been what Berta had always dreaded as a surgeon: burns. And there were many victims. Wherever they had fled, much of it had been on fire.

The mages were an interesting group. There were five men and three women, all dressed in nearly identical robes with a few varying details, each carrying a staff. The staves varied quite a bit between their material and grips and the adornment at the top, from intricate sculpted metal dragon heads to ornate rough crystal to one that even looked like a shrunken skull. She wasn't sure if they were decorative or ceremonial as she had yet to see any of them used for anything other than establishing the wielder as a mage. One of the female mages was clearly in charge, the others looking to her for what to do and on whom to spend their efforts. She was small boned with a heart shaped face with a few freckles scattered across her nose and closely cropped almost black hair over her pointed ears. Her staff had a fist-sized, pale egg-shaped stone at its top which faintly glowed even in the sunlight. Her name was Fiona. Berta watched her for a moment, seeing how the other mages deferred to her, asking her advice and doing what she asked.

Berta returned her attention to the little boy in front of her, sitting in a woman’s lap. He and the woman, his mother she assumed, were alone. They looked as desperate as any mother and child she had ever seen in Africa, both wearing too little clothing for the weather and looking like they’d missed too many meals. The boy might have been two or three based on his size, but he had that quiet stillness of children who had seen too much too soon. That and the small vial of sticky sweet nettle syrup that one of the other healers gave him to calm him. His eyes were large in his face, a brilliant green that he clearly got from his mother, but her ears were pointed and his were not. Berta wondered if they became pointed over time but wasn’t sure how to ask as this didn’t seem to be germane to his care and she didn’t wish to offend. His mother had a filigree of deep green tattoos across her forehead and cheeks and she kept whispering to the boy in a soft language that Berta didn’t recognize. There was a long irregular gash on the boy’s leg that Berta was stitching closed with the material that had been provided to her, a substance that she had been informed was called “gurgut webbing” but seemed to function just like regular old cat gut suture. It was not her first choice for closing a relatively superficial wound, but she would make do.
“How old is your boy?”

“Tadaan is three.”

“He has your eyes,” Berta observed.

The woman smiled in a pained way. “But his father’s ears.” She looked like she might cry. Berta didn’t know what caused her pain but knew that many of the people in the camp had lost loved ones.

“I’m sorry.”

The woman nodded tearfully. “His father was a Templar. He was killed at Haven. We’re lucky to be alive.”

Berta nodded solemnly. “I’m sorry for your loss.” As always, the words seemed completely inadequate.

She finished her suturing in silence, working as quickly as she could with the unfamiliar material and a straight, rather than curved needle, but was done shortly. She hailed one of the young soldiers who were functioning as runners in the healers’ camp, motioning for the water bucket he carried. She scrubbed her hands vigorously in the water and scooped some over the boy’s wound, washing away the last of the blood.

“Try to keep it clean and dry. If the skin around it gets red, a little bit is alright, but any redness wider than the breadth of his finger or any discharge from the wound, bring him back to us.” She wasn’t sure what they could do but she couldn't help giving follow up instructions.

The woman nodded. “Thank you.”

Berta stood from her crouched position. “May I ask you a question?”

“Yes.”

“What are your people called?”

The woman cocked her head curiously at Berta. “I’m Dalish, of course.”

“Right. Of course.” Berta wiped her hands on her sweat shirt, feeling curious. “And your son...”

The woman’s jaw tightened. “He cannot be Dalish. My clan would never accept such a child.” The Dalish woman gathered her son in her arms and walked back towards the rest of the camp.

Berta wanted to call after her, to apologize for upsetting her but she was gone, quickly disappearing between the tents and soldiers.

“Enchanter!” Berta turned her head to look at who was shouting and saw Mikel standing over her pneumothorax patient from earlier, the man lying flat on his back on the cot, not moving.

Fiona moved quickly to Mikel’s side. “There’s no need to shout and don’t call me Enchanter.” She peered at the man. “What’s going on?”

Mikel shook his head and gestured at the motionless patient. “I don’t know, he just collapsed.”

“He couldn’t breathe again,” the woman beside him wailed.

Berta ran over, pushing Mikel out of the way. She checked his pulse, again, fast and weak, and felt
his trachea, again shifted to his left. She lifted his shirt, looking at his perfectly healed chest and wondering what the hell happened. She tapped along his chest, again hearing the hypertympanic sounds on the right.

“His pneumothorax has recurred,” she said tersely. “I need a knife again.”

“Wait,” said Fiona. “What is wrong with him?”

“His lung is collapsed. His chest wall, his ribs and muscles, have been healed but there’s still a hole in his lung. As he breathes, he pushes air into his lung and through the hole, so it gathers outside the lung, collapsing it and eventually pressing on the heart. We need to release that pressure, now.”

Fiona nodded slowly and stepped up to the man and held a hand over the right side of his chest. She closed her eyes and Berta felt, more than heard, a low hum, standing next to the mage. Fiona ran her hand up and down over his chest, her head cocked to the side as if listening intently. She stopped her hand over his lower right chest and lowered her hand to touch his skin, splaying her fingers out over his ribs. She kept her hand there for a moment until a small soft smile played across her mouth. She opened her eyes and turned to Berta. “I think that has worked.”

Berta felt her patient’s pulse again, steady, and his trachea, midline. She shook her head in wonder and looked at Fiona. “What did you do?”

Fiona shrugged and folded her hands before her. “Simply what you said needed to be done. I focused on his lung, deeper than the ribs and muscles of his chest and healed him.”

Berta looked at the mage, the implications of this dawning on her. The healers needed to know what precisely they were fixing. No wonder infections were difficult for them. They likely knew nothing about microbes or germ theory or immune response.

Berta opened her mouth, eager to share her realization with Fiona, but was abruptly cut off by a loud bellowing. “Inquisition, coming through!”

She turned to see a shocking sight, topping anything she’d seen so far. The deep booming voice came from an almost impossibly huge man, easily seven feet tall, hugely muscled, gray-skinned, wearing an eye patch, adorned with multiple black tattoos with horns coming out of his head that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a Texas longhorn. He fixed Berta with his one good eye and strode purposefully toward her.

“Holy shit,” Berta said under her breath.

The giant walked up to her and Berta craned her neck to look up into his face. No one else seemed alarmed so she took a deep breath and willed herself to remain calm. He studied her for a moment, taking in her sweatshirt and scrubs, her pearl earrings and rubber boots. Berta felt like she was being mentally dissected.

“Got someone who wants a word with you.”

Berta nodded as if considering the matter. “I’ve been helping the healers here, but I suppose I could come along if you insist.”

A smirk played across his mouth. “I insist.”

Fiona and Mother Giselle exchanged a glance but said nothing. Berta looked at them and raised her eyebrow, hoping for some clue as to whether this was a friendly situation or something more threatening.
Mother Giselle stepped next to Berta. “Iron Bull, if she could be returned to the camp when you are done questioning her, she has been most helpful in caring for the wounded here.”


Berta nodded and followed him, glancing behind at Fiona and Mother Giselle, neither of whom looked particularly worried, so she supposed this was probably routine. If random odd women dressed strangely and possessing surgical skills dropping into your war zone could be considered routine. Maybe this would even offer her an opportunity to learn more about her situation. She noticed Iron Bull’s companions for the first time, a young man in armor with a sword and a blonde Dalish archer in leathers both of whom had a distinctly martial bearing. They fell in behind Berta, clearly to discourage her from wandering off. She had nothing but a view of the horned man’s back and the large, lethal looking axe he wore across it as they marched along. They made their way through the camp along the partially frozen river that bisected the valley, the pit in Berta’s stomach growing as they passed soldiers who all stopped what they were doing to stare. Her escort seemed to mark her as a prisoner of some kind, under suspicion for something.

By the time Berta and her guard reached the base of the steep switch backs leading upwards into the sky, she had already assumed she was being taken to the castle. The trail was fairly broad, wide enough for a car, but tightly crisscrossing the rocky cliff, leading nearly directly vertical up to a gatehouse high above. Berta looked upwards. Time for cardio, she thought.

“Keep up,” warned Iron Bull.

Berta took a deep breath and began the climb.

She was feeling good for the first third of the climb, tired by the second third and sweaty and winded by the time they reached the top. If she had thought her captors would give her a rest, she was sadly mistaken. Neither the giant, the young man or archer appeared remotely bothered by their ascent. Iron Bull nodded perfunctorily to the guardsmen in the gatehouse and they scrambled to open the gate. There was a long walk across a high causeway where the wind grew colder and whipped them fiercely. The castle loomed ahead of them, Berta’s sense of foreboding deepening. The second gate was open and led into a lower courtyard. From here Berta could see the castle was in disrepair with fallen stones and scaffolding along the walls and soldiers scrambling everywhere like ants. Berta looked to her right, seeing a barn and stables, horses and stable boys. To her left were a series of tents and lean-tos with wounded soldiers and healers in attendance but no mages that she could see. Ahead was a makeshift desk made from two different sized crates and what looked like half a wooden door split longways. A man stood at the desk barking orders, sending soldiers scrambling.

“And I need a report on the armory. Now,” Berta heard him say as she drew closer, following her armed escort.

“Commander,” the horned man said. “Where do you want the prisoner?”

Berta swallowed hard. Prisoner. So that’s how this was going to go. She could feel her heart rate speed up and she started to think about all the things she’d learned in MSF to do if she were captured. Keep your mouth shut. Do as you’re told. No sudden movements. Keep your hands where they can be seen. Don’t do anything your captors might perceive as a threat.

The Commander turned and looked her over. He was a tall human, probably at least six feet, wearing armor with some sort of fur or feathers around the shoulders and a sword at his hip. He was
remarkably handsome, blond and honey-eyed, with a perfect male cover model stubble, his beauty somehow enhanced rather than marred by the scar through his right upper lip. He scowled at Berta, looking more annoyed than angry, as if he didn’t have time to deal with her. Berta, for her part, found the same thought she usually had when dealing with pretty boys in her world coming unbidden to her mind: asshole.

“Put her in the cells. Door to the left of the steps up to the great hall if you’re facing them. I’ll let Leliana know you’ve arrived.” And with that, Commander Pretty Boy turned his back to them and went back to work.

“You heard the man,” Iron Bull said to her and started up the steps beyond the Commander’s desk.

Berta looked around at the activity in the courtyard and thought about the Commander’s directions to Iron Bull. The castle was in rough shape and the directions the Commander had given to Iron Bull implied that he wouldn’t know where the cells were, so Berta assumed that they hadn’t occupied the castle for long. She didn’t know how that helped her but anything she could figure out about this place that might help her escape or at least figure out how to keep from being burnt at the stake could be useful. Though since they had mages, despite her medieval surroundings, the likelihood of her being burnt alive as a witch was probably small. Thank goodness for small favors.

The stairs took them beneath another set of stairs that led up to what Berta assumed was the great hall, a giant, church like building in the center of the keep. Their staircase ended in an upper courtyard with several wooden outbuildings built against the outer wall of the castle. Here, everything was abuzz with activity as well with soldiers carrying supplies, setting up practice dummies in a far corner and erecting a fence in the center of the courtyard. Berta was encouraged that she didn’t see anything resembling stocks or gallows.

Iron Bull turned sharply to their right, towards a door at the bottom of a shallow ring of stairs. The door creaked loudly as if it hadn’t been opened in a long time or with any frequency. Once inside there was a steep flight down. Berta had the urge to dig in her heels and refuse to go any further but before she could merely pause, the young man in the armor gave her a gentle push forward. “You don’t want the Chief to have to carry you.” He smiled at her and gave her a quick wink which struck her as completely incongruous with the fact that he was participating in throwing her in a dungeon.

At the bottom of the first flight of stairs, there was a small landing and another long flight headed off at an angle below. The area wasn’t completely unused as lit torches lined the stairwell. There was a soft roaring noise, constant, slowly getting louder as they descended.

At the bottom of the stairs was a large chamber with four cells on the left and on the right, the back wall of what had been cells was collapsed, some of the doors broken open and other cells filled with rubble. Two large ornate sculptures of owls were displayed along the back wall.

There was a woman dressed in a soldier’s uniform, who nodded to Iron Bull and briskly hustled to unlock the second to last cell on the left. She stood at attention and held the door open.

Iron Bull turned to Berta and gestured towards the cell. “After you.”

Berta almost rolled her eyes before she could stop herself. “Somehow I don’t think you’re actually going to be joining me.” She stepped inside the cage.

Iron Bull reached for the door and closed it, holding the bars and leering down at her, the banging door loud and final sounding, echoing in the stone walled chamber. He gave her a dangerous looking grin. “Maybe you should count yourself lucky.”
Berta refused to shrink at his threat but nodded placidly and turned to take stock of the cell. Three stone walls and the bars made up the cell. There was a small empty barrel in one corner and a bed roll on the floor. The stone floor at least looked clean and for a medieval prison it was blessedly devoid of rats.

“No one in or out except Sister Leliana,” the giant instructed the guard and headed for the stairwell, disappearing up the stairs with his two lackeys. The guard followed and closed the chamber door behind her.

Berta took a deep breath and sat down heavily on the bed roll to finally take a moment to take stock of her situation. She was exhausted, hungry, thirsty, sweaty and filthy but alive. There was blood and mud on her scrubs and her hair was plastered to the back on her neck from the climb. The adrenaline began to wear off as she sat, and the fear started to expand in its absence. This was impossible. Everything about this was impossible. Something had plucked her from her world, her life and dropped her into this place. A place with magic and Dalish and swords and whatever that horned guy was. Berta realized at home it was Christmas Day and, thinking of Santiago’s last words to her she whispered, “Merry fucking Christmas to me.”
Prisoners and Questions

When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.
-Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Musical accompaniment:
“Motherless Child” - Johnny Hollow,
"99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall" - D-Black

"Who are you?" a man's voice rasped.

Berta sat up sharply, unaware that she wasn't alone.

"Hello? Who's there?" She went to the bars, pressing her head against them, trying to see towards the other cells, but she couldn't see beyond the plane of the barred door. "My name's Berta. Who are you?"

"I'm Magister Alexius. Or I was a Magister. I suppose I am merely Alexius now." The voice sounded sad, bereft.

"Magister?" she asked. "You were a teacher?"

“Perhaps once.” There was a sharp bark of bitter laughter from the other cell. "How the other Magisters would be insulted at that. Merely a teacher. How insulting to the pride of Tevinter."

Berta supposed that she was not going to get an intelligible answer. "Why are you here?"

There was an angry sound, like an exhalation through clenched teeth. "Trying to save my son's life. Trying to bring glory to a declining Empire." There was a pause. "And you, my dear, if we are to engage in polite conversation, why do you find yourself in the Inquisition's dungeon?"

Berta shrugged despite her fellow prisoner not being able to see her. "I don't know really. I don't think I've done anything wrong."

There was a sound that might have been deranged cackling from Alexius. "Neither have I, my dear, neither have I."

Berta swallowed hard. A teacher imprisoned for nothing? Either he was lying, or this Inquisition had nothing on Tsarist Russia.

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

"Merely a day. But I've been the Herald's prisoner since before Haven fell."

Another mention of the Herald. Perhaps that was Commander Pretty Boy? "Who is the Herald?"

"You haven't seen her? You would remember if you had." There was a scraping sound as if he was either sitting or getting to his feet. "She's a Dalish bitch if you can believe it. They claim she walked out of the Fade, saved by Andraste herself from certain death at the Temple of Sacred Ashes." His voice showed a flair for the dramatic. He snorted. “And they say the Black Divine is sacrilegious.”

Berta had the sinking feeling that no one was going to tell her anything that made any sense to her. But the Herald was a she. So not the Commander or the horned guy. She thought about what else to
ask, eager to get any answers she could. "Is Haven a city?"

"You weren't there?"

"No." Berta paused thinking what else to say to explain herself. "I'm from...very far away. I'm a stranger to these lands." She winced, thinking that she sounded like a cheesy Shakespearean actor. Next, she'd be m'lording and m'ladying all over the place. "I don't even know where I am, really."

"You're not from Orzammar? I know you're human, but the accent..."

Berta puzzled over that for a moment. "No."

"From farther than Par Vollen?"

"Where is Par Vollen?"

"Far to the north."

"Then, yes."

"I would find that hard to believe but had my eyes been opened to so many impossible things by the Elder One." There was a reverence in his voice that Berta found deeply disturbing. Ok, Berta thought, time to bring out the crazy.

"What..." she started and then stopped. She wanted to ask more but wondered how suspect his answers were. Thinking briefly of Thor arriving on earth and accosting Natalie Portman, she asked, "What realm is this? What world?"

He laughed again. "You are from another world?" His laughing became more unhinged. "I had thought that there could only be visitors from other times..."

Berta ignored his comment, not eager to delve into the implications, thinking that things were complicated enough without adding time travel to the mix in some kind of misguided Game of Thrones/Dr. Who mash up. "What world is this? What world?"

Berta felt a chill run down her spine. If the mages and Dalish and the horned guy hadn't been indication enough, there it was, loud and crystal clear. She was in a completely alien world. Though how she came to be there she couldn't say. She sat heavily back on the bed roll, feeling the beginnings of frustrated angry tears in her eyes. She mashed the heels of her hands into her eye sockets, yelling internally at herself not to cry. Thedas. What the actual fuck.

"My dear, are you still there?"

"I'm here." Berta pulled her legs up and leaned against the cell wall. "Apparently, I'm not going anywhere."

"Right you are. Not until the Herald decides your fate."

The door creaked on its hinges and Berta hopped to her feet, looking out of her cell and seeing the dungeon guard, four other Inquisition soldiers and two figures who looked like knights, dressed in full plate with helms covering their faces and a flaming sword emblem upon their breastplates. The
guard ignored Berta, fitting a key into a door to her right.

“Let’s go, blood mage,” came a voice from behind a helm, low and threatening.

There was some shuffling and clinking beyond where Berta could see and a figure in muted red robes trimmed with leather was led out of the cell, his wrists tied together. He looked over his shoulder at Berta. She recoiled at the hate in his eyes. "Good luck, my dear. You will need it."

The soldiers roughly grabbed him and pushed him towards the stairs, the door clanging shut on their way out.

*~~~~~*~~~~~*

Berta wasn’t sure how much time had passed. The shadows on the collapsed wall shifted slowly. The roaring in the background was constant. She thought it might be running water, but she couldn’t be sure. The female guard returned periodically to glower at her. After the third time the guard made her rounds Berta asked if she might have some food and water and received a slice of thick brown bread, a strip of some kind of dried meat and a mug of water. She devoured the dry bread and choked down the meat, trying not to think about from what type of animal it originated as she washed it down. She left the cup just outside the bars. She paced around the cell, counting her steps, and after she reached a thousand, she laid down on the bed roll and stared at the ceiling, counting the stones, 173 the first time and 175 the second. She couldn’t count again because the light was failing and the torch closest to her cell had burnt out. The cell was getting cooler. She took off her boots, setting them to the side and crawled under the woolen blanket on the bed roll. It was scratchy, but she was exhausted. The waiting was tiring. Her body could only sustain her flight or fight response for so long. She fell into a hard, dreamless sleep.

She awoke sometime later, how much later she couldn’t be sure. All but one torch was out and there was no light coming through the collapsed wall. Berta felt like something had awakened her, but she didn’t know what. The single torch flickered making dancing shadows on the walls. She raised her head slowly to see a slender figure standing at the bars of her cell. She couldn’t see well in the dimness, but she had an impression of cat like eyes and tightly contained strength and then suddenly the figure was gone, lost in the shadows. Berta wasn’t sure if she was dreaming.

"Hello?" she called, her voice echoing in the chamber. Silence answered back. She dropped her head back to her arm and fell back asleep quickly.

When she next woke, it was to faint light coming in from the collapsed wall, telling her that it was sometime past daybreak. She lay on the bedroll for a long time, curled on her side watching the light creep over the stones in the remains of the cell across from her. She finally got up and availed herself of the chamber pot in the corner, crouching over it awkwardly, thinking that indoor plumbing was highly underrated. She pushed it distastefully aside behind the barrel, sat to put her boots back on and started to pace the cell again. The guard reappeared, the same woman as yesterday, and she shoved more bread and jerky Berta’s way, again with a mug of water. Berta thanked her, and the woman grunted at her before disappearing up the stairs again.

Berta felt sick to her stomach, alone with her thoughts. Why were they holding her here?

The hours stretched on interminably. Alexius was not brought back. Was he moved to another cell someplace else? Was he being tortured somewhere? Did the same treatment await her? At times during her internship, she had thought that solitary confinement would be a treat. Given the incessant ringing of her cell phone, pestering by the nurses, patient demands and sleep deprivation she had once had a fantasy in which she was falsely accused of a crime and got to spend an uninterrupted 24 hours in solitary confinement, doing nothing and sleeping as much as she wanted before being
released. The reality did not live up to the fantasy.

The guard came later, bringing a hard chunk of cheese and a wizened apple this time with her water. While not firm, it was more pleasant than the jerky.

"Oh, mixing it up," Berta observed. The guard frowned at her as she slunk off. Berta had to take a deep breath to keep from begging her to come back and tell her what was going on.

Sometime later, she wasn't sure how long, she started singing. The creeping time and roaring in the back ground made her feel like her tenuous grip on reality was stretching to a breaking point. She started with folk songs of the camp fire variety and then switched to the French lullabies she vaguely remembered her mother singing to her when she was a little girl. She moved on to show tunes and then Christmas carols. Sometime around "We Three Kings of Orient Are" she got tired and dozed off. When she woke up, she decided to go back to it but for the life of her could not recall the lyrics of a single song. Finally, all that came to mind was "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall" which she began belting out angrily to pass the time.

If she had not been singing so loudly, she might have heard the footfalls on the stairs or the opening of the dungeon door. As it was, she was surprised out of the passing around of the seventeenth bottle by the appearance of a woman just beyond arm’s length outside the bars, as if Berta might make a grab at her. Berta stopped singing abruptly, hopping to her feet, coming to the door, equal parts terrified and hopeful.

The woman was a little taller than Berta’s five foot four with a pretty, slender face and red hair peeking out from beneath her purple hood draped over a mail coat and armored boots. Berta thought she was a little older than the woman, who she would have placed around thirty-five at the oldest. In her gloved hands she held Berta’s work bag.

“My bag.” Berta blurted. “I’m glad it’s not lost,” she explained.

The woman continued standing there, studying her and holding the bag, fingerling the metal clasps. Berta shifted uncomfortably.

The woman opened the bag and began pulling out the contents. “Your bag seems very well made...fine leather. Its lining is odd,” synthetic something, Berta thought, “and its contents even stranger. Like this, for instance, what might this be?” She held up Berta’s stethoscope.

“That’s my stethoscope. I use it to listen to the heart and lungs of my patients.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “You are a healer. Where did you learn this skill?”

“At the University of Rochester and then at Duke University.” Much good may that information do you, Berta thought.

“I have never heard of these universities.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not from around here.” She rested her hands on her hips. The chair of the Duke surgery department was going to be pissed his reputation didn’t extend to Thedas.

“You have no magical healing abilities?”

Berta shook her head. “No magic of any kind.”

“What were you doing in the mountains?”
Berta sighed. She wasn’t sure how to answer. Had she been in the mountains? She decided honesty was best. “I don’t know how I got here. I was trying to go home.”

“Surely you can’t ask me to believe that you are Avvar.” The woman looked amused.

Berta shook her head. “I don’t know what that is.”

The woman considered. “Where is your home?”

“Dover, New Hampshire.”

“There is no such place.” She looked like she was losing patience.

“Look...my name is Berta Shaw. I am a doctor, what you call a healer. My presence here is a mistake. I was driving...going home from work and there was a thunder storm and there was this green lightning and my car...I had an accident.” She closed her eyes, trying to remember exactly how it happened. “I went off the road and then I was here. There was a column of green light and then I was attacked by these things...they were horrible...and it was so cold.”

“Despair demons. They came out of the rift when they sensed you.” The woman nodded. “You were lucky. We must have found you soon after. Otherwise, you’d be dead. As it was, our mages were not sure you’d survive. The Herald insisted on them healing you.”

“So I could be questioned.”

The woman made no reply, her face expressionless. “You understand our interest, no? An oddly dressed stranger who just happens to appear in an isolated mountain pass in the path of the Inquisition. Quite a coincidence.”

Berta shook her head. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

The woman ignored her, dropping the stethoscope to the side on the floor and digging into the bag again.

“What is this? These symbols?”

Berta squinted in the dim light at the small object in her hand. “It says, ‘caramel lip butter.’ It's chap stick. For when your lips get dry.”

“What are the symbols on your clothing?”

“It says, ‘Colorado.’ It’s where I went to school.”

“Why is there a druffalo on your shirt?”

“A ‘druffalo?’ It’s a buffalo. It’s the school mascot.”

She tossed the chap stick next to the stethoscope. "And what is this?" she asked, holding up Berta's tangled ear buds.

"You use them for listening to music."

The woman looked at her like she was daft before tossing them aside. She pulled out Berta's cell phone, holding up the case towards the cell. "This crown, what sovereign do you serve?"

Berta sighed. "I don't serve anyone. That crown refers to the British government. The saying
underneath, 'keep calm and carry on,' was used during war time as propaganda to encourage the citizens. I adopted it some time ago as a personal motto." Berta paused for a moment, deciding to try something. "Turn it over."

The woman's eyes narrowed. She slowly turned the phone over, looking at its blank face suspiciously. "Press the button."

The woman looked at her, confused.

Berta thought for a moment. "The small black circle. Push it with your finger." Berta pantomimed pressing it with her index finger.

The woman slowly reached up with her other hand and pressed the button. Berta could see the illumination of the home screen light up the woman's face. She gasped, startled at the image on the screen.

"That," Berta said, "is my home."

The woman peered intently into the image, looking at the picture of Berta's house. Berta had snapped the picture on a snowy day from the top of her driveway, walking back from checking the mail, the colonial red salt box house with its center chimney dominating the landscape of fields and the line of snow-covered trees in the background. Just looking at the picture made Berta happy, knowing that she had rescued the circa 1750s house and its property from a developer. She had been slowly and lovingly restoring it, doing the work in dribs and drabs, for the better part of two years. It was old, but it had good bones.

Berta let the woman stare at the photo for another moment. "That is where I want to be. Not here."

The woman turned the phone over in her hands and back again, the picture disappearing. She pressed the button again, her nose almost pressed to the screen. She tapped on the picture. "It's almost like an eluvian," she whispered.

Berta wasn't sure what an eluvian was, but she thought the questioning was derailed sufficiently that she could change the rules.

"You are Sister Leliana, yes?"

The woman looked up from the phone, displeased.

"I assume because the big guy with the horns said, 'no one but Sister Leliana in or out' and here you are." Berta couldn't quite gauge the woman's reaction. Fuck it, she thought, plowing ahead. "So, Sister Leliana, I want to go home. I don't know what you think I'm doing here but I assure you that this is the last place I want to be. I don't know how I got here, and I don't know how to get home."

The woman looked skeptical. "I can see from the state of this castle and the camp below that this Inquisition is a military organization and you've just been routed. Someone defeated you pretty badly at Haven and you're in chaos. I can't do much about that, but with my healing skills, I can help your people. I already have. I helped take care of soldiers and refugees yesterday. Ask Fiona the mage or Mother Giselle if you haven't already. In return, I'd like you to help me get home. Help me and you can rid of me that much faster."

Sister Leliana crossed her arms across her chest. "Negotiating to become an agent of the Inquisition from a prison cell. Bold."

Berta wasn’t sure being an “agent” was what she had in mind, but she was in no position to be
particular. “Take it as an indication of my desire to go home.”

Sister Leliana smiled slightly. “I will take your request to the Inquisitor.”

Berta frowned. “Not the Herald?”

“The Herald of Andraste is now the leader of the Inquisition. She will decide what will become of you.”
If I could re-establish a class of nobles, I should do so at once, and I would not belong to it.
-Louis Veuillot

Musical accompaniment:
“Sonata No. 5 for Two Violins in E minor: II. Gavotte - Andante grazioso” - Jean Marie Leclair

When Jim appeared along with the guard the next morning to escort Berta from her cell, she felt like singing the Hallelujah chorus. If she was being released from the dungeon, she hoped it was because the Inquisitor had accepted her offer. Sending a familiar face to fetch her seemed to bode well. The female guard seemed depressed to be losing her only inmate. She scowled as Berta headed up the stairs behind her escort. He led her up and out into the upper courtyard and then up the staircase to the great hall.

“Where are we going?” Berta asked.

“Lady Montilyet sent for you. I'll take you to her.”

Before she could ask who that was, Jim was headed through the wide-open doors into the great hall, a vast open space with scaffolding along the walls and piles of rubble in the corners. There were soldiers and workmen building more scaffolding and several barefoot Dalish women cleaning the floors and fireplaces. At the head of the hall, on a raised dais was a single ornate chair emblazoned with a large all-seeing golden eye. There were unlit braziers and sconces on the walls. Sunlight streamed through the high windows.

Before they reached the dais, they turned sharply to the left, heading through two doors and into a cozy study. The room was stone walled and large but warmed by a blazing fire. Two armchairs were arranged before the hearth. An ornate wooden desk with a high-backed tufted chair and multiple bookshelves were in the far corner. The room was empty. She turned to look questioningly at Jim.

"I'm sure she'll be along in a moment. Please, sit." He gestured to the chairs before the fire.

Berta acquiesced, sitting carefully on the edge of the chair, not wanting to sully the upholstery with her filthy scrubs.

No sooner had she sat down then she was jumping up again as the door on the far side of the chamber opened. She turned and immediately locked eyes with Commander Pretty Boy who was exiting the room beyond with Sister Leliana and another woman in tow. He looked her over, briefly, before turning to Sister Leliana with a skeptical arch of an eyebrow and a slight frown. The sister looked in turn to the woman Berta hadn't seen before. The woman was dressed in a gold and blue outfit that was ruffled and pouffed with a large, heavy medallion necklace around her chest and shoulders. She held a writing tablet with a burning candle affixed which Berta realized was probably equal parts practical and dangerous. Her hair was up and braided, pulled back from her face, pretty and exotic to Berta's eyes, with mocha skin and light eyes. She glided smoothly down the steps from the doorway toward Berta.

"My lady healer, I apologize for keeping you waiting," she gestured to the commander and sister.
"We had urgent matters to discuss. I am Lady Josephine Montilyet, ambassador for the Inquisition. I believe you have already met Sister Leliana, and this is Ser Cullen Rutherford, the commander of the
Inquisition's forces."

Berta noted Sister Leliana's absent title in the introductions and assumed, taking into account that this was the woman who came to question her, that her role must be more of the clandestine variety.

The commander nodded curtly. "If you'll excuse me," he said with extraordinary politeness to Lady Montilyet, before exiting the room as quickly as possible.

Sister Leliana excused herself as well, nodding politely to Berta before heading after the Commander into the great hall.

Lady Montilyet gestured to the chair in front of the fire again, inviting Berta to sit before putting her tablet down on her desk and returning to take the chair opposite. "Would you mind waiting outside?" She asked, dismissing Jim.

"Yes, m'lady." He briskly headed back into the great hall closing the heavy wooden door behind him.

"Now," Lady Montilyet breathed, settling into the chair, crossing her legs at the ankles, "I would offer you refreshment, but we are somewhat ill-supplied at the moment. I apologize for your...accommodations, my lady. The Inquisition has many enemies and we must treat all new arrivals with an abundance of caution."

Berta nodded, feeling acutely aware of her greasy hair and blood-stained clothes, sitting across from the pristine and prettily perfumed ambassador. ‘Lady’ was hardly appropriate at present. "Yes, I understand. One cannot be too careful."

The ambassador looked relieved. “Precisely.” She shifted slightly, inclining her head towards Berta. “If I may, I am unsure of how to address you.” She looked at Berta expectantly.

Berta paused, the realization hitting her that the ambassador thought she was nobility. She supposed that was not too surprising as she told them she had attended two universities, they knew she spoke at least two languages and she was wearing pearl earrings and a ruby birthstone pendant, hardly the usual trappings of a commoner if her observations thus far were any indication. She briefly considered her reply. Her first instinct, honed from many years of insisting on a first name basis with nurses and her male colleagues so she would seem less threatening and more likeable out of necessity, was to blurt, ‘Berta is fine.’ She experienced a prickle of discomfiture over what she was about to say, trying to quash the desire she had always had to eschew the culture of arrogance of most doctors, and surgeons in particular, but the memory of sleeping on a stone floor and eating stale bread was still fresh in her mind. She had to be willing to do whatever it took to survive in Thedas.

“In my country, our nobility is not strictly hereditary. My title is ‘doctor’ followed by my surname, Shaw. The title denotes advanced education and training.”

The ambassador raised her eyebrows. “Most interesting. So, your children will not inherit your title.”

Berta shook her head. “I don’t have children, but if I did, no, they wouldn’t.”

“How very...egalitarian.” Lady Montilyet seemed a bit mystified.

“The title can only be obtained if one has the means to pay for the schooling,” Berta clarified. “As I said, not strictly hereditary.” She thought she could almost hear her father whispering a sarcastic thank you for acknowledging his purse strings.

“Ah, I see,” said the ambassador, nodding. “Well, perhaps you will find some things not so different
here, Doctor Shaw.”

Berta found hearing the woman speak her title a little unnerving, but it was too late to completely back pedal. She put on her best disarming smile. “My close friends call me Berta. I hope you will feel you can do the same.” Yes, she thought her smile said, we’re in the aristocracy club together.

The ambassador seemed appropriately disarmed. “Oh, yes. And I hope you will call me Josephine.”

Berta smiled, thinking that next they’d be having a sleepover and braiding each other’s hair. “Thank you, Josephine.”

“So, to business,” continued the ambassador. "The Inquisitor found your proposal intriguing. She has accepted your offer to aid our people as an agent of the Inquisition. In return she will avail you of her advisers on the rifts and the Fade in order to return you to your world. Solas is her most knowledgeable adviser on all things related to the Fade. He is an apostate, but I assure you he is not dangerous. He has conducted himself with the utmost propriety.”

Berta wondered what this Solas was an apostate from and why that might be dangerous. Was he some sort of heretic?

Josephine continued. “I will make sure you meet with him when he returns with the Inquisitor from the Fallow Mire."

“And when will that be?” She hoped she might have time to get cleaned up and secure a change of clothes before meeting anyone else.

"I would think not more than a fortnight."

"Two weeks?” Berta felt her heart hammering in panic. No, no, no... She opened her mouth to protest but quickly closed it again, not wanting to offend her host. "That's longer than I expected to be here."

Lady Montilyet pressed her lips together. "It is unavoidable, I'm afraid. The Inquisitor left this morning and Solas accompanied her. In the meantime, the Inquisitor has empowered me to manage Skyhold on her behalf as her seneschal. I have arranged accommodation for you. It is not luxurious, but it will be convenient to care for our wounded. You will report to Mother Giselle who has been managing our refugee situation and assist her and the mages with healing. I spoke with Grand Enchanter Fiona. She said you were most helpful."

Berta nodded taking all this in. “Thank you. I will do my best.”

Lady Montilyet smiled genuinely. There was something about her manner and appearance that reminded Berta of Counselor Troi from the Next Generation. “I can only imagine how difficult this has been for you.”

Berta clenched her jaw at the hot feeling in her eyes warning of impending tears. Do not be nice to me, she thought fiercely, I can handle anything but that. “I'll live,” she said tersely.

Lady Montilyet looked at her carefully, seeming to understand. “Well, I will see that you are taken to your quarters. Once you are settled you can speak with Mother Giselle about your duties.”

“May I have my bag back? I will need...” she decided not to call the stethoscope by its name, “my things if I’m going to take care of patients.”

Lady Montilyet smiled. “They’re already in your quarters. I have taken the liberty of assigning you a
lady’s maid. She’ll help you bathe and get you a change of clothing.” To the ambassador’s credit, she did not appear repulsed by Berta’s lack of hygiene.

“Thank you.” She breathed a sigh of relief and stood at the same time as the ambassador, feeling a bit numb as she was escorted to the door and passed off again. Two weeks. She would be here at least that long. It would take a week for anyone to notice that she was missing. What would happen when she didn’t show at the new office next Monday? Who would take care of her patients? What would her partners think? She tried to imagine coming up with a plausible explanation for her disappearance. Telling the truth would not be an option.

Don’t get ahead of yourself, she admonished herself. Bath first, change of clothes second, fulfill your end of the agent bargain third. Then worry about getting home.
This chapter contains some graphic descriptions of trauma and subsequent injuries. Caveat lector.

Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm, especially from abusing the bodies of man or woman, bond or free.

-Hippocratic Oath

Musical accompaniment:
“Knockin' On Heaven's Door” - Bob Dylan

Berta was led back to the lower courtyard where she had first entered the keep. Much of the rubble clogging the courtyard had been cleared and scaffolding had been put up to repair the adjacent walls and crumbling bridge from the great hall to the battlements, but the infirmary area was much as she had seen before, a few shabby makeshift tents clustered around an open fire with sick and wounded soldiers littering the bare ground. There was a single more substantial tent in the style of those down by the lake, what Berta was beginning to think of as standard Inquisition issue. The commander was still stationed at his makeshift desk near the stairs, shuffling papers and barking orders. He glanced briefly at Berta as she passed, his look one of withholding judgement for the time being.

Jim gestured toward the main tent. “I’ll leave you here, m’lady.” He bowed obsequiously before hustling off towards the upper courtyard. The bowing was going to take getting used to.

Berta pushed the tent flap aside and stepped inside. It was tall enough for her to stand, even if she had been tall, with a single cot along the right, a side table and chair along the back wall and a small, round topped wooden storage chest along the left side. She was relieved to see her parka was there, draped over the back of the chair, her scarf, hat and gloves folded in the seat and her bag propped against the leg on the floor just as Lady Montilyet had promised. There was a densely woven patterned wool rug on the ground, covering the stone and grass of the courtyard, giving the tent a floor. While not posh, it was infinitely preferable to a dungeon cell.

“Oh, m’lady!” Came a small surprised voice.

She set the tub in the middle of the tent. She pulled something out of the pocket of her apron and crumbled it into the basin. She poured the bucket of water in and immediately a clean herbal smell like lavender suffused the air. The maid knelt before the wooden chest, opened it and pulled out linens and a bar of soap, clothing and a small hammered pewter pitcher, setting them on the cot.
“I’ll just be a moment with more water, m’lady.” She left the tent, the flap closing behind her.

Berta started to undress, feeling simultaneously relieved to be rid of her soiled clothing and incredibly vulnerable, hearing all the noises of the castle immediately outside the tent. She folded her scrubs into a pile and tucked her bra, underwear and socks in the middle, pulling the remnants of her ruined pen from the back pocket of her scrubs and tucking it back in her bag. She held her sweat shirt across her chest as she perched on the edge of the cot.

The girl reappeared with another bucket of steaming water, pouring it into the metal basin. “I’ll take your clothes to be washed, m’lady.” She stood there for a moment, her eyes downcast, waiting. Berta wasn’t sure what she was waiting for.

“Well, um...you know what? I think I can handle bathing on my own. Why don’t you...um, what’s your name?”

“I’m Meena, m’lady.” She managed to drop a curtsy while avoiding Berta’s eyes.

“We need to speak with her after I’ve changed.”

“Right away, m’lady.” She exited the tent quickly tying the flaps behind her, apparently pleased to have a task to perform.

Berta breathed a sigh of relief, finding herself alone with her bath. There was a washcloth sized rag in the linens and she stood in the shallow tub, scrubbing herself with it and the soap which was scented with the same herb as the bath water. The small pitcher was the perfect size for scooping up the water and rinsing. She managed to awkwardly wash her hair with the soap and get it rinsed with minimal spilling on the rug before stepping out to dry herself and investigate the clothing situation. The underwear was something like a linen string bikini, tying on the sides of her hips as to be adjustable and relatively comfortable. The strip of fabric that she assumed was a bra left something to be desired, having no straps and lacing up either the front or back, she couldn’t tell which. She finally decided that she would lace it up the front because she really had no way of tightening and tying it in the back as she had dismissed the maid. The last time she’d worn a strapless bra was in a friend’s wedding and she had joked that the technology did not exist to support her adequately in strapless. If the technology was absent at home, it sure as hell wasn’t going to be present in Thedas. The breast band left her feeling compressed yet saggy at the same time. Fortunately, after she pulled on the chemise, she discovered the over bodice laced up the front and had straps but then she felt like the prow of a ship with everything lifted and on display. The skirt reached past her calves, a very practical length Berta thought, without too much fabric to drag in the mud. Clearly Thedas had no reservations about putting a woman’s ankles on display. The lower part of the leather bodice flared over her hips covering the skirt’s gathered waistline that she had tied to the side. There was an apron to tie over the skirt and lower bodice with two large pockets in front. The shoes were leather and styled like slippers with a strap tied over the top, but they were rather narrow, and the toes were too long and floppy, so she put her boots back on without socks. She finger-combed her hair after drying it as best she could, feeling fortunate that her hair was low maintenance enough that her primary styling tool had always been the AC vents in her car. She dug through her work bag, stopping to put on lip balm and pulled out her stethoscope, looping it in one of the apron pockets. She took stock of her appearance for a moment, feeling like she was dressed in a costume but exited the tent, tying one
Meena was waiting outside, indicating that Mother Giselle was on her way, eager to speak with her. Berta took stock of the area, mentally ticking off improvements that she would make if it were up to her, from pallets for the patients to getting rid of the standing water in the courtyard. There was much to be done.

“So, you’re the new healer.” Berta turned to face a woman who stood near the fire. Her hands were bloody, and she wiped them on a rag before folding her arms across her chest, staring at Berta with open skepticism. “I’m told you’re a surgeon.”

Berta nodded. “That’s right.”

“Where did you train?”

“I doubt anywhere you’ve heard of.” Berta disliked the woman’s hostile glare.

“Well, Commander Cullen put me in charge of the wounded soldiers.” Berta could almost see her chest puff up with pride. “He brought me up from the refugee camp. I am a surgeon. I trained in Denerim.”

Good for you, Berta thought. “Well, then I guess we’ll be working together. Are there no mages here?”

The woman scoffed. “Magic can’t heal everything. We shouldn’t rely on it. And most of the soldiers don’t want a mage touching them.”

Berta was surprised. Given the choices available, magical healing seemed a better option than herbs and a prayer. “That seems short sighted.”

The woman shook her head. “If you’d trained properly you would know that diet, judicious bleeding and careful balancing of the humors are the keys to healing.”

Berta looked at her, trying unsuccesssfully to keep from arching an incredulous eyebrow. Oh, for fuck’s sake, she thought, no wonder Mother Giselle thought surgeons were quacks. This one surely was. “My training was a bit different, I’d wager.”

“I’m sure there is much you can learn from me,” the surgeon said imperiously.

Before Berta could reply, there was a scream from high on the scaffolding. She looked up to see a man falling from the edge of the crumbled bridge, his arms cartwheeling as he fell, his body landing hard on the stone rubble three stories below with a sickening thud. He did not move.

“Help!” someone yelled.

Berta froze for a moment. She was not a first responder, an EMT or paramedic. Her role had always been on the receiving end of the ambulance. Regardless, in the next second, she was running toward the fallen man, hoping her advanced trauma life support training would be enough.

“Don’t move him,” she ordered as the other workmen descended around their injured comrade. The workmen stared at her, their worried, tired faces questioning her command.

Berta clambered over the rubble, careful not to fall on the jagged stones. The man was lying on his side, his back painfully arched at an odd angle, his leg bent up over the stones, his fractured femur
jutting up through his torn skin and breeches, bloody and ragged. He was conscious, but barely, moaning. Berta looked at the fallen workman and immediately began casting around for something to use to transport him from the rubble to over by the fire where he could be kept warm and she'd have room to work. He groaned and tried to move his leg, the bone protruding further out, accompanied by a sudden pulsing spurt of bright red arterial blood from his thigh.

"Shit." Berta pressed her fingers to the artery, looking around at the assembled work men. "Does anyone know his name?"

"It's Garin," said an older balding man, who looked ash faced at all the blood.

"Garin," Berta called to workman. "Try to hold still." She turned and saw the Denerim-trained surgeon at her elbow. "Here," Berta said, grabbing her hand and pressing the surgeon’s fingers to the artery. "If your fingers start to go numb, you're holding enough pressure."

Berta turned from the scene and strode past the commander who had joined the small crowd surrounding the accident site. "I need your desk."

Cullen's forehead wrinkled. "Wait, what?"

Berta grabbed the edge of Cullen's makeshift desk and dumped its contents onto the ground, papers, ink, quill, tankard of water and all. She began dragging the heavy, flat wood top back towards the rubble. Two of the work men saw what she was doing and picked it up, placing it next to the worker, ignoring Cullen's muttered protest. She moved to the worker's head, crouching among the stones so she could place both hands on his neck and stabilize his spine.

"I need three men on each side and one at his feet. You-" she said to the surgeon, "don't move."

Several of the workmen hesitantly moved to help as Berta asked. "We're going to lift him onto the door on the count of three. One, two, three." Garin screamed in pain at being moved, the workmen handling him more like the rubble he was lying on than a precariously injured patient, but he was easily lifted onto the makeshift stretcher. Berta winced at his moans, hoping his comrades didn’t exacerbate his injuries further.

"Great, now help me carry him over to the fire. Gently." They carefully lifted Garin and inched over the rubble to bring him over to the infirmary area, the surgeon creeping along aside them, keeping pressure on the lacerated artery. Berta knelt beside her patient, quickly listening to both sides of his chest. His lungs were clear but his breathing rapid from pain. She looked him over quickly, noting the blood along his right temple and scrapes along both arms. She felt his belly, pressing over his spleen and liver, looking at his abdomen for any bruising or discoloration. His major injury seemed to be his leg.

"Do you have a knife and sutures? I've got to cut down to the artery and tie it off."

The surgeon nodded. "Here, take his leg. I'll get the supplies." Berta traded off holding pressure while the surgeon ran to grab her kit. She returned quickly with a leather roll which she untied and displayed the tools inside. Berta almost involuntarily shuddered at the crudeness of the instruments but grabbed the closest thing to a scalpel, hoping it was clean.

"Put your finger here," she instructed, "and don't move. I'm going to cut down to the artery and I don't want to cut you." She incised two inches above the bleeding site, cutting with the knife and then bluntly dissecting with her finger until she felt the pulsation of the superficial femoral artery. "What I wouldn't give for a Travers and a couple of Kelly clamps," she muttered, pulling out a loop of gurgut webbing from the surgeon’s kit and pushing it beneath the artery with her finger. She tied
off the artery, executing one handed knots with her right hand while she retracted the flesh over the artery with her left. She cut the suture long, so it would not retract into the wound in case she needed to access the artery again. "Ok, you can take your finger off now."

The surgeon hesitantly removed her hand from Garin's leg. The jet of blood did not recur. Berta took a deep breath and frowned at her handiwork.

“He may lose his leg but at least he won’t bleed to death.” She shook her head. It wasn’t like she could get a vascular surgery consult. In her ER at home, she’d have orthopedics on their way to take care of the fracture, two large bore IVs to replace the blood he’d lost with fluid and he’d be on the way to the CT scanner for a head, c-spine, chest, abdomen and pelvic CT. As it was, she’d have make do with cleaning his leg, doing something for pain, reducing the fracture and the seeing if she could find a mage to give him a once over.

“Let’s get his leg reduced,” Berta said to the surgeon.

The woman’s attitude had changed considerably. “What do you need?”

“Something for pain? Nettle syrup or something stronger? A lot of clean water to wash the wound.”

“Blood lotus extract in addition to the nettle will help keep him calm.” She brought a small wooden box over from one of lean-tos. Inside, there was a plethora of small glass vials and jars. The surgeon began mixing the contents of two of the jars together in a small metal cup she took from the kit. "I'll get this mixed and then get the other supplies."

Berta took the moment to look around at the small crowd that had gathered. The workmen were hovering, watching them and Garin. She was acutely aware of their fear and judgment, their hope that they could heal him. She didn't want an audience if reducing his leg didn't go well. She stood and casually walked over to the commander who stood looking at the contents of his upturned desk, his hands on his hips. He looked up at her as she walked over to him. He was perturbed.

"Commander, would you consider directing the workmen elsewhere? I don't want them watching if I encounter any difficulties treating his leg." She kept her voice low, not wanting to alarm anyone but she thought it was best for everyone if there were no spectators. "It will likely be...ugly."

The commander looked over at the men who were standing around and over to Garin. "Yes, I'll get them back to work."

"Oh, no, I meant maybe gave them a rest elsewhere? I don't think getting them back to work was such a great idea." Berta didn't think getting them back to work was such a great idea. "They've just seen one of their colleagues pretty horrifically injured. Some of them may be in shock. We don't want any more accidents."

Cullen thought for a moment and then nodded. "Perhaps you're right." He started towards the men.

"And let them know that one of us will let them know how he is later," Berta suggested.

Cullen’s jaw clenched and turned back towards the men, addressing their concerns and shooing them off. "Men, let the healers do their work," she heard him begin.

The workmen reluctantly obeyed the commander and began to disperse, some headed out the gate and the rest headed toward the upper courtyard. Berta watched them go, thinking that a curtained and cordoned off treatment area would be a good idea. She returned to the surgeon, watching as she coaxed the mixture of nettle and blood lotus into Garin's mouth. Berta knelt opposite her.

"I'm Berta."
The surgeon glanced at her. "I'm Sue."

Berta smiled thinly. "I would say it's nice to meet you, but under the circumstances..."

Sue helped Garin sip the last of the sedating draught from the cup. "It's never 'nice' when we are needed."

"Agreed." Berta looked at Garin's face. It was contorted with pain. "How long does it take for the mixture to take effect?"

Sue looked quizzically at Berta. "I don't understand how you can know how to cut the body so precisely but don't know how quickly a pain elixir works."

"I'm not from here. We don't use plants the way you do." Modern pharmacy would be almost unrecognizable to the Thedosian surgeon. "It's complicated."

Sue seemed to take her words at face value. "It will act quickly. Let me get the water."

Berta stayed by Garin's side, watching his eyes blink slowly until they stayed closed while Sue came back with a bucket from the well in the courtyard.

"Is the water clean?"

The surgeon looked confused. "It's fresh from the well."

"Let's boil it for good measure. Do you have something I can use to clean the wound?"

Sue retrieved several fabric strips from a basket beside one of the lean-tos. "Will this do?"

Berta tried not to look horrified. "Let's boil those, too."

She needed to work quickly, before Garin's muscles were so tight that she wouldn't be able to reduce the fracture but the watched pot, true to form, took forever to boil. While she waited, she took a pair of scissors from the surgeon’s kit and cut the leg of Garin’s breeches off above the wound, tossing the bloody, dusty rough cloth aside. Once the water was boiled and the cleaning cloths were sterilized, Berta retrieved the small pitcher from her bath and washed it with boiling water as well. Once the water was cool enough to touch, she poured some over her hands, cleaning them as best she could. She then turned to Garin's leg, the bone still sticking out through the flesh at an angle, the skin purple and swollen around the break. She gently but quickly cleansed the wound, brushing and washing dirt, bits of his torn clothing and stone dust aside, copiously washing it out, using the entire bucket of water. She dried her hands on her apron before standing, straddling Garin's broken leg.

"OK, we're going to reduce this," she said to Sue. "I'm going to grab here," indicating behind his knee, "and pull up. If I can pull hard enough, the bone will slide back in and then we can dress the wound and splint it. I need you to hold him down, so I don't lift his entire body."

“What is 'OK'?”

Berta shook her head. “Never mind. Doesn't matter. Ready?”

Sue nodded again, placing her hands on Garin's hip bones to hold him down.

Berta got in position. "On three. One, two, three." She pulled hard, bending at her knees trying to pull the bone straight, gritting her teeth, pulling upwards with her arms and pushing up with her legs with all her strength. Garin woke from his nettle induced stupor and screamed, his other leg flailing
to get away from her. She released his leg slowly giving herself a rest before trying again.

"Garin, calm down, breathe slow. I know it hurts but we're trying to take care of you." She pushed her hair out of her face with the back of her wrist, taking a deep breath before getting ready to try again.

"Can I help?"

Berta looked over her shoulder at Cullen. She had forgotten that he was even there. She looked at the tall broad-shouldered man in all his armor. "I'm guessing you're stronger than I am."

Cullen smiled wryly and stepped forward, taking Berta's place straddling Garin's leg. "Hold just behind his knee. Now you're going to pull up slowly as hard as you can."

Berta dropped to her knees, placing her hands opposite Sue's on Garin's pelvis to stabilize him. "On your count, Commander."

Cullen counted off to three and pulled, harder than Berta could have. Garin screamed again, but Berta held his good leg down. "Keep pulling..." Berta instructed Cullen, "don't stop...there!"

The femur slipped back under the skin. Berta rushed to hold pressure firmly on the break to keep the bone from sliding back. "We need to tightly splint this," she said to Sue.

The surgeon grabbed more supplies from her store, bringing over two long boards that had probably been gleaned from the rubble and more strips of cloth from her basket. Berta remained kneeling at Garin's side, holding his leg steady with both her hands. She looked up at the commander, now standing over her.

"Thank you." She smiled, thinking that maybe Pretty Boy had his uses after all.

"I'm glad I could help." Cullen looked at her appreciatively. "It was impressive how quickly you stopped the bleeding."

Berta shook her head, looking at her patient. "I don't deserve any complements unless he keeps his leg." Berta glanced up at Cullen, noting that his eyes flitted quickly over her chest and then away. She sighed inwardly. She was going to have to find something more practical to wear for patient care. Kneeling and bending over patients was going to end in a wardrobe malfunction if she wasn't careful. She ignored the commander for the moment, getting to her feet once the splint was in place.

"I need a mage to heal his break and help with the bleeding. Do you-"

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"No mages in the keep," he explained, his tone making clear that he would brook no argument. "Not until I can deploy our templars adequately."

Berta found herself at a loss. "But he needs healing. I know he looks stable now, but he may very well die from his injuries if."

"Then he dies," Cullen stared her down. "Better one man dies than the entire castle be put at risk by an abomination."

Berta wrinkled her forehead at him in disgust. "I don't even know what that means."
"It means that the security of the Inquisition is more important than one man's life."

"I guess I wish you'd told me that first, then I wouldn't have bothered. We could have just left him in the rubble," she said caustically.

“As the Commander of the Inquisition, I will let mages in when, and only when, I see fit.” He was clearly done discussing this with her as he started to pick up his papers and quills off the ground. “You there,” he barked at one of the soldiers. “Clean this mess up. We’ll relocate to the throne room.”

“Well, you’re not much of a commander if you let the people you’re supposed to protect-”

“Berta!”

Berta turned to the voice, seeing Mother Giselle hustling across the courtyard, attempting to intervene before things got out of hand between her and Cullen.

Berta pressed her lips together. “He’s being unreasonable,” she hissed.

Mother Giselle nodded and put a restraining hand on Berta’s arm, drawing her away from the commander. “Let it go. His roar is loud and like most lions his bite is even worse.”

Berta made a face at what she considered a malapropism, watching the commander stalk off up the stairs with his soldiers in tow. “How am I supposed to take care of his soldiers when he won’t allow mages?”

Mother Giselle spoke soothingly. “He will come around in time. For now, I see that you have been making yourself useful. I expected no less.”

Berta smoothed her apron. “Unfortunately, yes.” She nodded towards the surgeon who was near their patient putting some kind of poultice on his leg. “Sue and I have met. She seems...dedicated.”

Mother Giselle smirked. “Agreed.” She looked around the infirmary area. “Do you have everything you need?”

Berta almost laughed. “Hardly, but a lot of what I’d like to have probably doesn’t exist here.”

“Why don’t you work with your new colleague, make a list of what you need. And I can talk to the Commander about getting mages in to work with you.”

Berta smiled, grateful for the help. “Thank you.”

“You should find some parchment, ink and quills in the table in your tent. Make your list and I’ll come by later and take it to the quartermaster. In the meantime, see to your patient.” Berta opened her mouth to protest but Mother Giselle held up her hand. “Do the best you can.” She turned and headed back up towards the upper courtyard.

Berta sighed heavily and went back to check on Garin. “What are you putting on the wound?” she asked.

“It’s a poultice of mashed elfroot leaves for healing and spindleweed to help staunch the bleeding.”

Berta wrinkled her nose. It smelled a bit like a mix of menthol and seaweed. “Mother Giselle said for us to make a list of everything we need, and she’ll get it from the quartermaster.”

The surgeon laid a damp cloth over the poultice. “Go make your list. I’ll keep an eye on him. He’s
Berta looked down at her bloody hands. She wasn’t touching anything in her tent until her hands
were clean. She picked up the bucket she had used to clean Garin’s leg and looked around for the
well. It was on the far side of the courtyard toward the barn and stables. She headed towards it,
noting the rotted timbers covering part of its opening thinking that boiling the water that came from
the well was a good idea. There was a wooden bucket, and someone had clearly recently rebuilt the
pulley and crank mechanism. She dropped the bucket in, hearing a splash below and laboriously
drew it back up, dumping the water into her metal bucket before submerging her hands. The water
was warmer than she expected, and she scrubbed as best she could. She would have to find her nail
clipper in her bag and trim her nails even shorter than usual, so she could keep the blood and dirt
from drying beneath them. She missed gloves. She wiped her hands, cleaner now, on her apron and
drew another bucket of water before heading back to the infirmary thinking to save herself a trip next
time she wanted to wash her hands.

As she arrived back at the lean-tos, she saw that Sue had turned her attention to another soldier
around the fire, administering something from her box of potions. There was a young man crouching
by Garin’s side. He was deathly pale with a patchwork, drab brown tunic and a ridiculously large
floppy hat, hiding much of his face. Berta paused, watching him for a moment, wondering if he was
one of the workmen or maybe Garin’s son though his coloring was quite different. As she watched,
he pulled a knife slowly from his sleeve and moved it towards Garin’s chest.

“What the hell are you doing?” Berta yelled, running forward.

The young man looked up at her, surprised. “I am helping. He wants to die.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

The young man stood and took a step back, seemingly shocked that Berta was upset, sheathing his
dagger back in his sleeve. “The Inquisitor said I could help.” He seemed genuinely mystified by her.
“You’re angry. You don’t understand. Things are different here. Blood and squalor, filth and fire.
Everything where you were was white. Here it’s red.”

Berta paused, feeling shaken at his words. “Whatever, just don’t kill my patients.”

The young man nodded sadly. “It may take hours to die, every breath an agony.”

She glanced down at Garin. He seemed calm, but he was sedated. Worried, she dropped to his side,
taking out her stethoscope again and rechecking his lungs, keeping one eye on his would-be
murderer. His lungs were clear, but his breathing was fast. His arms were clutched tight to his sides,
his wrists flexed, fists flared out. Berta hadn’t seen decerebrate posturing outside a textbook and she
felt her stomach drop. “No, no, no...” Berta lifted his left eyelid and then the right. His right pupil
was hugely dilated. “Shit.” This was not good.

She looked up to ask the young man how he had known, but he was gone.

“Sue, where did that young man go?”

The surgeon looked quizzically at Berta. “A young man?”

“You didn’t see him?”

“I guess not.”

Berta turned back to Garin. His breathing slowed, becoming deeper and slower until he stopped
breathing entirely. Berta counted the seconds, willing him to breathe again. He suddenly gasped and then started breathing again, rapid and shallow. Berta gently felt along the right side of his skull where she had noted the blood earlier, near his temple. She slid her hand back into his hair and frowned as her fingertips found the skull fracture. His breathing was being affected by bleeding in his brain, but whether he had hemorrhage in the brain itself or outside the lining of the brain, she couldn’t be sure, though she guessed the latter given the location of the fracture. She chastised herself for missing the fracture and not doing a thorough secondary survey after initially stabilizing him. If she had a CT scanner...but she didn’t and all the wishing in the world wouldn’t change that. She briefly considered attempting a craniotomy, but she was no neurosurgeon and even if she was bold or crazy enough to try it, there were no power drills here to cleanly get through his skull, no antibiotics to keep infection at bay once his brain was exposed to the outside world and no way to evacuate any hemorrhage that was clotted. The skull fracture was Garin’s death sentence. She would not try to intervene any further when really it would just come down to nearly amateur, experimental trepanation. Primum non nocere, she thought. There was nothing more she could do.
Rara Avis

The love of learning, the sequestered nooks,
And all the sweet serenity of books.
-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
Musical accompaniment:
“In Taberna: Estuans Interius”, Carmina Burana - Carl Orff

In the end, it took Garin an hour to die. His apneic episodes grew longer until he stopped breathing altogether, and then his heart stopped and then it was over. Losing a patient was never easy and thankfully was only an occasional occurrence in Berta’s bread and butter surgery practice, but she felt this time more acutely, though whether it was because she witnessed his accident, or she sat by his side angry and impotent, or her selfish fear that the Inquisitor might withdraw her support since someone died on her watch, she couldn’t say. Two chantry sisters arrived shortly after he died to wrap his body and bear it away and two soldiers arrived shortly thereafter to clean and reclaim the commander’s desk.

Berta pestered Sue about the three soldiers who remained, listening carefully to her explanations of their ailments, trying to sort out what was likely clinically useful and what was likely hogwash, and learning about the various plant extracts in the potions box and their properties. Around midday, Meena appeared with a trencher of bread, cheese and dried fruit from the kitchens. Sue said she was going to meet with an apothecary about obtaining more supplies and Berta, nursing what she guessed was a caffeine withdrawal headache said she’d stay, keep an eye on the wounded soldiers, who all seemed stable at the moment, and get started on her list for the quartermaster.

She found a roll of parchment, a small bottle of ink and an actual feather quill in the table drawer in her tent. While a fan of fountain pens, Berta thought the quill might be a bit messy, so she looked in her bag and found an extra ball point. She sat cross legged on the rug at the entrance to her tent, both flaps tied back, and started in.

Cots or pallets for the patients were a must. It was absurd that the wounded were just left lying on the ground. Stretchers would be in order as the commandeering of the commander’s desk had demonstrated. Each patient should have a metal water bucket for dedicated hand washing and there ought to be at least three or four spares, as well as at least two pots (should she call them cauldrons? she wondered) for boiling water for cleaning. Could she get a hold of some alcohol for sterilization? They probably had alcohol in Thedas. She could distill something to the proper strength if she had the equipment. She would need bandages that could be sterilized and suture material. Was there something finer gauge than gurgut webbing? Needles would be needed, curved for suturing if possible. Splints, slings and crutches would be in order. Smaller, shallow basins for collecting body fluids would be necessary. Despite the crudeness of the tools in the surgical kit, Berta wondered if a second one could be found and maybe a second medicine chest. She still wanted a curtained treatment area or at least an additional tent, but why not put all the patients in tents? She wrote down “Tents, 4” thinking that might be enough. Thinking again about the water buckets, she added a personnel request as well, writing “2 runners” in a second column, thinking that having two people to constantly fetch water or go to the kitchens for food for the patients would be helpful. Berta thought they could chop wood to keep the fires burning too. Beneath this she added “mages,” resisting the urge to write it in all capitals and underline it. In a third column she started a list of things that needed to be improved in the courtyard, cutting the grass and weeds and coming up with some kind of drainage solution for the standing water as well as a designated dumping site for all the dirty
water they’d be generating. That led her to thinking about the refugees by the lake below, wondering where the water source was for the lake and the well and thinking that they’d have to be careful with this large castle full of people above the lake that they didn’t contaminate it. That could be disastrous.

Her list seemed too short but everything she would love to have was unavailable in her current situation. When Sue came back from her meeting with the apothecary, Berta asked her if she had anything else to add. Sue said she had everything she needed in her kit. Berta thought she was wasting an opportunity for additional supplies but didn’t press. Perhaps bureaucracies functioned differently in Thedas, but she doubted it.

“Do you have any idea where Mother Giselle is?” Berta asked. “I want to give her my list.”

“I saw her in the garden. First left off the throne room.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back soon.”

Berta put her pen in her apron pocket and rolled up the parchment. She headed up the stairs to the upper courtyard and then round to the next staircase up to the throne room. I certainly won’t suffer for lack of exercise, she thought. The first door to the left had been cleared and the wrecked stone and crumbled wood had been stacked to one side. The door led to a cloistered courtyard that had grown tangled with wildflowers and weeds sprouting up between the paving stones and mature trees and vines growing along the periphery. Here everything was bustling too with a crew of men and women clearing overgrown brush and moving several large planters in place in one corner. There was a boarded up well here also, but it hadn’t seen the same refurbishment as the one in the lower courtyard. Mother Giselle stood by the well, talking with a slender russet haired woman with pointed ears and a tan and brown high-necked dress. They both turned to look at Berta as she approached.

“Doctor Shaw, this is Elan Ve’mal,” Mother Giselle explained. “She comes to us as a representative from the College of Herbalists in Val Royeaux.”

The woman inclined her head in greeting. Berta, not knowing if this was a prestigious position thought it best to be polite. “How do you do?”

Elan looked bemused. “How do I do what?”

Berta sighed. “A figure of speech. It’s nice to meet you.”

Elan smiled. “Mother Giselle and I were just discussing the requests from your surgeon colleague. We were thinking that we could plant many useful medicinal herbs here within the garden.”

“That would certainly be convenient,” Berta said noncommittally, not really having any idea how difficult or easy it might be to come by the necessary plants.

“Of course, with the Inquisitor’s approval,” Mother Giselle cautioned.

“Of course,” Elan agreed. “I will start on the proposal for the gardens right away. If you’ll excuse me.”

The herbalist took her leave, leaving Berta and Mother Giselle on their own. Berta fished her list from her apron pocket and handed it to the priestess. “Everything I could think of, within reason. I divided it into supplies, personnel and improvements to the infirmary area.”

Mother Giselle took the parchment and unrolled it, her eyes glancing over the list. “This is your language?”
Berta immediately felt stupid. Of course, Sister Leliana had called her words “symbols.” While the spoken language was more or less the same, the written language was different.

“Oh, I guess I should have asked Sue to write it all down.” Berta chewed her lip.

“Hmmm,” mused Mother Giselle. “You will need to be able to read if you are to be able to receive written communiques.”

“I’m not illiterate,” Berta protested, until she realized that in this world, she was. The thought was humbling.

Mother Giselle paused for a moment, handing the list back to Berta. “I think I know someone who can help us. Come with me.”

Berta followed as Mother Giselle headed back into the great hall and to a door directly across from the garden. It led into a giant rotunda with bare walls on the lowest level with the upper levels disappearing in darkness above them.

“This way,” she beckoned, heading out another archway and up a staircase that clung to the outer wall of the rotunda. On reaching the second level, Berta saw that they were in a great library with small alcoves lit by the glow of the outside light coming in through the ornately paned windows. There were books in almost every alcove, but room for many more, the smell of leather and parchment intoxicating and divine. Mother Giselle walked briskly to the first alcove and stood with her hands folded before her, her entire bearing that of exaggerated patience and submission.

“Master Pavus,” She intoned. “May I have a word?”

The man standing in the alcove, perusing the books, did not turn. “Mother Hen, what could you possibly want with me?”

“I have a favor to ask.”

He turned, arching a meticulously groomed eyebrow. Berta thought he looked a bit like Errol Flynn with a tan, as dashing as the 1930s Hollywood Star in his Robin Hood days. He wore a fitted tan leather outfit that left his left shoulder and arm bare, a choice that Berta assumed was sartorially driven rather than for any practical reason.

“And what favor might that be?”

“This is Doctor Shaw,” she said, gesturing to Berta. “She is an accomplished healer but cannot read our language-”

The man looked dubious. “An accomplished illiterate healer? What will Fereldan dish up next?”

Mother Giselle ignored his question. “She is not Fereldan. I thought for someone as learned as you, teaching her our written language would be simple.”

“It’s only simple if the student is not,” he said archly. “And are you?”

“Certainly not,” said Berta. She disliked his attitude but thought better of making a stink about it if he was to be her tutor.

“Why not find a nursery maid to teach the healer her letters? Surely, you don’t need-”

“Thedas’ most acclaimed magical scholar? Perhaps not.” Mother Giselle shrugged. “But I thought
you would enjoy an apt pupil.”

Dorian appraised Berta carefully. “It would be pleasant to have someone intelligent with whom to converse.” He gave an exaggerated sigh. “You have no idea what dullards most Fereldans are.”

“Are you Orlesian?” Berta asked, thinking that maybe speaking his language would soften him up.

“Oh, no, my dear. I am from Tevinter. A fact of some concern to some members of the Inquisition.” He paused a moment, looking her over. “And where are you from?”

“New Hampshire. It’s on the coast of New England.”

“New? And where is Old Hampshire?” He seemed amused.

“Just Hampshire. In England.”

“Not Old England?”

“Just England.”

Dorian tutted. “Your people are not very creative when it comes to naming places,” he observed.

“If you knew our history, it would make more sense,” Berta explained.

“So, history, you’ve studied it?”

“Yes. Along with music, languages, arts, sciences and medicine. I studied chemistry, what you would probably call alchemy, and physics...I don’t know that you have anything equivalent, in college for four years. I then went to a university where I trained to be a healer for four years. I then studied for an additional five years, with one year in between for laboratory research, to become a surgeon. Does that meet your requirements?”

Dorian applauded lightly. “Bravo, you’re educated. But, my word, ten years to learn to tell the sick to chew some elfroot and suck it up? Seems a waste. Or was it remedial training?”

“Healing is far more advanced where I come from,” Berta said icily.

“Two extra years for appropriate application of leeches, then! Ug, I loathe leeches. Slimy things.” He shuddered at the thought.

“Leeches are really only good for one major application: removal of subcutaneous hematomas following limb reattachment surgery but only one species is commonly used, Hirudo medicinalis, but I doubt you’re familiar.” Berta smiled benignly.

“And bleeding of patients, where do you stand on that?”

“It’s a useless practice that only weakens the sick. Unless the patient in question has polycythemia vera. Then it is advantageous if performed on a regular schedule.”

Dorian pursed his lips as if deciding something. “I must say I have met many an educated man who could only parrot what he had been taught with never a spark of original thought between his ears.”

“Education is no substitute for intelligence or application,” Berta replied. “I am intelligent, but I freely admit that I am ignorant of your world. Ignorance can be remedied. Stupidity cannot.”

Mother Giselle cleared her throat, thinking that perhaps they’d forgotten her in their verbal sparring.
“Master Pavus, may I assume you’ll help?”

“Oh, yes, fine...” Dorian made an exasperated gesture to shoo her off.

Mother Giselle smiled harmlessly. “Wonderful. Now you will have something to keep you busy since the Inquisitor left you behind.”

“And thank you for reminding me.” Dorian smiled sweetly. “Now begone.”

Mother Giselle inclined her head slightly and withdrew, giving a quick smile to Berta. “I will let the infirmary know of your whereabouts. Take your time.”

After Mother Giselle withdrew, Berta looked at her new tutor. “Does this library have a map of Thedas?”

“As your tutor, have I no say in your curriculum?” He feigned offense. “We’ll just jump right in wherever you see fit?”

Berta smiled, seeing that everything with Dorian would be drama and jest. “Since I am new here, I would much appreciate being briefly oriented to your world before we begin.”

“Hmm. Not an unreasonable request.” He tapped his bottom lip thoughtfully. “Let’s see...” He wandered over to the next alcove.

“You aren’t surprised that I’m claiming to be from another world entirely?” His quick acceptance struck her as a little strange.

“Everyone has heard all about you, you’ll find. News in the Inquisition travels fast; gossip even faster.” He began looking through the next alcove of books. “You’d think with all we’re dealing with people wouldn’t need further entertainment, but I even heard one of the soldiers calling you ‘The Maiden in the Snow’ and telling of your dramatic rescue by the forward scouting party. They say the Inquisitor and the apostate Solas found you themselves. Sounds like quite the charming fairy tale.”

“That’s me, Snow White.”

“Pardon?”

“Never mind.” Berta was finding herself saying that more frequently. She’d need to do a better job of censoring herself.

Dorian sighed in frustration. “Everything is in such a jumble at the moment. There were many books already here when we arrived, none cataloged that I can tell, some beyond repair, some salvageable, and the rescue teams brought some back from Haven, including Sister Leliana’s private library. I’m sure Josephine will nab some select donations from the noble houses once we’re a bit more established...”

Berta sighed involuntarily. “I love libraries. They were always my favorite places to study. They have fallen by the wayside in my world, but I always liked having all that knowledge close at hand instead of...” She stopped herself before saying “in the cloud” as that would probably make her sound crazy. “I love books, their smell, their feel. Everything about them really. The entire first floor of my house is practically bookshelves.”

“Oh, so you are nobility. The scullery maid look threw me off.” He glanced side long at her apron and boots and then continued perusing the shelves.
“More or less.” Berta felt loathe to go into it again and suddenly self-conscious about her clothing.

Dorian turned and gave her a stern glance. “Either you are, or you aren’t. If you have that many books you must be wealthy, not to put too fine a point on it.”

“If you have enough money you can buy respectability,” she said vaguely. An outright lie still made her uncomfortable.

“Well, every society must have its stabilizing principles. Mine, we murder each other for sport and have slaves, so don’t feel too bad.” He went back to perusing the volumes. “Now, let’s see...a decent atlas that is less than 3000 years old...”

Berta wasn’t sure if he was joking about the age but the giant tome he pulled out and hefted on to the adjacent table looked like it could have been hundreds of years old at least. He blew off a thick layer of dust, making them both cough and sputter before slowly opening the pages.

“Yes, not tragic amounts of mildew. Let’s see...late Storm Age, more recent than I’d hoped for. Ah, here we are,” he said brightly, carefully turning the pages like a curator and finally settling on one near the back of the book.

Berta looked over the page, an ancient hand drawn map with completely unfamiliar coastlines, oceans, mountain ranges and cities marked. All the text was in symbols she couldn’t help but think of as runes, given their angular forms. “So, where are we?”

“Here,” he indicated, pointing towards the mountain range in more or less the middle of the lower land mass.

“And which way is North?”

“Here,” he said. He pointed towards the opposite edge of the map.

“So, we’re on the border of Ferelden and Orlais...”

“I thought you couldn’t read.”

“I’m functionally illiterate, not deaf. I ask questions and I listen.” She clenched her jaw, irritated at herself for getting impatient with the person who was presently willing to help her. “I can read, I just can’t read this,” she said with a little less heat. “Which side is Ferelden, and which is Orlais?”

“Ferelden is to the east and Orlais to the west.”

She nodded slowly. “And where is Tevinter?”

“Here.” He circled an area far to the north.

“Oh,” she said. “It must be quite cold there.”

Dorian chuckled. “No, my dear, it’s the south that’s cold. My homeland is warm. The climate is perhaps the thing I miss the most.”

Berta quickly recalibrated her assumptions. “So, we’re in the Southern Hemisphere.”

Dorian nodded. “Precisely.”

“So, what are all these other areas? Other countries?”
“This is Nevarra, where Seeker Pentaghast is from. She’s actually somewhere in the twisted line that leads to the throne.”

“I haven’t met her,” Berta interjected.

“When you do, don your armor. You’ll be in for a treat.” He circled an area to the east with his finger. “And this is the Free Marches, city-states each with its own petty nobility: Kirkwall has a Viscount, Starkhaven has a Prince. I’m sure the ruler of Markham calls himself Emperor if he thinks he can get away with it.” Berta smirked at his color commentary. “And here is Antiva, the home of our lady ambassador and the finest wines in Thedas, though some Orlesians might disagree. Out here is Rivain, seafaring people. Lots of pirates. This is the Anderfels. Rocks and Grey Wardens, if you can tell the difference.”

“And what about here?” Berta pointed to the large island in the north and the land mass just barely visible along the northernmost edge of the map.

“That,” he said, pointing to the land mass, “is the Qun. And that is Seheron, the island the Imperium and the Qun have been squabbling over for around three ages.”

“How long is an age?”

“A hundred years.”

Berta chuckled. “So, not long.”

Dorian frowned grimly. “My country wastes massive resources on fighting an unwinnable war and refusing to negotiate. The fighting flares up now and again. Last time it really got going was about 30 years ago, but it is always simmering at a low boil. Have you met Iron Bull? He’s a Qunari.”

“The big guy with the horns? There’s a whole country of them? Are they all like that?”

Dorian smirked. “Strapping fellow, isn’t he? There are hornless Qunari, but they’re rare. Iron Bull has the most imposing double horns I’ve ever seen but some of them have four horns or more. It’s unclear to me what the difference is.”

Berta shuddered. “I hope the horns grow in after birth.”

Dorian laughed. “You’ll have to ask him.”

“So, there are four species in Thedas: humans, dwarves, Qunari and Dalish.” She tapped her thumb against each of her opposing fingers in turn.

“Mmm, yes and no. There are humans, dwarves and Qunari, though technically any follower of the Qun is a Qunari but most people mean the large horned race, which most scholars designate as kossith, but no one uses that in every day parlance. There are elves, some of whom are Dalish.”

“Oh, I misunderstood.” Her mind flitted back over any and all interactions she’d had with any of the people she’d been mentally classifying as Dalish. She hoped she hadn’t offended anyone.

“Most of the elves live in segregated communities in towns and cities, the alienage. Those who live outside the cities, the minority of elves, live in nomadic clans scattered throughout Thedas. They are the Dalish and keep to the old ways. They are the adult elves you see with the facial tattoos, the vallaslin.”

“I’ve seen dwarves with tattoos too, but the style is very different.”
“Yes, the dwarven tattoos are brands to indicate a lower caste. Dwarven society is very caste conscious. A few human cultures have facial tattoos as well. You see them in Rivaini peoples and in some remaining tribal cultures in remote areas.” Dorian drummed the table top rhythmically with his hands. “Oriented enough for now? Perhaps you’ll allow me to get on with the task assigned me? Hmm?”

“Yes, thank you. This is a lot to take in, but it helps.” She chewed her lip again for a moment, still gazing at the map before mentally shifting to her next challenge, thinking, like medical school, that she was trying to sip from an open fire hydrant. She put her hands on her hips. “Teach me my letters, sir.”

Dorian smiled archly. “That’s my girl.”

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Dorian spent the next hour teaching Berta the basics of the common written language, starting with the alphabet with its 37 characters rather than the English 26 and the useful marks for possession and plurals. Numbers were next and were easier, being very similar to Roman numerals. It was a little difficult at first but by the end of their first lesson, she had created a single page translation guide for herself and managed to correctly enumerate her supply list on her second try and Dorian was hovering over her like the proud parent of a preschooler.

“Well done!” He proclaimed.

“You needn’t be so condescending,” she said mildly.

“I want you to feel that you are doing well.” He beamed at her.

She smiled confidently back at him. “I am doing well. Tomorrow I’ll teach you my alphabet and we’ll see if you can keep up.” She clicked her ball point and put it back in her apron pocket.

“That pen really is ingenious. You truly will give me one?”

“I promise. I have several in my bag.”

“To think, I can write tomes without sullying these hands with ink.” He held his hands out in front of himself, admiring his long fingers and even nails. “No one will even suspect I’m an accomplished scholar. How marvelous.”

Berta chuckled. “You have been an excellent teacher. Or should I say ‘Magister?’”

Dorian shook his head. “I am not a Magister. Well, not yet, anyway. You’ll find many Southerners call all Tevinter mages ‘Magister’ but only the members of the upper house of the Imperial Senate, the Magesterium, are actual Magisters. My father is a Magister so at some point I will probably be forced to return home to the viper pit to take his place.”

“You sound less than thrilled at the prospect,” Berta observed.

“And here we were having such a pleasant afternoon and now you’re ruining it with questions about my homeland and family.”

“You brought it up.” She shrugged. “Fine. I retract the question. I won’t ask you about your family if you don’t ask me about mine.”

“Agreed.”
Berta thought for a moment about the former Magister she had met briefly in the dungeon. “Did you meet Gereon Alexis while he was a prisoner here?”

Dorian looked surprised. “How do you know him?”

“He was in the dungeon at the same time I was. He said some...worrysome things about the Inquisition.”

“No doubt he did.” Dorian looked pensive. “I knew him well. He was my mentor for many years and my friend. But he had changed. I came here to find out what he was up to and stop him if possible. Fortunately, with the Inquisitor’s help, I was successful.”

“What did she do with him?”

“She executed him by her own hand. All the good he once stood for, his integrity, his beliefs...he betrayed them all.” He shook his head sadly. “I won’t say that he didn’t deserve death, I just wish there’d been another way.”

“I’m sorry.”

They sat in silence for a moment, each lost in their thoughts until Berta asked the question that was beginning to overwhelm all the others. “Dorian, what is this Inquisition for? Who are they fighting?”

“Ah, the real question at last. We, my dear, for you are with us as well, are fighting Corypheus, the Elder One, an Ancient Tevinter Magister who, after tearing a giant rift in the sky, is attempting to raise himself to Godhood. And if he cannot rule the world, he will destroy it.”

Berta took a deep breath. “That sounds...terrible.”

Dorian grimaced apologetically. “You asked.”

Berta shifted uncomfortably in her chair, unsure of what else to say. “Well, on that cheery note, I should probably get back to doing my small part in the infirmary.”

“Wait, before you go: homework.” He turned and plucked two books off the pile near them on the floor. “I’d pulled these out earlier while I was sorting through some general interest books and they will be perfect for you.” He plopped them down in front of Berta amidst a small cloud of dust.

Berta covered her mouth as she coughed and looked at them skeptically. “I’m not sure I’m up to full-fledged reading.”

Dorian gestured dismissively. “Pish posh, you’ll get there in no time. Give me a month of my expert tutelage and you’ll be reading the Chant of Light in ancient Tevene.”

“I doubt I’ll be here that long,” Berta dismissed, blowing the dust off the two books and tucking her parchment inside the front cover.

“And where are you planning on going?”

“Home, of course.”

Dorian looked at her carefully. “I don’t want to alarm you, and I do not claim to be the world’s expert on the Fade, but I think you should know that people popping through rifts from other worlds is hardly a common occurrence. You are, my dear, a rara avis.”

Berta wrinkled her forehead. “A rare bird?” She laughed. “I suppose that’s better than an odd duck.”
Dorian put his hand on her forearm and she immediately stopped laughing at the seriousness of his expression. “Our consciousness enters the Fade in our sleep, when we dream, but to enter a Rift is to physically enter the Fade, a feat that has only been done three times in history to my knowledge.”

“Only?” Berta felt that sick feeling in her stomach creeping back.

“Yes: Corypheus, the Inquisitor and now you.”

Berta placed her hands flat on the table to keep them from shaking. “But Lady Josephine said...the Inquisitor promised Solas would help me get home.”

“I’m sure that’s what she intends. Solas is a dour fellow, but he has an exhaustive knowledge of the Fade. He will help...if he can.”

Berta nodded slowly, feeling her heart racing. Calm down, she told herself, he might be wrong. Solas is the expert; he might know something Dorian didn’t. She stood and gathered the books quickly. “I should get back to the infirmary.”

“I’ve upset you.”

“It’s fine.”

“I’ll come collect you at supper time, if you’d care to dine with me.” He seemed genuinely concerned.

“That would be lovely,” she said automatically. “I’ll see you then.”

Berta turned and walked briskly from the library, trying to keep herself from racing down the steps and through the throne room. Once she hit the ground of the upper courtyard she turned quickly under the steps, out of sight, and, clutching the books carefully to her chest, braced her other hand against the wall and vomited. Once she was done, she stood upright, wiped her mouth with the very corner of her apron and headed down the steps back to the infirmary. Focus on the work, she thought. When in doubt, or when in despair, there was always work to do.
Dinner and a Show

Under certain circumstances, profanity provides a relief denied even to prayer.
- Mark Twain

Musical Accompaniment:
“Break Stuff” - Limp Bizkit

In Berta’s absence, Sue had discharged two of the soldiers back to their quarters, but three more had arrived fresh from the sparring grounds, with various lacerations and injuries needing attention. Berta brute forced her way through setting one soldier’s dislocated fingers and bracing them crudely with strips of cloth and a few sticks gleaned from the rubble pile near the scaffolding. The second soldier had a gaping gash on his forehead over his left eye. Berta rifled through Sue’s kit and found only straight needles. She took one needle over to the fire and balanced it on the rocks encircling the flames, hoping to heat it and make it a bit more malleable. After a bit, she picked up the needle with the crude forceps from the kit and, casting around for something to use to bend it, grabbed a hand sized smooth stone from the ground around the fire, holding the base of the needle with the forceps and using the stone to press the needle against the fire retaining stones, slowly bending it into a crescent.

“You’re ruining my needle!” Sue complained.

“I’m improving your needle,” Berta explained, finishing up, relatively satisfied with her handiwork. She dropped the needle into the pot of boiling water over the fire. “Do you have any suture material that’s finer than the gurgut webbing?”

“I have spider silk.” Sue handed her a parchment envelope from her kit containing multiple lengths of thin grey suture.

Berta considered the material. Regular silk was not a good alternative for closing a facial wound, but she wasn’t sure about this material. It was almost as thin and fine as 4-0 monocryl.

“It’s expensive-don’t use it if-”

“Is it absorbable? Or does it have to be removed?” Berta held up a length of it and tested its strength by plucking it with her finger.

“It will break down with time but in the skin, it’s best if you remove it after a few days.” Sue frowned, collecting her remaining materials and squirreling them out of Berta’s sight. Sue went back to the third soldier, examining his twisted ankle.

Newly curved needle in hand and improved suture threaded, Berta made short work of the soldier’s forehead laceration with neat, interrupted stitches, pulling the cut closed, working quickly while the soldier cursed.

“You couldn’ gi’m me a drink to dull it?” He grumbled.

“I don’t have anything to give you.” She tied off the last suture and snipped it. “But feel free to swear all you like.”

“Andraste’s bollocks!” He snapped, but then thanked her.
“Perhaps we shouldn’t be encouraging them.” Berta looked over her shoulder to see Mother Giselle approaching. “We should be caring for their souls as well as their bodies.”

Berta looked apologetically at the priestess. “I think that’s more your department.” She turned back to the soldier. “Come back in three days and I’ll take a look to make sure it’s healing properly. Sooner if it bothers you.”

The patched-up soldiers took their leave. Berta went to her tent and pulled out her translated list, handing it over to the priestess.

“Wonderful,” Mother Giselle intoned. “I knew Master Pavus would be the right person to help us. I’ll take this to the quartermaster and I’ll ask the Commander about the personnel and these improvements.”

“The Commander?” Berta had assumed it would be Lady Montilyet who would grant her requests as seneschal rather than the inflexible commander.

“He’s overseeing the repairs and personnel as part of the armed forces.” She patted Berta’s arm. “Don’t worry. I can be very persuasive, and the Commander is a devout man. He will not turn down a priestess.”

Berta wasn’t so sure and wished that she had been a bit more careful not to antagonize him if she was going to be dependent on him for materials. Berta turned back to the surgeon’s kit, fishing out more needles from Sue’s stash, thinking she’d work on several of them.

“No, you don’t,” Sue warned, stealing back her needles. “I’m only giving you one more to ‘improve.’”

Berta sighed and took the needle over to the fire to give it the same treatment as the first. This one snapped in two the instant she tried to bend it. “Fuck,” she said under her breath.

“Doctor Shaw!” Mother Giselle looked shocked. “Such language! You are as bad as the soldiers.”

Berta tried to look chagrined. “Sorry.”

Mother Giselle launched into a lecture about purity of mind and something about the Maker and Andraste. Berta almost immediately quit listening, her usual response to what she considered religious drivel. The priestess’s lecture did get her thinking about who was really best to be in charge of taking care of the refugees and thinking while Mother Giselle might be best suited for caring for their eternal souls, perhaps someone with a more earthly focus should be looking out for them.

“Mother Giselle,” she interrupted, happy to try to end her tirade. “How many healers do we have? How many mages? I hope I’m not speaking out of turn, but I was thinking we should make sure we have adequate coverage, so the refugees and soldiers could both be cared for.”

Mother Giselle did not return to her lecture. “What did you have in mind?”

Berta shrugged. “Well, I was thinking about the water supply in the lake. We really should be locating the water source. And I was wondering whether there are any other healers available. I mean, it would be best if we distributed healers and mages evenly between the refugees and soldiers—”

Mother Giselle held up a restraining hand. “Berta, there will be time enough for planning. You have only been here one day.”
“Well, actually three days, but who’s counting?”

Mother Giselle smiled patiently. “My point is that perhaps you should give yourself some time to adjust. You cannot organize the Inquisition in a single day.”

Berta knew herself too well. “I’m not really very good at taking my time,” she said. “I’m much more of a charge in guns blazing type.”

The priestess looked nonplussed. “I’m not sure what that means, but I think I speak for all of Skyhold when I say we would prefer you not set anything on fire.” She rolled the list in her hands. “Commander Cullen should have the Templars deployed tomorrow and then we can see what we can do about the mages. In the meantime, I’ll get this to the quartermaster.” She left and headed up the stairs to the upper courtyard.

Berta spent the remainder of the afternoon tag teaming with Sue over the various soldiers that trickled through with training injuries, a headache, a sore throat and a probable gastroenteritis. Sue wanted to bleed the soldier with the queasy stomach, but Berta forbid it, not caring if she clashed with the surgeon over a potentially harmful practice. Sue eventually relented when the soldier seemed relieved that there was no bleeding going to take place, and he went away satisfied with the broth and bland diet with extra fluids that Berta prescribed.

It wasn’t until early evening that she sat down again at the entrance to her tent and pulled out the books that Dorian had given her. She grabbed her ball point pen and another piece of parchment and painstakingly translated the titles. The first was In Pursuit of Knowledge: The Travels of a Chantry Scholar by Brother Genitivi. The second, which Berta thought would probably be far more useful in her current role, was The Botanical Compendium by Ines Arancia. After taking 10 minutes to methodically map the runes of the titles to the English alphabet, she realized that any actual reading would be difficult until she knew the runes cold. Fishing down into the bottom of her bag, she pulled out a package of 3 x 5 note cards, secured with a rubber band, she always kept on hand for taking notes while rounding and keeping track of her OR cases and patients. It was a holdover habit from residency but one that she would probably never shake. She neatly made a note card for each common rune and on the flipside, the English equivalent. She mixed them up and proceeded to quiz herself over and over again until she could go both directions easily from common to English and back again. She was working her way through the introduction of the botanical atlas when Dorian appeared at the base of the stairs to escort her to dinner.

“Oh, doing your homework,” he observed. “Making headway?”

Berta grimaced, getting up and putting the books and her notes away. “Very slowly.”

“What is that?” He asked.

Berta looked at her notecards. “Oh, this? It’s a rubber band.”

“Ingenious.” Dorian looked over her books and parchment, wondering what other unique items she might have in her possession.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Berta went into her bag and dug out another ball point pen. “Your pen, Master Pavus.”

Dorian could barely wait to get his hands on the pen and began clicking it incessantly and grinning delightedly. “This is fabulous.”

“You’re welcome.”
“Shall we?” He offered his arm to Berta.

Berta paused a moment before accepting, looking at Sue and wondering whether it would be appropriate to invite her to join. Sue saw her hesitation and waved her hand dismissively.

“A trencher and a spot by the fire is good enough for me.” Berta could hear the slight bitterness beneath the words but didn’t feel she was in a position to insist. She took Dorian’s arm and let him lead the way.

They ascended the stairs and crossed the upper courtyard to a wood and stone building almost directly across from the great hall. They entered through a door at one corner into a warm room with a large fire in the central hearth and heavy wooden tables and chairs arranged along the walls around the room. There were two long tables at the far end, blocking off an entrance to a back room that seemed to function as a kitchen, forming a bar where soldiers and hangers on were lined up for tankards and mugs. Dorian led her towards a table to the left of the entrance with room for six. Berta stopped short, as one of the seats at the table was taken by the young man who had escorted her to the dungeon along with Iron Bull. The young man looked up as they approached and gave a half smile and nod of acknowledgement.

“Well, you don’t look too worse for wear,” he said, coming to his feet. “No hard feelings, right?”

“Oh, you two know each other?” Dorian looked surprised.

“Not by name,” Berta explained. “No hard feelings, so long as you’re not planning on returning me to a cell.”

The young man smiled more broadly. “No plans on my end.” He gestured to the table inviting them to sit. “I’m Cremisius Aclassi, second in command of The Bull’s Chargers. Everyone calls me Krem.”

“The Bull’s Chargers?” Berta asked.

“Mercenary outfit,” the other occupant of the table explained. He was a dwarf with strawberry blond hair gathered in a ratty short ponytail, a gold earring and an open shirt showing a remarkable amount of chest hair. There were two giant empty tankards in front of him and a third that was half full.

“May I present Varric Tethras, merchant prince of Kirkwall, famous novelist and general scoundrel.” Dorian gestured to the dwarf, who did not get up.

“Charmed,” Berta replied and proffered her hand when the dwarf extended his. He gave a rather melodramatic kiss to the back of her hand.

“And you are?”

Dorian rescued her hand from Varric’s grasp and seated her on the opposite side of the table next to Bull’s lieutenant. “This is Doctor Berta Shaw, a healer from New Hamp Shire. Did I get that right?”

“Close enough.” She smiled at Dorian as he sat across her.

“Oh, so you’re the one Chuckles and Curly dug out of the snow.” He looked amused.

Berta was confused. “Chuckles and Curly?”

Dorian rolled his eyes. “Solas and Cullen.”
Varric looked pleased with himself. “I do nicknames. It’s kinda my thing.”

Berta hadn’t met Solas, but she found it hard to think of a nickname less apropos for the Commander than “Curly.” “I can hardly wait to see what you come up with for me.”

Varric squinted at her considering. “I don’t have a read on you yet; we’ll see.”

“Come now, Varric, you’re being restrained,” Dorian chided gently. “You had my nickname within five minutes of making my acquaintance.”

“Not everyone I meet is as easily characterized as you, Sparkler.”

Berta smirked at Dorian. Yes, Sparkler was just about perfect.

“No, please.”

Dorian gestured to get the bar keep’s attention and asked for two suppers from the bar maid who came over to take their order.

Berta leaned over to Dorian after the barmaid left. “I don’t have any money,” she said apologetically.

Dorian waved away her concerns. “You do, actually. Your Inquisition pay. Though you haven’t been paid yet, I dare say. Cabot allows all Inquisition members to eat and drink on credit. But today is my treat anyway- I invited you.”

The food arrived promptly, a hearty vegetable stew in broth with a side of brown bread, hard cheese and tiny dried berries that tasted like currants. Dorian also ordered them two tankards of ale.

Varric kicked back on his chair, looking at Berta with a discerning eye, watching her carefully as she ate. “So, what’s your story?”

Berta swallowed the mouthful of potato she was chewing and shook her head. “I don’t have a ‘story.’”

Varric gave her a look like she’d just told him she was the Queen of England. “Sweetheart, everyone has a story.”

“I’m really pretty boring.”

“I doubt that.” He leaned forward in his chair, swirling his tankard. “So, where’d you grow up?”

“New York City.”

“Again, with the ‘New.’ Her people put ‘New’ in front of all their place names,” Dorian said to Varric, speaking with authority.

Varric ignored him. “And what is New York City like?”

Berta considered how to describe it in a way he would understand. “It’s the largest city in my country. It fills an entire island at the mouth of two rivers. There are buildings so tall that they are called skyscrapers.”
Varric was practically salivating over the details. “You’re right, completely boring.”

Berta smiled. “Point taken.”

“And what about your family?”

Berta sighed. “Well, I’m an only child. My mother died when I was twelve and my father and I are not close. He still lives in New York, but I haven’t seen him in years.”

“Ah, family drama. This is good.” He stroked his chin as he listened. “And what about your own family, a husband, children? A lover that you left behind?”

“Oooh, do tell!” interrupted Dorian, cupping his face in his hands as if he was all ears.

Berta chuckled. “I don’t have a husband or children. I have plenty of friends and other surgeons I work with, but I was about to leave to do some traveling when I ended up here so probably no one has noticed that I’m missing yet.” It sounded even more pathetic than she had imagined when she said it out loud. “So why all the questions? Do you quiz everyone about their past?”

Varric took a sip of his ale. “As a matter of fact, I do. How can I write the book about the glory of the Inquisition if I don’t know all about the past of each of the players?”

Berta cocked her eyebrow at him. “You’re writing a book about all this?”

Varric nodded sagely. “Of course. My best-selling novels are fiction, but The Tale of the Champion brought me a pretty profit. It’s the story of the Champion of Kirkwall.” He winked conspiratorially. “We’re friends.”

“So, I really should be careful because anything I say or do might end up in your novel?”

He grinned broadly. “Fair warning.”

“Varric!” The room went silent at the name yelled loud and clear through the tavern.

Varric hunkered down in his seat and placed his hand over his face, trying to hide. “Oh, boy...”

Berta’s eyes went from the dwarf to the woman charging in their direction. She was tall and lean with short black hair and dramatic features accented by a long pink scar down her left cheek. Her jaw was clenched, and her cheeks were an angry red. She wore a breast plate and her gloved hands were clutched into fists at her sides.

“Excuse me,” Krem managed quickly and disappeared to the opposite side of the tavern behind the fireplace. Berta watched him go, amazed that he could move that fast.

“You knew where Hawke was all along!” The woman thundered, grabbing the back of Varric’s chair, seeking to yank him out of it, but the dwarf was too fast, jumping out of his seat and skittering under her thrown fist and around the table to grab Berta’s shoulders like a human shield.

“You’re damn right I did!” he yelled back.

“Hey, don’t!” Berta began.

“You conniving little shit,” the woman spat, circling the table.

“You kidnapped me! You interrogated me!” He spat back. “What did you expect?”
Berta hunched forward in her chair, hoping to avoid any physical blows.

Dorian was on his feet. “Ah, Seeker Pentaghast, may I present-”

“Stay out of this, Tevinter.” The Seeker looked menacingly at Dorian.

“It can wait.” He sat again, shrugging at Berta and giving up his attempt to intervene.

“We needed someone to lead this Inquisition. Leliana and I searched for Hawke, but she was gone. We thought it suspicious, but no. It was just you.” Some of the fight seemed to leach out of her, replaced by disgust.

“The Inquisition has a leader.” Varric planted his hands on his hips, not backing down.

The Seeker shook her head. “Hawke was our only hope. She was the Champion of Kirkwall. The mages respected her. And you kept her from us.”

“For what it’s worth, I think Lavellan is doing a fine job. I have faith in her,” he added defensively.

The Seeker was seething. “Hawke would have been at the Conclave. If anyone could have saved Most Holy...”

“I was protecting my friend. I’m not responsible for what happened there,” he countered.

The Seeker’s nostrils flared in revulsion, her lips becoming a thin line. “You are a liar, a snake. Even after the Conclave when we needed Hawke most, you kept her secret.”

Varric threw up his hands in exasperation. “She’s with us now. We’re on the same side.”

“We all know whose side you’re on, Varric. It will never be the Inquisition’s.” Her loathing was plain.

“Oh, like I have no reason to help the Inquisition finish this?” the dwarf said sarcastically.

“I will not forget this, dwarf.” She spun on her heel and stalked out of the tavern, the normal murmur of conversation returning in her wake.

Berta looked awkwardly from Varric to Dorian, not sure what to say considering the tongue lashing the dwarf had just received.

“Sorry about that,” Varric mumbled, patting Berta’s shoulder apologetically. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve lost my appetite.” He tossed a couple of coins on the table and made his exit.

“So now you’ve met Seeker Pentaghast,” Dorian remarked cheerily and dug back into his stew.

Berta took a deep breath. “I’m not sure that really counts. She was far too busy yelling at Varric to notice me.” Her forehead wrinkled. “What was that all about?”

“It’s a long story.” He gestured to her supper. “Eat up and I’ll regale you.”

Berta started back in on her dinner while Dorian explained about the mage uprising in Kirkwall, the beginnings of the mage rebellion, Marian Hawke’s involvement and her disappearance after her lover, the apostate mage Anders, had blown up the Kirkwall chantry.

“And after all that, the Seeker wanted Marian Hawke to lead the Inquisition?” Berta tore off a bit of bread and dipped it in her soup. “She doesn’t sound like a great candidate.”
“It may indicate how desperate the Chantry was that Cassandra and Leliana were even considering Hawke as their Inquisitor.”

“And what was the Conclave about?”

Dorian drank from his tankard. “Well, that was really the beginning of the Inquisition.” He told Berta of the Conclave’s hope for peace between the mages and Templars, the death of Divine Justinia, Corypheus’s involvement and Aveline Lavellan’s appearance as the Herald of Andraste. Berta listened carefully, refraining from interrupting to ask too many questions, thinking that Varric had his work cut out for him if he was going to turn this into a coherent story.

The barmaid came and cleared their plates. Berta lingered a bit over her ale, thinking that it was thicker and less bitter than most beer at home. Home. It had only been three days, but home seemed light years away. She swirled the tankard and stared at the liquid suddenly feeling overwhelmingly exhausted.

“Are you alright?” Dorian asked.

“Yes, just tired.” She set the tankard down. “Thank you for everything today, Dorian. I appreciate everything you’ve done- the meal, the tutoring, the books. You really have been too kind to me.”

“It has been my pleasure. Intelligent company is always a welcome diversion.” He smiled and tipped his glass to her.

“Maybe tomorrow you can tell me more about the Chantry. And Templars.” She decided not to say anything about her preconceived notions of Templars from her world.

Dorian shook his head slightly. “While I do consider myself Andrastian, the Inquisition is firmly under the auspices of the southern Chantry. You’d best ask Mother Hen.”

Berta made a face. “I’d been avoiding that. I’m afraid she’d try to convert me.”

“That she would.”

Berta drained the last of her ale, enjoying the warm sleepy feeling that was sneaking through her from her full belly and the beer. She covered her mouth but couldn’t hide her yawn.

“Oh, am I boring you?” Dorian quipped.

“I’m sorry. It’s been a long day.”

“Let’s be off, then.”

He escorted her out of the Herald’s Rest and into gathering twilight of the upper courtyard. Torches were being lit around the walls and the orange glow of fire light spilled out the open doors of the great hall.

“It’s a lovely evening out, take a quick turn around the battlements with me?” Berta felt like she could use a brief stretch of her legs before going back to the infirmary.

“Lovely? It’s freezing. Are you sure you’re not Fereldan?” Dorian shivered and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Perhaps if you wore something a bit more practical,” she observed, eyeing his bare shoulder.

“I will not hide this physique under drab Fereldan garb.” He flexed his shoulder to punctuate his
point. “I am headed in to find a fire and perhaps some mulled wine before bed. But don’t let me keep you from exploring.” He gave a flourishing salute. “I’ll see you on the morrow.”

“Goodnight, sweet prince,” she said, heading up the stairs to the battlements. The flight of stairs was not long and when she reached the top, she wished she had her coat. The wind picked up at the top of the wall, blowing cold over the mountains, glowing a deep purple in the darkening night. Berta looked out over the wall towards the lake. There were hundreds of tents below and small fires scattered between them, glittering like topaz. The wind came up again, ruffling her hair and blowing the clouds across the sky. Berta looked up to heavens, looking for Orion’s belt or the Big Dipper out of habit before realizing that these were completely new stars in a new sky. And there were so many stars, more than she had ever have seen at home, the night sky clear with no city lights to compete with the starlight.

“What are you doing up here?”

Berta started, immediately feeling guilty as if she shouldn’t be up on the battlements but down in the infirmary where she belonged. She turned to see Commander Cullen, holding a crate of scrolls and books, quills and ink in his arms.

“I am stargazing.”

The Commander looked at her suspiciously as if he couldn’t figure out why anyone would do such a thing. “There are many more stars visible here than at home,” she continued. “The night is really quite beautiful, if a bit cold.” She figured it couldn’t hurt to try to engage in some friendly conversation.

“Oh. I suppose it is a nice night.” He stood there stiffly, holding his crate of supplies.

“What are you doing?” Berta asked, indicating the crate.

“Moving my office to one of the towers. It will be convenient to the throne room after the bridge is repaired.”

“And inconvenient for someone looking to borrow your desk.” Berta smiled, hoping she was being charming.

“Well, yes, quite.”

Yes, he definitely cracked a smile, Berta congratulated herself. Grasping for something else to talk about, Berta looked towards the lake. “I didn’t realize the army was so large,” she observed.

His smile vanished. “Yes, we’ve had volunteers arriving from all over, in addition to all the refugees from Haven.” He regarded her suspiciously again. “I’m wondering why you are interested in the size of our forces.”

“The size...?” Berta realized belatedly that she had gone and stepped in it. “I was just making conversation. I assure you that I have no ill intent regarding the Inquisition. I really just want to go home.”

“Yes, home,” he mused. “To a place that none of us have ever heard of.”

Wanting to demonstrate her sincerity, she added, “If you want to be rid of me sooner, you could have someone take me back to where I was found. Maybe I could find some clue or-”

The Commander scoffed. “I have neither the time nor the resources to send men on a wild nug chase
through avalanche territory crawling with hostile Avvar. Lavellan closed the rift there before we even found you. It would be pointless to go back.”

Berta felt her teeth clench in response. The man was infuriating. “Well, I guess you’re stuck with me then.”

“Unfortunately, I guess I am.” He hefted the crate in his arms and headed into the adjacent tower. “Goodnight, healer.”

“Good night, Commander.” Fuck you, too, she thought.

He slammed the door behind him and Berta turned back to her star gazing, finding the small amount of peace of mind she had gained from her dinner with Dorian completely ruined. She sighed heavily and headed towards the steps down from the battlements.

“He doesn’t know you want to help.”

Berta started again, the young man who had tried to kill Garin earlier in the day, appearing out of the shadows. “You shouldn’t sneak up on people. It’s rude.”

The young man’s pale face shown in the starlight. “I am Cole. You are Berta.”

“Yes, that’s right.” She inched toward the stairs, not feeling safe with this odd boy. She had the sudden thought that if she had her car keys, she would have had them between her fingers in a heartbeat.

“You are safe. You don’t want to die.” He looked sadly at her. “What is a car?”

Berta shivered, pins and needles prickling the back of her neck. “What did you say?”

“You would scratch my eyes out with your car keys. That’s mean.”

Berta was breathing fast, completely unsettled. “I’m going to go now. Please don’t follow me.”

“The Commander is confused. The little bottle makes him shake but he tests the chains.”

Berta shook her head, backing slowly towards the stairs. “Uh, yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.” She walked down the stairs sideways, keeping her eyes on him, feeling like he might pounce on her if he got the chance. Once she reached the upper courtyard she practically ran back to the infirmary. The fire was low, and she added two logs from the wood pile. She saw that the single sleeping soldier lying near the fire was now on a bed roll and smiled and reminded herself to thank Mother Giselle in the morning. She entered her tent and tied the flaps closed behind her, fumbling in the dark. She undressed down to her chemise and climbed into the cot, pulling the wool blanket up to her chin, wishing she had a door to lock rather than just a tent, the large haunting eyes of the odd boy, Cole, keeping her awake. It was a long time before she fell asleep.
Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.

-Arundhati Roy

Musical accompaniment:
“Revolution” – UNSECRET
“Stayin’ Alive” - The BeeGees

In the morning, Berta saw that Mother Giselle had made good on her promise as, in addition to more bed rolls, several cots and pails, there were two mages, Mikel and Fiona, waiting by the fire when Berta exited her tent after dressing. Sue was nearby, giving the mages the side eye and keeping her distance. Meena appeared with breakfast for the four of them and acquiesced readily when Berta asked about setting a bath for her as part of her evening routine. Fiona, for her part, seemed happy to be there and ready to help, but Mikel was equal parts surly and on edge, flinching when Berta addressed him and dragging his feet when asked to help, which was a change from his previous attitude in the refugee camp.

Two soldiers arrived, trudging down the steps along the wall from the upper courtyard, carrying a litter between them, loaded with crates and buckets, another small wooden apothecary case, blankets and more bed rolls. They marched into the infirmary area and set down their load.

Berta rushed over, looking at the supplies and started to help unload them while taking stock. She’d gotten almost everything she’d requested. “Only one tent?”

“Running low on tents at the moment, Serah,” the first soldier replied. “They’re all in use for the refugee camp. The Commander said to tell you that we should have canvas to make more next week.”

Berta nodded, grateful for the supplies she did receive. She’d have to thank the Commander.

“Could you help me set this up?” Berta began unfolding the tent, thinking that she could probably figure it out, but help would be appreciated.

“Here, let me, Serah.” The soldiers quickly relieved her of the tent and efficiently pitched it directly adjacent to hers.

Berta looked through the second apothecary kit, noting that there were several empty jars that she’d need Sue or Elan’s help filling but that several were half full and there were a set of glass measuring vials and several tools in the lower compartment, including small snips and a roll of twine. There was a slot for the heavy stone mortar and pestle in the center of the top section and the whole thing was lined with deep brown crushed velvet. It was used but had been well maintained.

The surgeon’s kit was another matter entirely. The tools were encrusted with dark material that she assumed was old blood. She hoped they weren’t rusted beneath the filth. She took all the tools out of the leather case and dropped them all into a bucket. She’d set them to soak, give them a scrub and then boil them to see if they could be salvaged.

“So where do you want this?” the second soldier asked Sue.

Berta looked up to see what the soldier was talking about. He was indicating the litter on which they’d carried all the supplies and she realized that it was the door that had formed part of the
Sue shrugged and looked at Berta. "Did you want this for something?"

"No. I don’t think we really need it for anything. I guess you can put it on the scrap pile." She indicated the rubble over at the base of the scaffolding by the wall.

The first soldier gave an Inquisition salute, folding his arm crisply across his chest. "My lady, the Commander ordered it brought to you with the other supplies."

Berta’s mouth twisted. You cannot be serious, she thought, before realizing that orders were probably taken very seriously in the Inquisition. She sighed, wondering if this was a peace offering or further evidence of the Commander’s irascible nature. "You can put it back where it belongs, I suppose." She indicated the crates still sitting to the side of the steps.

"Right away, Serah!" The soldiers took the door and placed it back on the crates.

"Wait a moment." Berta gathered the parchment and pen from the table in her tent and brought them out to the desk. "I have a message for the Commander."

Commander,
Thank you for the supplies (and the desk).
Doctor Shaw

It took her longer than she would have liked to translate the English letters to the runes in her head, but in the end, she felt confident that it was correct. Seeing her own name written in the runes gave her an uneasy feeling, wondering if she would have occasion to write it enough times that it would begin to feel like second nature. She folded the parchment note and gave it to the waiting soldiers who accepted it, bowed and left.

A few soldiers began trickling in, looking for treatment for various ailments. Sue began on a first come, first serve basis but Berta thought at some point they might have to make at least a passing attempt at triage. Berta started by examining the foot of a soldier who had come to the infirmary complaining of pain. His little toe had been rubbed raw from ill-fitting boots and was angry and swollen, clearly infected with pus seeping from beneath the toe nail which was barely hanging on. If the infection had settled into the bone, there would be nothing to do but amputate, which Berta, and presumably the soldier, wanted to avoid.

“Fiona, do you think you can treat this?”

Fiona looked at the soldier’s foot, wrinkling her nose in disgust at the appearance of his toe. Berta made a mental note to talk to her about her bedside manner.

“Things like this are difficult to heal. I can ease the pain, take the swelling and redness away but it almost always comes back.” She shrugged. “And it takes a lot of effort.”

"And why is that?" Berta asked.

Fiona frowned. "It is hard to explain if you do not use magic. There is…resistance. When I close a simple wound, the flesh obeys me. It follows my commands to heal. When it is more complicated like this..." She gestured to the soldier's foot. "Well, it resists. Something in the wound does not bend to my will. With enough effort and lyrium I might be successful but..." She trailed off, looking dissatisfied.

Berta smiled crookedly. "What if I told you that I have a theory about what is resisting you?"
Fiona raised an eyebrow and looked at Berta skeptically. "How would you know what is causing this?"

"Well, I don't for sure. But I'd like to explain some things my world knows about healing and see if it helps you."

Fiona nodded, clearly interested. Berta gestured for her to follow over to Berta's new desk, grabbing a page of parchment and her ball point. She tapped her lower lip with the pen, considering where to start. She decided the best approach would be simple, starting with pathology 101.

“There are four things to look for with inflammation, that is, a complicated wound, as you put it: rubor, tumor, calor and dolor.” She wrote each word down.

Fiona looked at what she had written. “That is ancient Tevene?”

“Uh, yeah.” Close enough, Berta thought. “Rubor is redness, tumor is swelling, calor, heat and dolor, pain. Together, they make up the four cardinal signs of inflammation. And inflammation is a sign of infection.”

Fiona nodded. “Sometimes when a wound is bad enough, there is a fever. Calor, correct?”

“Precisely.” Berta smiled, glad that none of this so far seemed to be a foreign concept. “Pain can be caused by lots of things, inflammation among them. And inflammation can be caused by lots of disease processes but infection, here in Thedas at least, is probably one of the most common.”

“And what does this have to do with the resistance I feel?”

“I think it has to do with the cause of the infection.” Berta paused. This was where she hoped Fiona would not write her off as crazy. “These signs of inflammation in the wound are caused by tiny living creatures called bacteria.”

Fiona cocked her head. “Tiny creatures? I’ve never seen something like that...oh, unless you mean the maggots that sometimes grow in a wound left open and untended.”

Berta nodded. “Just like that but much, much smaller. These organisms are so small that they cannot be seen.”

“But if they can’t be seen, how do you know they’re there?”

“By using a device called a microscope. It allows you to see things that are very small. They have several forms. This is called cocci,” she drew a small round circle, "this is bacilli," she drew an elongated oval. "This form can have small 'tails' that come out from one end or from all around it," she drew a flagellum on the bacillus, "and the last type is a spirochete.” She drew a twirling, spring-like line and then looked at Fiona to see how she was absorbing this information. She was frowning slightly at the page but looked like maybe she was chewing on this new knowledge, trying to digest it. Berta decided that the mage didn't look like she was about to denounce Berta as insane, so she plowed ahead. "So, my theory about the resistance you feel is that the bacteria, these tiny life forms, are causing the resistance. In my world, we have medicines which kill the bacteria but here, I haven't seen anything like that.”

Fiona was staring at the simple drawings. Berta could almost see the gears turning in her head. "The bacteria must be killed for healing to occur?"

"Our bodies have ways to fight off and kill bacteria- when that happens pus forms in a wound- that white residue is the remains of the body's defense mechanism. But sometimes the bacteria are too
many and the infection spreads."

A small smile crept across Fiona's lips. "I think I can use this."

Berta grinned, thinking that this conversation had gone much more smoothly than she could have possibly hoped. "The soldier's toe has bacteria in the skin and soft tissues, and maybe even deep into the bone if the infection has been going on long enough."

Fiona nodded decisively. "I will try."

They returned to the soldier and Berta cleaned his toe as best she could with a cloth and water. The soldier winced at her touch and looked fearfully at the elf but said nothing. Fiona crouched close to his foot as Berta looked on. She placed her hands over the toe and closing her eyes, just as Berta had seen her do before in the refugee camp. Nothing seemed to happen for a moment, but then Berta could see the redness fading, the swelling decreasing. The soldier cried out and flinched away. Fiona's eyes flashed open and she grabbed his foot.

"Hold still," she hissed.

The soldier looked at Berta, as if for confirmation that this mage wasn't going to harm him. She nodded reassuringly, hoping that Fiona wasn't doing any damage with her new knowledge. Fiona closed her eyes again, and released his foot, her hands over his toe again, but this time, her fingers were curled like claws and there was a faint odor, like ozone. The soldier flinched again but then held still.

Fiona flattened her hands again over the soldier's foot again for a moment and then opened her eyes. "That may have done it."

Berta looked at the soldier's toe which looked normal. She touched it firmly, pressing on the newly reattached toenail. "How does that feel?"

"Right near perfect." He grinned and wiggled his toes.

"Good," Berta replied. "Get some better fitting boots. You don't want this to happen again. Come back tomorrow. I want to make sure it's completely healed." The soldier gathered up his footwear and headed off, thanking both Fiona and Berta with a jaunty wave.

Berta looked at Fiona, feeling buoyed by the outcome. "So, what changed?"

Fiona smiled at Berta, clearly pleased with herself. "I focused as I always do. I healed his flesh first and then when I met the resistance, instead of pushing to heal it, I killed it."

Berta tried not to look alarmed. "You killed it?"

"Yes. Magic can be used to heal. It can also be a weapon, used to kill." She looked exhilarated. "I have never directed that type of power toward someone I did not wish harm. But I can focus the magic and...well, you saw the result." She took a deep breath. "I need to rest for a minute. That level of control is tiring."

Fiona went and sat by the fire, cross legged with her eyes closed, looking meditative. Berta had a million questions but held off, letting the mage rest. She glanced toward Mikel, considering giving him the same instruction but then thought better of it. Fiona was bright and seemed particularly gifted at healing. She wasn't as sure about Mikel and unleashing a potentially destructive force at a patient was not something she was willing to encourage until she understood it better. The initial results were exciting, though. This could definitely widen the impact of the mages.
Berta saw several more patients over the course of the morning, working in tandem with Fiona and Mikel, explaining pathology as best she could. The healing the soldiers received at the hands of the mages seemed improved by their new knowledge. No further infections presented themselves, so no further tests of Fiona’s new understanding of germ theory could be performed, but Berta thought that if Fiona was going to be utilizing potentially harmful magic it was perhaps lucky that she had used it first on something as dispensable as a little toe.

Near noontime, Meena arrived with lunch, and when a lull presented itself, they sat down to eat.

“Sue, take a break. Join us,” Berta invited.

Sue looked at Fiona and Mikel and made no effort to hide her discomfort. “I think I’ll go find Elan and eat at the tavern.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Meena brought plenty. It’s-” Fiona silenced Berta by placing a hand on her arm and giving a slight shake of her head.

Sue nodded brusquely and headed off up the stairs.

Berta watched her go. “What’s her problem?”

Fiona sighed. “The disdain and misunderstanding of those who have been warned of magic their entire lives.”

“But why? From what I’ve seen, your magical skills are far superior to anything else Thedas can offer for healing.” Berta shrugged realizing that she’d answered her own question. “She probably just feels threatened.”

“Magic is made to serve man,” Mikel grumbled. “She’s just unhappy that the chains of the Inquisition aren’t literal.”

Berta looked from Fiona to Mikel and back, feeling like she was missing something. “Wait, you’re prisoners of the Inquisition?”

“Yes,” said Mikel, as Fiona simultaneously said, “No.”

“So, which is it?”

“Not exactly,” Fiona replied, waving her hand in a more or less gesture. “We, the mages, that is, retreated to Redcliffe, in Fereldan. We were pursued by Templars-”

“Rogue Templar fanatics,” Mikel chimed in.

Fiona shook her head sadly. “We were being beaten. Our numbers were dwindling and then Alexius arrived, promising to take us to Tevinter, where a mage can have a better life.”

“Of course, it was all a lie,” Mikel said bitterly.

“I made the best decision I could at the time,” Fiona said, not unkindly.

“Your decision?” Berta asked. “You’re the leader of the rebel mages?”

“I was.” Fiona shook her head sadly. “I suppose I still am for what it’s worth. The King of Fereldan did not take kindly to a Tevinter force occupying one of his villages and he was angry at the bloodshed caused by the rebellion, so he banished us from Fereldan.”
“Can he do that?” Berta wondered aloud.

“He’s the King. The bastard can do whatever he wants,” Mikel grumbled.

Fiona shot a disapproving look at the younger mage. “The King is a good man. He was only doing what he thought was best for his people.”

“And how about the mages from Kinloch Hold? Are we not also his people?” Mikel shot back.

“So how did you end up with the Inquisition?” Berta interrupted.

“The Inquisitor told King Alistair that she would takes us from Fereldan. We had little choice. We had nowhere else to go.” She looked at Mikel before continuing. “So, the Inquisitor conscripted us.”

“Conscripted you?”

“I would have preferred an alliance of equals, but it is better to be protected by the Inquisition under any circumstances than to be completely on our own.” Fiona frowned at the memory. “The Templars would have fallen on us like dogs and killed every last mage when we left Redcliffe. This was the best I could do to keep us alive.”

“From Circles to Skyhold,” Mikel spat. “Just another cage.”

“That is not true, Mikel. Even you have to admit that we have been treated fairly while we have been here.”

“Sure, we have, if you count being watched like thieves and murderers.” He nodded towards the gates. Berta looked over her shoulder and noticed the two guards at the gate. They were both standing at ease, but she couldn’t help but notice that as they scanned the courtyard, they did seem to pay particular attention to the mages. Berta also wondered at their placement in the lower courtyard. They seemed better prepared to prevent someone leaving than someone entering.

Fiona stood and gathered the empty trencher. “Be that as it may, Mikel. We are here now, and it would be in everyone’s best interest to be cooperative and well behaved.”

“Yes, Enchanter,” he mumbled, staring at the ground.

“That is no longer my title,” she reminded him, brushing the crumbs off the front of her robe. “I’ll take this back to the kitchens.” She strode off towards the far end of the lower courtyard. Berta noticed the soldiers’ eyes follow her the whole way.

Mikel got to his feet and walked over to his staff, picking it up and leaning on it as he watched Fiona walk away. He turned towards the upper courtyard and waved. Berta followed his gaze to see who he waved to and saw two mages she had not seen before, a young woman with red hair who couldn’t be any older than a teenager and another dark-haired young man, both wearing mages’ robes and each carrying a staff, quickly trotting down the stairs. Berta smiled and got to her feet, thinking these must be friends of Mikel’s. Mikel walked up to Berta and placed a hand on her shoulder. She glanced at him, a little surprised at his familiarity. She was startled by the look in his eyes, deadly serious and sad.

“Sorry about this, Berta.”

She opened her mouth to ask what he meant and suddenly it was frozen, half open. She wanted to grab his arm, to ask what was happening but her hands would not move. She could not turn her head to see beyond the spot where Mikel had been standing a moment before. She could not even blink at
the bright fire ball that flew past her, crashing into the wall beside the gate, the blast of heat on her face, cinders exploding into the grass and the wood pile beside the scaffolding which immediately began to smolder. Berta began to panic as she tried to take a breath and found she could not breathe either, her entire body paralyzed in place like a statue. Her head was turned so she could see the guards at the gate draw their swords and rush forward to meet Mikel and the two other mages. A white flash came from the red headed mage’s staff, the soldier closest to her freezing in place, a pale coating of frost covering his entire body. The other mage twirled his staff and threw his hand out towards the other advancing soldier, a crack of thunder painfully hitting Berta’s ears at the same moment the lightening flashed towards the soldier. Berta felt her hair stand on end from the electricity and saw the soldier fly backward, landing hard on her back, smoke rising from her clothing. The male mage ran ahead, shouting, “Come on!” to the red head and Mikel, who paused, looking at the two soldiers, his face pained before running after his fellow mages. All this happened in a heartbeat.

Suddenly Berta could breathe and move again, and she pitched forward, landing hard on her hands and knees, gasping for breath. There was a silvery, circular pattern on the ground around her, quickly fading to nothing.

“Halt!” ordered a strong, loud voice.

Berta looked up to see a woman standing on the causeway between the gate and the distant gatehouse, sword drawn, her full plate armor with a lion’s head on the breast glinting in the afternoon light. Her hair was dark and pulled back from her face, a hard mask of determination as she faced the mages. Her sword began to glow as if white hot and she reached a hand out towards the mages. She glanced skyward and drew her hand into a fist, a brilliant column of white light lancing down from the heavens to the bridge ahead of her, cracking loudly as the light struck the stone, the impact throwing back the mages, leaving them crumpled on the ground like rag dolls, unmoving. The woman ran forward kicking Mikel’s staff away from his hands as she ran into the courtyard, yelling for assistance before running back to grab the staves of the other two mages. Soldiers came clattering down the steps by the outer wall and two more soldiers in full plate came running from the gatehouse, swords drawn, advancing on the incapacitated mages.

Berta slowly got to her feet, shaking a little, taking in the frenzied activity at the gate. The soldiers were forming up, quickly creating a bucket brigade from the well to the smoking debris near the scaffolding. Mikel and the other two unconscious mages were bound and hauled off up the stairs, none too gently. The first guard to be attacked, the one hit with frost, was shaking off the spell, leaning heavily on another soldier. They were headed towards the infirmary hearth. Berta grabbed a free bed roll and moved it closer to the fire, gesturing for him to sit, limping a bit herself from where her knees had slammed into the ground. She looked for the other soldier and saw that she was still lying immobile on the ground, two of her comrades standing over her uncertainly. Berta glanced back at the first soldier, warming himself, and reassured herself that he would be fine. She ran to the collapsed soldier, dropping to her aching knees at her side and shaking her shoulder. She didn’t respond.

"What's her name?" Berta asked the soldiers standing by.

"Sergeant Alia," the first said.

“She’s dead,” her other comrade hissed.

"Not yet," Berta replied crisply. "Alia, can you hear me? Are you alright?" The soldier did not respond. Berta pulled off the soldier's glove and checked for a pulse. She couldn’t find one. She quickly unbuckled the soldiers breast plate, lifted it with both hands and tossed it aside. She wondered briefly if electrocution by mage was AC or DC current and therefore more likely to cause
ventricular fibrillation or asystole, before discarding her brain’s irrelevant musings as she didn’t have a defibrillator anyway. Thinking that if there was a time and place for a chest thump, this was it, Berta raised her fist and brought it down hard on the soldier’s sternum, feeling self-conscious and over-dramatic even as she knew she might be doing the only thing she could to save her life. She very briefly checked for a pulse a second time and again found none. She felt the soldier’s sternum and placed her interlocked hands over her chest, keeping her arms straight and beginning to push rhythmically on her chest to the rhythm of “Stayin’ Alive” knowing that particular song would give her a compression rate of 120 beats per minute. She counted to thirty compressions and then leaned over the woman, reaching to thrust her jaw forward to open her mouth and throat, using both hands, cursing herself for not having large enough hands to do it one handed, sealed her mouth over the soldier’s and gave a breath, turned her face away and breathed again, watching the sergeant’s chest rise and fall. She checked her pulse again and felt nothing so began chest compressions again, counting to thirty. She glanced up at the soldiers surrounding their fallen comrade, who were staring at her as if she were violating the body. She gave two more breaths.

“Berta, what are you doing?” Fiona was beside her, her face white and stricken. “What happened? Where’s Mikel?”

“Your little mage friends killed Alia,” one of the soldiers growled, starting towards Fiona menacingly.

“Stop it,” Berta said harshly to the soldiers while continuing to give chest compressions. “Fiona can you restart her heart?”

Fiona began to move closer but two of the soldiers were suddenly on her grabbing her roughly and pulling her away.

“Fiona!” screamed Berta, starting after them.

Fiona shook her head. “I’ll be alright. Stay with her. Don’t let her die.” She looked frightened but went with the soldiers willingly.

Berta turned back to her patient and gave two more breaths to the fallen soldier, realizing that things would go very poorly for Fiona and the other mages if the soldier died. There was still no pulse, so she continued the compressions, feeling the sweat drip down the back of her neck, her arms starting to ache as the adrenaline began to wear off and the desperation began to set in. A small crowd had gathered watching her in silence and confusion, not understanding her purpose. She stopped her rhythmic pounding of the soldier’s chest to breathe into her lungs again. She checked again for a pulse, still none, and started her compressions yet again. The courtyard was eerily silent, the only sound Berta’s counting under her breath and quietly cursing. One, two, three, she counted again, pushing straight down on the soldier’s sternum. Fuck-ing heart, start pump-ing, she thought, chanting in time with her chest compressions. She bent over to force a breath into the woman’s lungs. She turned her face away to take another breath and felt the soldier exhale. She sat up, shocked, her hand flying to check her wrist. There was a strong pulse there.

“Oh, thank god,” Berta cried out with relief.

The soldier slowly blinked and began to cough, then grabbing her chest and wincing. “I feel like a bog fisher rolled over me,” she said hoarsely.

“Alia!” One of the soldier’s yelled and they swarmed around her.

“Okay, back off, give her some room,” Berta cautioned and was promptly ignored, the soldiers helping up their comrade. Berta would have preferred to stabilize her spine and move her carefully
since she’d been thrown back by the lightning blast, but the soldiers’ rejoicing was clearly taking precedence.

“Stop!” Berta yelled, pitching her voice a little lower than normal, utilizing her best surgeon-in-charge voice. The soldiers looked at her, freezing in their tracks. “You and you,” she said, pointing to the soldiers on either side of Alia, “please carry the Sergeant to the infirmary. The rest of you can go.” She had no idea if she had any authority to order these men around, but she guessed that if she gave an order with enough presumptive authority they would do as she asked, and they did. She followed the two soldiers carrying her patient the short distance to the infirmary. Berta unrolled another pallet and bade Alia make herself comfortable and then helped her to take her boots off. The balls of both her feet showed first and second-degree burns, exit wounds where the lightning from the mage’s attack had flowed from her body into the ground. Berta set the soldier’s feet to soak in cold water while she waited for additional water to boil and was cleaning the soldier’s wounds when Sue arrived from the upper courtyard.

“I heard all the excitement. I can’t leave you alone for five minutes...” she laughed ruefully, shaking her head.

Berta ignored her comment, not feeling like a mage nearly killing one of the soldiers was something to joke about. “What’s the best poultice to put on this? Or would a salve of elfroot be better?”

Sue looked at the soldier’s reddened, blistered feet. “For burns, a salve would be my choice.”

Berta nodded and began taking the ointment base, mortar and pestle and dried elfroot leaves from the potions box. She took the supplies over to the desk and began to prepare the salve the way Sue had shown her. Sue drifted over to watch her prepare the treatment.

“You shouldn’t feel bad, you know. It’s not your fault they attacked the watch.”

Berta stopped in the middle of grinding the dried leaves into the ointment and put a hand on her hip. “I don’t feel bad and I don’t think it’s my fault. I’m curious why you would think that I would?”

Sue shrugged. “You’re the one who insisted we work with mages.”

Berta clenched her jaw and went back to grinding the ingredients into a fine paste. “I’m going to give her some nettle syrup, too. I’m sure I fractured a couple of ribs.”

“What?”

“Restarting her heart after it stopped beating.” Berta wasn’t sure getting Alia’s heart going again was actually her doing. She was hard pressed to think of a patient on whom she’d performed CPR that survived. The soldier was by far the youngest and probably the healthiest person she had ever resuscitated and had so far beaten the odds, but it wasn’t like there was a coronary care unit she could be admitted to for further observation. Berta was nervous for her. If Fiona came back soon, Berta could ask her to heal her ribs and feet and maybe give her heart a once over for good measure. Otherwise, Berta would have to make do with elfroot salves and vague hope until she could figure out where Fiona had been taken.

“You expect me to believe that you brought her back to life.” Sue folded her arms across her chest.

Berta shook her head. “No, she wasn’t dead. Her heart stopped beating. There’s a difference. You’re not dead until your brain is starved of oxygen and dies.” She picked up the mortar and pestle, heading back to her patient, hoping to circumvent any further conversation from Sue.

Two of the hovering soldiers picked that moment to stop their hovering by the desk and approach
“Healer, will Sergeant Alia be alright?” The young soldier’s face was earnest and hopeful.

“I hope so,” Berta answered truthfully. “I’ll do everything I can.”

“Thank you for saving her,” the other soldier added almost tearfully. “Maker bless you.”

Berta smiled benignly, feeling a little uncomfortable with the blessing but not wanting to offend. They both gave Inquisition salutes and then headed off up the stairs.

Sue audibly scoffed. “Well, you’re very impressed with yourself.”

Berta looked at Sue incredulously. She took a deep breath and counted to ten, and then fifteen for good measure. “I don’t have time for this.” She headed back towards the sergeant, ready to treat her feet with the salve.

A woman in armor was standing over the soldier. She was barely over five feet tall and built like a tank with pale blonde hair cropped so close to her head as to almost appear bald. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were just as pale, and her large brown eyes were a bit too wide set. Her mouth was downturned at the corners, giving her a dour look. Berta thought at first her face was dirty but then realized that she had a heavy dusting of freckles across her cheeks and forehead. She had a scabbard at her hip and a flaming sword on her breast plate.

“Are you in charge here?” She asked brusquely, resting her gloved hand on the pommel of her sword.

Berta was fairly relieved to be able to defer to Sue given the look on the woman’s face. She glanced back over her shoulder at Sue.

“Commander Cullen placed me in charge,” Sue said, coming forward. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m Knight-Captain Briony,” the woman said. “I want to know what happened with the mages at the gate.”

Sue looked all too happy to throw Berta under the bus. “I wasn’t here. Berta was.” She moved to take the salve out of Berta’s hands. “Here, let me. And you can talk with the Knight-Captain.”

Berta smiled tightly at Sue and relinquished the salve not wanting to make a scene. She stepped away from Alia, moving towards the makeshift desk, leaning on its edge. “What would you like to know?”

The Knight-Captain folded her arms across her chest. “Tell me everything.”

Berta blew out a breath. “Um, well, I was eating lunch with Mikel and Fiona, they’re both mages who were helping here in the infirmary.”

“I know who they are,” she interrupted.

“Oh, well, Fiona went to take our dirty dish back to the kitchens and then Mikel...” She paused, trying to think exactly what happened next. As angry as she was at Mikel for taking away her ability to breathe and scaring the crap out of her, she realized that he could have let his friend shoot lightning bolts at her instead. She was reluctant to say anything that would get mages banned from the infirmary permanently, but not knowing how much Briony already knew or wanting to endanger her own situation, she thought the truth was the best course. “Well, he paralyzed me. I couldn’t see...”
anywhere other than the gate. There were these markings on the ground around me-"

“I thought you couldn’t see anywhere other than the gate?” she asked quietly.

“Well, after the paralysis wore off, I could see the markings fading on the ground.”

“Paralysis glyph.” She nodded. “Go on.”

“A fire ball crashed into the wall,” she gestured to the scorched stones adjacent to the gate, “and then-”

“Who conjured it?” the Knight-Captain interrupted.

“I don’t know. It came from behind me.”

The Knight-Captain squinted skeptically at her. “Who attacked Sergeant Alia?”

“The other dark-haired male mage- not Mikel. I don’t know his name. I’d never seen him before,” she added. “The red headed girl did some kind of freezing thing to the other guard. I need to examine him myself to make sure there’s no serious injury.”

Briony fixed Berta with a stony gaze. “And then you brought the Sergeant back to life.”

Berta shook her head impatiently. “No. She wasn’t dead. The shock to her heart had stopped it beating temporarily. Once it started beating again, she recovered.”

“My soldiers say that you breathed life back into her.” The Knight-Captain did not look away.

“That’s very poetic.” Berta put her hands on her hips and stared back. “Look, I helped your soldier the only way I know how, and it happened to work. She’s very lucky. It doesn’t usually.”

Briony looked back Alia. “And you want me to believe that there was no magic involved?”

Berta gave an exasperated sigh. “You should believe me because there wasn’t.” Sufficiently advanced technology might be indistinguishable from magic, but apparently basic life support was too. Berta thought for a moment to launch into a tirade about the primitive conditions she was forced to endure but thought better of it. She didn’t want to end up back in the dungeon.

“It seems to me that a surgeon could use blood magic quite easily.” Her tone was dark and accusatory. “Who knows if you’re bleeding a patient for their own good or your own ends?”

Berta looked at the bulldog of a woman and swallowed her anger. “I don’t bleed patients. Maybe you should talk to Sue.” She started to walk away before she said something she’d regret but then paused. “I need to see to your soldiers. For their benefit, it would be most helpful if Fiona could be returned to us as soon as possible since she had nothing to do with this. Thank you.”

Briony grabbed Berta's arm to keep her from walking away. Her grip was surprisingly strong, but Berta refused to flinch, despite the pain the woman was causing. The knight-captain stared hard into her face, her eyes piercing into Berta as if looking for something. Berta stared back. Briony suddenly let go of her arm and sniffed as if disappointed. She took a step back from Berta and frowned.

"You're no mage," she pronounced certainly.

Berta didn't know what to make of her pronouncement. "Yeah, that's what I've been telling you." She stalked away, over to the previously frozen soldier and tried to focus on examining him for signs of frostbite. The knight-captain watched her for a moment and then left up the stairs.
The rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully except for the mounting tension between Berta and Sue which Berta tried to dissipate by asking questions and deferring to her to keep the peace. New guards came to their posts by the gate and were joined by the dark-haired knight who had disarmed Mikel and the other mages. Sergeant Alia was resting and dozed after her dose of nettle syrup. Berta hovered over her intermittently, as if literally standing over her would keep her heart from flipping into a lethal arrhythmia. Every person who came down the steps brought Berta’s head snapping to attention, hoping it was Fiona. She was repeatedly disappointed.

There was a flurry of soldiers with minor to negligible injuries and complaints and it wasn’t long until Berta realized that the story of Alia’s recovery was traveling like wild fire and the infirmary was getting inundated with curiosity seekers rather than actual patients. She thought that it might be best to let herself be seen elsewhere for a bit and lessen the flow of unnecessary visits.

“Sue,” she ventured, coming up with an excuse on the spur of the moment. “I’m supposed to meet with Dorian for at least an hour every day. I thought perhaps now might-”

“Yes, fine,” the surgeon said without looking up from the sprained wrist she was examining. “I’ll be fine here without you.”

Berta wasn’t in the mood to take offense. “Thanks. I’ll be in the library if you need me.”

Sue grunted in acknowledgement and didn’t meet her eye.

Berta sighed inwardly and headed up the stairs to the great hall and then on to the library. Dorian was in his nook, sitting in a high-backed chair, one leg slung over the arm rest, a book open in his hands, his staff leaning in the corner.

“Ah, Lady Healer,” he said by way of greeting. “What brings you to the Inquisition’s Temple of Enlightenment and Erudition?”

“Hmm, I thought it was more like Parchment and Pedantry,” she replied absently.

Dorian closed his book at looked at her hard. “What’s wrong?”

Berta realized she was actually wringing her hands. “It...hasn't been a great day. Mikel paralyzed me, Fiona got dragged off by the guards to who knows where, Knight-Captain Briony came to question me and accused me of being a mage and Sue thinks this is all my fault and that I’m enjoying the attention.” She sighed. “So, everything kinda sucks right now.”

Dorian pursed his lips in thought. "It is interesting that Mikel's spell was effective on you."

Berta shook her head wryly. "Yeah, being paralyzed and unable to breathe was really 'interesting.'"

Dorian raised an eyebrow at her. "As you had said that there is no magic in your world, I wondered if you mightn't be immune. Apparently not."

Berta wasn't sure what the significance of that was. "I'm more interested in what they've done with Fiona. She and I had a major breakthrough with treating infection and she's integral to helping take care of patients."
Dorian snapped his book closed and stood. “Let’s pay Commander Cullen a visit.”

Berta shook her head vehemently. “Oh no, that is not a good idea. Not for me anyway. The man can’t stand me. I don’t see him doing me any favors.”

Dorian sighed. “Alright, then stay here. Read this.” He shoved his book into her hands. “Keep my chair warm. I shall return with the elven mage forthwith.” He sauntered down the stairs.

Berta sat heavily in the chair, hating that she felt so helpless. She couldn’t function as a healer without a mage, she couldn’t get Fiona back without Dorian’s intervention with the Commander. She pulled her translation sheet out of the pocket of her apron and smoothed it over her knee, frowning as she did so. She couldn’t even read without consulting her translation guide. Berta ground her teeth in frustration and opened the book to the title page.

It took her a few moments, but she puzzled out the title as “A Dissertation on the Fade as a Physical Manifestation” by Mareno, Senior Enchanter. Huh, Mareno, she thought, just a single name, like Cher or Madonna. She wondered if he or she was famous. She turned to the introduction and began to slowly read.

“Mages and scholars of magic have assumed that the Fade is a dream world, a nonphysical alternative reality where spirits and demons abide, feeding upon the dreams and emotions of the living corporeal beings of our world, shaping the miasma of the Fade to fit the expectations of the dreamer, weaving a new noncorporeal reality which matches the past experiences of the dreamer. But where does this new reality reside? Does it reside within the mind of the dreamer, an extension of their consciousness? Or perhaps does it reside outside of our physical world, in a world no less real or physical than our own? Research on this aspect of the Fade has been fragmentary and expurgated at best, at worst apocryphal, and limited to a small number of scholars at the White Spire and Minrathous, and the theory of the physicality of the Fade has remained protean.”

Berta rubbed her eyes. This was dense and abstruse. Translating each letter into English and then stringing together the words was exhausting. Why did Dorian want her to read this? Maybe just because he happened to have this in his hands? She continued to struggle through it, at least keeping her mind off waiting for Dorian to possibly return with word of Fiona.

“The Chantry teaches us that the home of the Maker was within the Fade, in the Golden City. Ancient Tevinter Magisters then entered the Fade and corrupted the city, exiling the world from the Maker’s presence. Surely, this legend, if true, indicates that the magisters entered the Fade physically, for how could they enter the Golden City in their dreams? Every man’s experience in his own dreams teaches him that the City can always be seen, yet never reached. How did the ancient mages of Tevinter reach this unattainable citadel if not circumventing the malleable geometry of the landscape of the Fade by physically being present? Examination of documents from the Shaperate show patterns of lyrium production and export to Tevinter during this time and one can see that a massive procurement of lyrium was undertaken at the time of the ancient Magisterium. This cannot be coincidence.”

Berta was intrigued. This was about Corypheus and, by extension, perhaps, her.

“The study of the physicality of the Fade necessitates a corresponding theory of the Veil. How can a nonphysical barrier separate a physical realm? Or perhaps does the Veil also have an aspect of physicality that can only be penetrated by mages in wakefulness but by all sentient beings, save dwarves, in sleep? Even the language utilized to describe the Veil, it’s ‘thinning’ in loci of great violence or powerful magic, lends itself to imagining a physical barrier.”

The text trailed off into esoterica about the Veil that Berta found largely unintelligible. She was
unsure if what she read boded well or ill for getting her home, but she was touched that Dorian was reading about something that impacted her predicament, though she supposed that it could simply be research on Corypheus as well. Either way, if it helped Berta’s situation, she was glad.

Berta raised her head from her reading at the sound of voices echoing up from the open chamber below.

“'I thank you for your intervention, Master Pavus,’” Berta could not mistake Fiona’s thick Orlesian accent, “'however you risk painting yourself with the same brush that the Templars tar me-’”

“I have very little concern about Templars,” Dorian began dismissively.

"You should have a care," Fiona replied, before the stairwell muffled their voices.

Berta stood from the chair and rounded the corner from the library nook just as the two mages reached the top of the stairs. She was shocked to see a swelling bruise along Fiona's cheek.

"What did they do to you?" Berta rushed forward to examine the petite mage's face.

Fiona raised her hand, shaking off Berta's concern. "What Templars do. Lash out first and ask questions later."

Berta escorted the mage to the chair where she sat properly, perched on the edge of the seat, looking tiny in the large wing back chair. Berta sat on a nearby stool, looking at Fiona, trying to gauge her injury.

"Let me find someone to fetch us some wine, or perhaps something stronger," Dorian said and disappeared down the stairs.

Fiona seemed to crumble slightly as soon as Dorian was gone. "This was not what I wanted."

"To get beat up by armored knights twice your size? I'm sure it's not." Berta was appalled.

Fiona shook her head sadly. "No, I don't mean this." She gestured to her face, her hands slightly shaking. "I mean this rebellion, this war, the hardships that mages continue to endure. None of this is what I intended." She folded her hands between her knees and looked down at the floor. "I thought I was old enough to no longer be naive."

Berta didn't know what to say. She liked Fiona and they seemed to understand each other, but it occurred to Berta that she really knew very little about her or her role in the mage rebellion. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Fiona looked at her. "You don't have magic where you come from; you don't know our history or our struggles. Mages in Thedas are a minority of the people. Dwarves have no mages at all. Of the elves and humans, maybe one person out of every thirty is a mage. Throughout most of Thedas, except in Tevinter, mages are kept in the Circle of Magi. The Circles can be places of refuge and learning. The Circle at Montsimmard is one such place. That is where I spent much of my early days as a mage. Others are essentially prisons with harsh conditions and harsher rules, like The Gallows in Kirkwall."

Berta wasn't sure where she was going with this but stayed quiet, listening.

"My time in the Circle was more pleasant than most. Especially given where'd I come from. But I saw that not all the Circles were like Montsimmard. I swore to do something about it. When I became the Grand Enchanter, I thought I could finally bring my will to bear on the Chantry. I called
a meeting of the College of Magi, bringing together the First Enchanters of all the Circles and called for a vote to leave the Chantry. The templars cracked down, disrupting the vote before we could take it. I tried again, calling the enchanters together at the White Spire in Val Royeaux. This time the templars invoked the Right of Annulment.”

“What does that mean?” Berta asked.

Fiona shook her head. “Their right to kill every mage in the tower. It is a wonder any of us survived. I lost many friends that day. Even some mages who thought we should remain within the Chantry were put to the sword by the Lord Seeker and his templars. Those of us who escaped met again. And this time we did have our vote. And we voted for rebellion.” She sighed heavily and leaned back in the chair. “It has been an ugly and painful war. More than half of the mages I started this journey with are dead. And many more that have manifested as mages in the last year have died because there are no longer stable circles to accept them.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. ”And my young charges today…attacking the gate guards because they believe that Anders must be near, and they hope to join him. His brand of violence apparently appeals more to them than their own safety.”

"Anders is here?"

Fiona shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. If the Champion of Kirkwall is here, my young mages are assuming that Anders is nearby. They may be right."

Berta wrapped her arms around her knees as she listened to Fiona. "Didn't he kill a lot of people?"

Fiona looked at her cautiously. "So did the Templars. Anders was perhaps more extreme in his actions than many rebel mages, but the Kirkwall circle was also worse than most. There were rumors of young apprentices repeatedly raped by their jailers. There were abuses of the rite of Tranquility. If those on the side of Templars are killed, no doubt their killers feel justified. I certainly have."

Berta looked at the small elven woman in a new light. She had a hard time imagining her killing anyone. "What's the rite of Tranquility?"

"I forget how much you don't know of our world." She shifted in her seat. "A mage's power comes from their connection to the Fade. That connection attracts demons who would possess the mage. From the moment a mage's power manifests, he or she must train to avoid this possession. A mage must be constantly on guard, especially when dreaming. All mages in the circles go through a ritual, the Harrowing, where the more senior mages summon a demon which the apprentice must resist. If the apprentice fails, they become an abomination and are killed. If a mage refuses to go through the Harrowing, or fails the Harrowing without becoming an abomination, then they are made Tranquil. Their connection to the Fade is permanently severed, removing all their magical abilities but also removing their will, their desires, their emotions, preventing them from ever being possessed. Some would say the Tranquil have lost their souls."

"That's horrible." Berta thought being made Tranquil sounded similar to being lobotomized and some of the circles sounded much like asylums of the previous century. "But, why-"

"Here we are," Dorian announced gleefully, balancing a tray on one hand like a waiter in a cafe, carrying a bottle and three small cordial glasses on it. "Just what the healer ordered for overcoming Templar torture. I really don't know how you Southerners put up with it."

Fiona did not look amused but took the glass that was proffered and downed the contents in a single gulp.
"Oh, my dear, that's Antivan brandy. Pace yourself." Dorian tutted at her and refilled the elf's glass before handing one to Berta.

Berta sniffed it suspiciously. "Dorian, it's the middle of the afternoon."

He looked at her down his nose. "And your point is?"

Berta sipped it cautiously, feeling the burn on her tongue and trickling down her throat. "I don't think I'm going to finish this. I'm kind of a light weight and I still have work to do for the rest of the day."

Dorian looked at her as if disappointed and shrugged before finishing her glass off.

Berta looked at Fiona, as the elf sipped her second glass of brandy. At least her hands were no longer shaking. "I've got to go back to the infirmary. I want you to come with me if you feel up to it. I can make you a cold compress for your face."

Fiona looked at the glass in her hands. "I will return shortly. I want to talk to the Commander first."

"Not a good idea given his current mood," Dorian advised. "Perhaps a note?"

Fiona acquiesced. "Very well. Have you some parchment and a quill?"

Dorian smiled. "I'll do you one better; I have a pen." He brandished the ball point, whipping it out from his leathers.

Berta smiled and thanked Dorian for the brandy before leaving Fiona to write her note to the Commander and heading back to the infirmary. She wondered if Fiona could write a plea that would alter the Commander’s mind. Berta was already anticipating how to handle letting him have his “I told you so” moment regarding the mages in the keep. He would probably be insufferable.

The remainder of the afternoon was uneventful except for the large numbers of soldiers that drifted through wanting to see Sergeant Alia or Berta or both. The attention made Berta uncomfortable, especially with Sue’s earlier annoyance but there really wasn’t anything either of them could do about it. Commander Cullen made a brief appearance to congratulate Alia on her survival of the mage attack, inspect the guards at the gate and generally boost morale. Berta found she suddenly urgently needed more water from the well and took her time drawing it just to stay out of his way.

Meena came later to let Sue and Berta know that the kitchens were nearly organized, and the evening meal would be provided in the great hall. Berta was overcome with a sudden dread, thinking of the entire population of Skyhold in the great hall staring at her while she tried to eat. She asked Meena if she could bring her a plate in her tent and find her a candle, so she could read once it was dark. Berta had no desire to sit on display in front of a curious throng. Meena was, per usual, happy to acquiesce.

Berta spent what was, on the whole, a rather pleasant evening hiding in her tent. She splashed herself clean in the hot water Meena brought for her bath and found her laundered scrubs and socks folded neatly in the chest. She decided that the scrubs would be best to wear for sleeping where no one would see them and stare. The clean socks felt especially good after being barefoot in her boots. She then ate the simple meal Meena had brought, a sauce that was similar to hummus or a white bean puree, nibbling on the cheese and dark bread, while flipping through her lettered note cards, and reading about the flora of Thedas in the book Dorian had given her. When the candle burnt low, Berta put her notecards back into her bag. Her hand brushed against a familiar object and she pulled out her phone and looked at it, experimentally tapping the home button on the screen. Nothing happened. It was dead, its battery drained. There was a small niggling flutter of panic in her chest. She was running out of time.
Auld Lang Syne

It's always hard when you've known a person a long time and then you have to recognise that you have nothing left in common but your memories.
-Eva Heller

Musical Accompaniment:
“Auld Lang Syne” - Chase Hofelder

The next two days were comparatively boring, and Berta fell into something resembling a routine. Wake up, breakfast, work in the infirmary, lunch, tutoring with Dorian, more work in the infirmary, bath, supper hiding in her tent and then bed. Sue seemed unable to sustain her acute resentment when Berta was consistently competent, and they worked, if not contentedly, at least peaceably side by side. Sue slid into condescension when Berta asked questions, but she was slowly teaching her otherworldly charge about herbal healing in Thedas. Fiona had come back to the infirmary after penning her note to Cullen and had been a great help. Mikel had not yet been returned to them, and the Commander's terse reply to Fiona was only that it would be the Inquisitor's decision when she returned from the Fallow Mire and until then the three mages at fault would be held in the dungeon and no others would be found to help in the infirmary. Fiona was upset but understood. There had been no shortage of minor infections to occupy her and on which to try her new techniques. She was progressively getting less fatigued from the treatments as she learned how best to focus her abilities. She had tried to get Berta to join her and the other unincarcerated mages for dinner but had been unsuccessful. After two evenings of Berta avoiding the great hall, Dorian declared he was having none of it.

Berta sat on a stool, finishing suturing a training gash on the back of a recruit’s shoulder, focused on her task. She spread a thin film of elfroot paste over the cut glancing up as she saw Dorian approaching. "Now keep that dry and covered. Come back in two days so I can make sure you're not developing an infection." The soldier tried glancing back over his own shoulder to see her handiwork but only ended up looking like a dog chasing his own tail as he turned round. Berta tried not to laugh.

"Thank ye, Healer." The soldier pulled his torn shirt back over his head and gave a brief Inquisition salute before taking the steps two at a time back to the upper courtyard and his training group.

Berta looked at Dorian, standing with his arms crossed before her. "I have a guess why you're here."

Dorian's mouth twisted in a wry smile. "You cannot hide indefinitely. I'm here to make you return to polite society."

"You could dine with me in my tent," she suggested. "With the flaps tied tight, It's quite cozy."

Dorian chuckled. "As much as I might enjoy the rumors that would engender, I see it as my solemn duty to make you join me and your compatriots in the hall. Come now. A few curious stares never killed anyone."

Fiona walked over from the soldier she finished healing. "You should listen to the Altus." Dorian nodded in agreement and extended his hand.

Berta sighed and looked at his extended hand. "Fine. Let me wash up."
Dorian looked pleased with himself, knowing she had been successfully cajoled. Berta washed her hands in one of the buckets by the fire, scrubbing with soap and water and then drying them on a clean spot on her apron. She left the apron hanging on one of the tent ropes. "Fiona, will you join us? Sue?"

"Go ahead," Sue said without looking up from the mortar and pestle on the desk where she had surrounded her apothecary box with various plants and powders. "I'm going to finish restocking and then I'll be along."

Berta looked to Fiona who nodded and the three of them set off up to the great hall.

They walked through the wide open doors of the hall. Tables had been set up along either side of the long room, near the fireplaces. She looked about, seeing a few familiar faces when it struck her; the seating arrangements were not dissimilar to a high school cafeteria. All the merchants, largely surface dwarves and a couple of their human Orlesian counterparts, were at one table. The next table was mostly Templars and soldiers (the jocks, Berta thought) and the next a table of Chantry sisters (cheerleaders?), headed by Mother Giselle. There was a table of mages (the AV club), whom Fiona left Berta and Dorian to join. Berta started to follow her but Dorian steered Berta towards another table near the dais with a jerk of his head and a hand on her back. Berta was pretty sure they weren’t on their way to a table full of people who dropped through Rifts into Thedas.

They reached the table by the dais and Berta saw several familiar faces gathered around it. Soup had already been served and an elven servant was pouring wine while another placed individual rolls at each guest’s plate.

“Master Pavus,” Lady Montilyet said by way of greeting as Dorian pulled Berta’s chair out for her to the left of the unfamiliar man at the head of the table. “You were successful in convincing her to join us.”

Berta sat in the proffered chair kitty corner from the ambassador. “So, you put him up to this?”

“I hoped he would convince you to leave your patients.” She smiled at Dorian as he took his seat next to Berta. “I believe you have met Seeker Pentaghast.”

Cassandra nodded stiffly, sitting across from Berta with her arms folded across her chest. “Very briefly.”

“It’s nice to see you again,” Berta lied. At least the Seeker looked significantly calmer than the last time she had encountered her.

Cassandra smiled tightly. “And you as well.”

“Doctor Shaw, may I present Arl Teagan of Redcliffe?” Josephine indicated the man sitting at the head of the table, a craggy faced fellow with a goatee and fading russet hair touched with gray at his temples.

“My lord,” Berta murmured, feeling self-conscious using his title but not sure what else to say. Berta realized that in the high school cafeteria of the great hall of Skyhold she was sitting at the faculty table with all the nobles.

“My lord,” he said inclining his head and ripping apart his dinner roll. “Lady Montilyet tells me you are an accomplished healer.”

Berta fell back on the manners that she’d learned on the upper East side of Manhattan. “She is too kind.”
“What brings you to Skyhold, Arl?” Cassandra was sitting back from the table, her soup untouched, her arms folded confrontationally across her chest. “Surely not a discussion of healing techniques.”

Josephine’s eyes flashed to Cassandra, imploring her to be civil. “I believe what Seeker Pentaghast is saying is that we are delighted by your arrival and are eager to know what the Inquisition can do for you.”

Cassandra glanced at Josephine. “Yes, that’s exactly what I was saying.”

The Arl frowned and addressed Josephine. “I am here because of my nephew.”

Josephine kept her face neutral and glanced at Cassandra, a plea to keep out of this. Josephine folded her hands on the edge of the table. “You have a concern for Connor.”

The Arl shifted in his seat. “I tried to secure his release from Kinloch Hold when the fighting broke out in Kirkwall. I did not want him caught up in...whatever ugliness the mages caused. The Knight-Captain of the tower denied my request.” He frowned. “Then he was dragged along with the tide of mages into Redcliffe which was the last place he needed to be.”

Everyone around the table looked grave and Berta was sure that she was missing something.

“And now he is conscripted into this...this Inquisition,” he sputtered angrily. “I would know what plans you have for him.”

“He gets to play a part in the Inquisition’s glorious crusade to save the world, of course.”

Berta turned to look down the table at the woman at the end who had spoken. She was leaning back in her chair, balancing on its back legs, her messy, short black hair tousled in her shockingly brilliant blue eyes. She was pale and pretty but not delicate. She balanced her chair a moment longer before landing the front legs deftly on the floor and propping her elbows before her on the table.

Arl Teagan’s eyes flashed to her. “The way Kirkwall needed saving, my lady? Pray, tell me how that turned out.”

“I’m sitting here, and many mages are free, so I’d say it turned out just fine.” Her lop-sided smirk made her look very pleased with herself.

“I doubt the murdered Chantry sisters would agree with you,” the Arl said sharply.

Berta realized that she must be looking at Lady Marian Hawke herself, the Champion of Kirkwall.

“My dear Arl, we are engaged in a fight for our lives,” a statuesque black woman on the other side of Dorian practically purred. “Perhaps we cannot be too particular about the assistance we accept.” She glanced briefly at the Champion and then away, as if she found what she saw lacking. The woman was stunningly beautiful with her high cheek bones and light, almond-shaped eyes, but her tone was haughty and judgmental. Her head gear—which Berta was hard pressed to think of it as a hat—would have looked right at home in an Asgardian movie set, but the woman managed to carry off the silver pronged look with exquisite dignity. There had to be something wrong with a world in which everyone was this good looking, Berta mused. She definitely didn’t belong here.

“The presence of Orlesian Knight Enchanters does nothing to ease my concerns.” Teagan spoke directly to Josephine, barely sparing a glance for the behorned beauty down the table who almost imperceptibly sighed and took a delicate sip of wine, ignoring him.

“See, Viv?” the Champion laughed. “He doesn’t like you, either.”
The lady in question arched a perfectly groomed eyebrow at Marian. “You will kindly address me as ‘Lady Vivienne’ or ‘Madame de Fer.’ Both titles which, I believe, I have earned.” Her words were polite but with a knife edged hardness. The Champion shrugged as if it made no difference to her and crammed half a roll into her mouth.

Josephine smiled disarmingly at the Arl. “My lord, the Inquisition is no more Orlesian than it is Ferelden. We have members from both countries as well as Antivans, Nevarrans, Free Marchers, Tevinters,” at this Dorian wiggled his fingers hello at the Arl, earning a snort from Marian down the table, “…and even from outside Thedas,” Josephine explained, smiling briefly at Berta.

The Arl glowered at Dorian. “That is all well and good, but I would not see my nephew turned into a Tevinter battle mage.” Berta shuddered to think of the literal and figurative fire power she’d seen at the gates unleashed on a battle field.

“Oh no, my lord, we’ll turn him into a Mortalitasi,” Dorian said gleefully. Marian chuckled, not bothering to hide her laughter.

Josephine looked daggers at Dorian and Marian in turn and Berta had a feeling that it would be the last time either of them were invited to sit at the grownups’ table. Berta could see the conversation veering off a cliff.

The Arl looked at Dorian. “Your glibness does you no credit, Tevinter.”

Fortunately, before Dorian could reply, they were descended on by elven servants serving the main course, roasted meat and vegetables in a rich gravy with a grain that looked a bit like couscous on the side. Berta glanced around and noted that the other tables were not being similarly waited upon. This chafed at her egalitarian sensibilities but seemed to be par for the Thedosian course.

Berta saw a darkening in Dorian’s eyes over his entrée and hurriedly waded in to the conversation. “My lord,” she said to the Arl, “if you don’t mind my asking, does your nephew have any interest in healing magic?” The Arl regarded Berta cautiously. She licked her lips and continued. “I’ve been working with…”—she thought it best not to mention Fiona as the leader of the rebels who had occupied Redcliffe—“...mages who have healing abilities and we’ve been successfully treating some conditions that have, up to now, been challenging to treat. I’m sure our experiments would benefit from another mage’s participation, that is if he is interested.”

The Arl took a bite of the roasted meat in front of him and chewed thoughtfully. “I would be pleased if he found something that allowed him to make constructive use of his abilities.”

Josephine shot Berta a grateful look. “I would be happy to introduce Connor to Lady Shaw, my lord.” And then to Berta, “I do hear you’ve been performing miracles in the infirmary.”

Before Berta could reply, Lady Vivienne audibly scoffed. “I believe some of our soldiers are perhaps too easily impressed.” The stately lady looked coolly down the table at her.

Berta smiled warmly right back. “Oh, I think you’ll find that with our new treatments, the soldiers are impressed just the right amount.”

“How to you propose to monitor these mages under your tutelage?” Lady Vivienne asked. “I doubt you hide Templar armor under your...garb.” Her eyes dragged down Berta’s clothing, her tone dripping disdain.

Berta had encountered many of Lady Vivienne’s type on the Upper East Side, women who were rich and beautiful and therefore thought themselves superior to Berta in every way because they
looked like supermodels and Berta looked like, well, Berta. She was old enough to have reconciled herself to her plain face and utilitarian body, and to know that her value did not come from her appearance. There was no point in trying to best Lady Vivienne who would always hold the upper hand in physical beauty. Instead, Berta would take the same approach she had always taken with this type of woman; if she couldn’t win the game, she would simply refuse to play.

“I’m sure Commander Cullen has planned for every exigency,” Berta replied. “He was similarly concerned.”

“That is good to hear,” Cassandra interjected and gave Berta a small smile. She seemed pleased that Berta had not risen to take Vivienne’s bait.

“We shall see,” the Iron Lady sniffed and took a precise bite of her vegetables.

The remainder of the meal passed calmly enough with Marian recounting the latest tourney news from the Free Marches (Reeve Asa was supposedly going to be headlining the Grand Tourney near Markham next month) and Dorian and Vivienne got into a nitty gritty discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of entropic versus elemental magic. At the end of the meal, Josephine had an elven page show the Arl to his chambers for the night and everyone made to disperse. Josephine beckoned Berta towards her study.

Dorian paused for a moment. “Come to the tavern when you’re done with Josephine. We’ll have more fun than at dinner.”

Berta spoke under her breath to Dorian. “Please promise me I don’t have to sit with the nobles again.”

Dorian smirked. “I don’t make promises that I can’t keep. The wine and the service at the table is excellent.”

She sighed, unable to think of a witty rejoinder and headed towards Josephine’s office. “I’ll come find you.”

Berta walked into Josephine’s office to find her and Cassandra standing around her desk, looking over a piece of parchment in Josephine’s hand.

Josephine smiled warmly. “Berta, thank you for helping keep the peace with the Arl.” She shook her head. “I don’t know what I was thinking including Hawke and Dorian.”

“You were trying to show that we aren’t simply Orlesian for the Arl’s benefit,” Cassandra observed. “And Hawke was Ferelden before she was a Free Marcher. If they had behaved, it might have worked.”

“And if you hadn’t included Dorian, I’d probably still be hiding in my tent,” Berta observed. “I should thank you for inviting me.” Even if I’d rather not do it again, Berta added silently.

Josephine looked appraisingly at Berta. “You have the instincts to play the Game. You handled Madame de Fer well.”

Berta could hear her capitalization of the word. “The Game? You actually call it that? Like, out loud?” She was surprised.

“Well, all nobles play the Game,” the Ambassador explained. “Some better than others.”

Berta thought this over. “I assume Madame Vivienne is from Orlais.”
Cassandra folded her arms across her chest. “What gave it away?” Berta laughed wryly.

Josephine laughed as well. “What I really wanted to tell you is that I received a dispatch from the Inquisitor. She found our missing soldiers in the Fallow Mire and headed back to Skyhold today, so she should return sooner than expected. Perhaps even the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic.” Berta felt her pulse quicken. One step closer to getting Solas’s help and going home.

“And I wanted to thank you on behalf of the Inquisition for all the good work you’re doing in the infirmary. Mother Giselle has been most complimentary.”

“Oh, well, thank you,” Berta said lamely. All the praise made her a bit uncomfortable. “I’m going to join Dorian in the Herald’s Rest. Would either of you like to join us?”

“Oh, I have much work to do,” Josephine apologized. “Perhaps another time.”

“I will walk that way with you,” Cassandra said.

Berta said her goodnight to Josephine and headed out of the Ambassador’s office and through the great hall. The dinner crowd had largely dispersed and there were only a few stragglers sitting near the fires and several serving elves picking up forgotten dishes and sweeping the floors into the great fireplaces.

Berta wondered what she would talk about with a female warrior but was saved by Cassandra speaking first. “Our Ambassador is skilled, but she is still young, and sometimes too trusting.” Cassandra stopped in the large doorway to the hall and stood facing Berta, her arms folded across her chest.

Oh, fuck me, Berta thought. How many people in this Inquisition weren’t crazy suspicious of her? Berta sighed and turned to face her. She was taller than Berta and looked down at her, a serious frown on her otherwise beautiful face.

Berta regarded Cassandra and shook her head, feeling tired of defending herself. “I doubt there is anything I can say to assuage your fears or make you trust me. If I have my way, I won’t be here long enough for that to matter. But if there is something you want me to say or do to appease you, just let me know. I’m only too happy to oblige.” She put her hands on her hips and looked at the taller woman, bracing herself for her reply.

Cassandra looked taken aback. “No, I only meant that Josephine has sometimes overplayed her hand. It is good that you were there tonight.” She shifted stiffly. “You are right; I am not by nature trusting, but you are proving yourself a friend to the Inquisition. For that I am grateful.”

Berta dropped her hands from her hips. “Oh, well, then, you’re welcome.”

Cassandra sniffed. “I only hope that you do not betray that trust.”

Berta sighed. They almost had a nice moment there. “I’m not planning on it.” She turned and walked down the steps towards the Herald’s Rest, the Seeker continuing by her side in silence. As Berta headed towards the entrance, the Seeker hung back.

“I am not given to revelry. Enjoy yourself before the Inquisitor returns.” She inclined her head to Berta and then headed towards the practice dummies in the lower courtyard. “Goodnight, Healer.”

Berta watched her go, finding her comment about the Inquisitor vaguely unsettling. She was unsure
if Cassandra liked her or not but decided it didn’t matter if Solas was returning to help her in a matter of two days. A soldier exited the tavern just as she reached the door, light and music spilling out into the dusk of the courtyard. It sounded friendly inside, warm and bright and Berta wanted that for just a little while before bed. She entered and looked about. The room was far busier than the last time she had been there. She slowly walked around the large room looking for Dorian. The merchants had all relocated from the great hall and were occupying most of the far end of the room opposite from the bar. She wandered past the fireplace and saw Krem and the rest of his mercenary crew sitting on chairs and barrels along the wall. Elan and Sue were at a small table near the bar, their heads close together, whispering about something.

“Oy, Healer!” yelled a loud Cockney voice. She turned to look for the voice and saw a twenty-something girl she didn’t recognize, leaning on the railing looking down at her from the second floor, waving wildly to get her attention. The girl’s hair was a mess of chopped straw with her elven ears sticking out through it. Berta saw Dorian just beyond the elf’s shoulder give a shake of his head at her gesticulating. Her hollering got the attention of most of the tavern and anyone who hadn’t noticed Berta before was staring at her now. Berta ducked her head and briskly walked up the stairs towards Dorian’s table. As she approached, she saw that Marian and Varric were there as well as the elven girl. Berta walked up and slunk into her seat against the wall next to Dorian. He pointed at the mug of wine in front of Berta’s seat and nodded at her. She gratefully took a drink, noting that it was warm and mulled, perfect for a chilly evening.

“Perhaps you could yell a little louder, Sera. I’m not sure everyone in the tavern heard you.” Dorian sipped his ale and shook his head.

“I got her here, din I?” she said, her accent thick. She sat back down, straddling the up ended barrel at the end of the table. Her loud yellow tartan leggings and red tunic were threadbare and torn in places and her hair looked like she cut it herself without the benefit of a mirror or scissors. “Name’s Sera. The storyteller says you’ve come through one of them glowy demony things.”

“That’s right, a rift, if that’s what you mean.” Berta looked questioningly at Varric. “I suppose the storyteller would know.”

Varric smiled benignly. “Healer, this is Sera, and this is Hawke, the Champion of Kirkwall.”

Berta could get a better look at the Champion now that she sat across from her. Her eyes were bright but the crow’s feet at their edges revealed her age and the hard set of her mouth gave her a toughened look. Her black hair was a mess, in her eyes and tucked behind her ears. The Champion inclined her head and gave an exaggerated genuflecting gesture with her hand and a smirk. “I think between the Inquisitor and the other freaks she’s assembled, Varric’s got the makings of another best seller.”

“My lady,” Berta mumbled, not sure if the freaks in question included her.

Marian scoffed. “I think we’re well past formal titles. I’ve been on the run for years. I’m more outlaw than lady these days.” She took a swig of her tankard and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “My mother’s probably rolling over in her grave.” She shook her head sadly and took another deep drink. “So, why are you here?” she asked brusquely.

“I beg your pardon?” Berta asked. She didn’t know she’d have to justify her presence.

“Easy, Killer,” Varric chided, holding up a hand. “Dorian invited her for a drink before he knew we’d be talking business.”

Berta looked quizzically at the young elf. “And what is your role in the Inquisition?”

“We’re Friends of Red Jenny, yeah? Making a show for the little people against the rich tits.” She gave a wink as if her statement was supposed to be enlightening. Berta looked at her blankly and Sera rolled her eyes. “Stealing the knickers out from under the their lordinesses. Bad things should happen to bad people, right?”

"Uh, sure." Berta wasn't sure who Red Jenny was or how petty theft was going to help the Inquisition's cause, but she let it go.

"Clear as mud," Dorian whispered loudly to Berta. Sera made a face at the mage.

"And what about you?" Marian asked Berta. "What's your role in this shit show?"

"I'm a surgeon and healer. I'm working in the infirmary until the Inquisitor returns." She reached for the mug of wine in front of her and took a sip, the spices warming her. "Then Solas is going to help me get home."

Sera snorted and nearly snarfed her ale. "Good luck with that weirdy. He’s the most elfy elf. Tell you all about a thousand years ago but can’t figure out what to eat for breakfast this mornin'."

Varric shook his head. "He's a learned sort of fellow. If anyone can help, I'm sure he can."

Sera looked at Varric as if a thought had just occurred to her. "And you’re the least dwarfy dwarf. Honestly."

Varric laughed. " Took you this long to notice I don't have a beard?"

"As much as I hate to end our idle chatter, I do need to ask you two for everything you know about Corypheus." Berta had never seen Dorian look so serious. "The Inquisitor tasked me with doing as much research on him as I can and you both know more than most."

Hawke leaned over her tankard and frowned. "All I can tell you is I thought I'd killed the bastard. And before that he put up a hell of a fight."

"You were there, Varric?" Dorian asked.

Varric nodded. "Yep, me, Hawke, Daisy and Blondie."

Berta raised an eyebrow. "More nicknames?"

Varric shrugged. "Merrill and Anders. Merrill's a Dalish elf who'd left her clan and Anders..." He glanced at Hawke, but the Champion said nothing, her mouth a thin line. "He was an apostate mage and former Grey Warden."

"And that's who you really should be talking to: the Wardens," Marian added. "They were the ones who created that prison and maintained the seals. Someone in the order must know something more about Corypheus."

Dorian nodded. "I'll ask Blackwall for anything he has before I write to Weisshaupt. He was fairly senior in the Order. He might know something."

Sera blew her breath out loudly, making a raspberry with her lips. "Well, when you finish with the talking, tell me where to shoot and I'll have done with him. I'm going to go drink where no one’s talking magical weirdness." She got up abruptly and left heading away towards the bar downstairs.
Dorian barely spared the elf a glance as she left. "Tell me more about this prison."

Berta listened closely, unsure if she should be privy to their conversation, but no one asked her to leave so she sipped her wine and remained silent, enjoying being a fly on the wall rather than the focus of the conversation. According to Marian, Corypheus had been sealed in an ancient prison and her father, Malcolm Hawke, had used blood magic, which Berta could tell was a Bad Thing, to strengthen the seals. Things got a bit fuzzy where the cult of dwarves came from that was worshiping Corypheus or why a group of rogue Grey Wardens sought to release the ancient Magister, but it sounded suspiciously like Corypheus had some sort of mind control at his disposal. Marian and Varric both swore up and down that they had killed Corypheus and seen him die before burning his body but here he was up and walking around. Dorian asked many pointed questions but, in the end, he sat silently, staring at the candle flame on the table, his expression grim. Berta, for her part, thought that climate change and nuclear holocaust were starting to sound like more manageable world-threatening problems.

“And the warden you met, Larias? No one knows what happened to him?” Dorian looked searchingly at Hawke and Varric.

Varric shook his head. “I assumed that he returned to Weisshaupt to report to his superiors, but according to Cassandra, he never arrived.”

Dorian rapped his fingers thoughtfully on the table. “Again, this comes back to the Wardens.” His brow furrowed. “I will definitely have a chat with Blackwall.”

Marian stood and stretched. “Well, if we’re not going to talk to him tonight, I’m going to bed.”

Varric looked horrified. “But the night is still young? You’ve only had one glass!”

Marian shook her head sadly. “I’m not as young as I used to be.” She paused for a moment and looked down at her dwarven friend. “And neither are you.”

Varric smiled mischievously. “But I find that if I drink enough, it doesn’t matter.”

“Then drink away, my friend. I’ll see you in the morning.” Marian nodded to Dorian and Berta. “Pavus. Healer.” She trotted down the stairs quickly and headed out the door of the Herald’s Rest.

Varric turned to look back at Dorian. “She’s worried. And I can’t say I blame her.”

Dorian sighed. “There is much cause for concern, but none of it will be solved tonight. I guess we’re all waiting for the Inquisitor to return. Really, most inconsiderate of her to take Solas and Blackwall on her adventures. But now,” he said, his face brightening considerably, “we should drink.”

Berta made herself comfortable, leaning against the wall. “At home, it’s New Year’s Eve. Definitely an occasion for drinking.”

Varric grinned. “I’ve gotten through many a First Day with my family by drinking.”

“You traditionally spend the first day of the new year with family?” Berta couldn’t remember the last time she spent New Year’s Day with anyone who was a blood relative.

Varric took a sip of his ale. “Unfortunately, yes. What about your First Day traditions?” His eyes lit up as he sensed otherworldly details he could include in his story.

Berta thought about how she usually spent her holidays. “The night before, New Year’s Eve is more about partying and getting drunk. At midnight, when the New Year begins, you’re supposed to kiss
someone, preferably someone you know, but as midnight approaches people get less picky.” Berta thought of several particularly poignant New Year’s parties where someone’s boyfriend offered to kiss her since she didn’t have a beau of her own. “There’s a lot of drinking of champagne, a bubbly wine, and some people eat black eyed peas for good luck. And there’s this song that everyone sings at midnight, but almost no one knows all the words so it’s really just an excuse to drunkenly bellow.”

Dorian’s brow was pinched. “You all sing a song nobody knows? That makes absolutely no sense.”

“Do you know this song?” Varric asked. Berta sheepishly shrugged and nodded. The dwarf looked pleased and clapped his hands quickly in a demand to be entertained. “Let’s hear it.”

Berta hesitated, a half glass of wine not nearly enough alcohol on board to induce her to sing in public. She had always considered knowing the words to Auld Lang Syne something of a party trick that she could trot out once a year. She started softly, just loud enough for her tablemates to hear and not compete with the troubadour downstairs.

“Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
and auld lang syne?

For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne.
We’ll take a cup of kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.

And surely, you’ll buy your pint cup,
and surely, I’ll buy mine!
We’ll take a cup o’ kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.

We two have run about the hills,
and picked the daisies fine;
We’ve wander’d many weary foot,
Sin’ auld lang syne.

We two have paddl’d in the stream,
From morning sun till dine;
But seas between us broad have roar’d,
Sin’ auld lang syne.

And there’s a hand, my trusty friend,
And give us a hand o’ thine!
We’ll take a good will drink of ale,
For auld lang syne.”

Berta finished quietly, feeling suddenly overwhelmingly sad and missing home. She pressed her lips together and then took another sip of her wine. Afraid to meet either of her companions’ eyes, for fear that she might begin to cry. Varric looked pensive and Dorian gazed into his tankard as he swirled his ale.

“What is ‘auld lang syne?’” Dorian asked.

Berta kept her gaze on her wine. “Days long ago. Times gone by.”
“Quite a morose song, isn’t it?” Varric observed.

“If you find thinking of old friends sad. I guess I think if it more as nostalgic.” Berta thought briefly of Hawke and all her family and companions that had fallen by the wayside and then realized that those friends were Varric’s too. “Is...is Anders still with Marian? Could he be nearby?” Seeing the look of distaste on Varric’s face, she explained, “I wouldn’t want any more trouble for the mages in the infirmary.”

Varric shrugged. “Hawke won’t say. I don’t know where he is, and I don’t want to know. His particular brand of radicalism was exhausting even before he started indiscriminately killing Chantry grand clerics.”

Even with what she knew of the lives of Circle mages, Berta wasn’t about to excuse terrorism in the name of revenge for other atrocities; however, it wasn’t like Thedas was a democracy or republic. The mages couldn’t vote for a Divine or King who might hear their complaints or change policies. Perhaps, as in early America, the Thedosian tree of liberty was only refreshed with blood. “There must be another way...” she mused.

Varric shrugged. “Anders didn’t have to blow up the Chantry, but Hawke?” He sadly shook his head. “The Templars had her sister.”

Berta wrinkled her forehead. “Her sister is a mage?”

Varric nodded. “Bethany. Yeah, sweet girl. She was in the Kirkwall Circle when the Knight-Commander invoked the Right of Annullment. Hawke wasn’t left with much choice.” He took a swig of ale from his tankard. “So, Hawke fought against the Templars. Sometimes I think she kept Anders alive just because so many of her other friends had abandoned her and she needed another fighter at her side. She was horrified by what he’d done.”

“Why did her friends abandon her?”

Varric looked down at his hands. “Hawke can be a hard woman to stand by. She doesn’t take any shit and she won’t coddle you. She’s also prone to being cuttingly sarcastic and will do the right thing, even if it pisses you off.” He sighed deeply and took another sip of his ale. “In the end, only me, her mage friends and the city guard stuck by her while she fought the Templars to save her sister and the other mages in the circle. If she ever bumps into her former friends...well, all I can say is, they better run.”

In Varric’s telling, Hawke cut a more tragic figure than a heroic one. It made Berta wonder again at Cassandra and Leliana’s desire to place her at the head of the Inquisition. “But would she have-”

“If you want to know more, read my book.” Varric held up a hand to interrupt her. “I’m done dissecting my friend for the night.”

Berta nodded soberly. She didn’t wish to make Varric feel like his loyalties were being tested. She forced a smile. “I thought you were a business man. Don’t you mean, ‘buy my book?’”

Varric grinned magnanimously. “For you, Healer, I’ll give you a deep discount on an autographed copy.”

Dorian arched an eyebrow at the dwarf. “May I infer from your use of her title that you still don’t have a nickname picked out for her?”

“You can’t rush these things, Sparkler. I just need to let it marinate for a bit and then it’ll declare itself.”
“Well, Berta’s already a nickname,” she said, taking another sip of wine.

Dorian looked askance at her. “It is? I thought that was your given name.”

“Berta is short for Alberta, my grandmother’s name,” she explained. “When I was little my father and his family called me Bertie.”

Varric frowned, considering. “I could call you Bertie.”

Berta looked hard at him. “Not if you want me to answer.”

Varric laughed. “Then the quest continues.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Berta said, “I was thinking of something I needed that I thought perhaps you, as a connoisseur of fine liquor might be able to help me with.”

“And you didn’t think of me?” Dorian asked. “I’m hurt.”

Berta shrugged. “You’re not a businessman.”

“How may I be of service?” Varric asked. “Mind you, whatever it is might be out of your price range.”

Berta chewed her lip thoughtfully. “Well, I’m hoping the Inquisition will pay for it.”

Varric leaned in. “I’m intrigued. What did you have in mind?”

“I need a still.”

Varric raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Planning on competing with Cabot?”

“No, nothing like that. I need to distill a very strong alcohol for use in the infirmary. It’s important for cleaning equipment and cutting down on infection,” she explained.

“Does that require something different than a regular still for making liquor?” Varric’s eyes narrowed like he was doing some quick calculating.

“It shouldn’t. I can double distill regular liquor to the strength I need.”

Varric had a very satisfied smirk on his face. “Cabot’s had to import everything he sells. If I could get a still here, the Herald’s Rest could have a new silent partner. And something more palatable than this Ferelden swill.” He gestured to his tankard dismissively.

Dorian emptied his tankard and looked disappointedly at the empty bottom. “This Ferelden swill is not so bad...”

“You haven’t yet tasted Skyhold Silk, the Taste of the Inquisition...” He gestured broadly. “I’ll bet it’ll be all the rage in Val Royeaux by the end of the year.”

“Before you get too carried away with your delusions of grandeur, how expensive would that be? All my other equipment’s been requisitioned through Commander Cullen.” Berta assumed the Commander might take some convincing before purchasing something that was primarily used for recreational purposes.

Varric winked at her. “You leave the Commander to me.”
Berta stayed up far too late with Varric and Dorian and getting just tipsy enough give them each a peck on the cheek in honor of New Year’s Eve traditions. Sera reappeared, completely drunk and no more intelligible than before, and demanded a peck on the cheek for her and Krem both, who she had dragged along in her boozy wake. The bard down by the hearth on the first floor had played largely sedate songs that Berta would have classified as medieval chamber music, but Sera accosted her to get her to play something livelier before dragging Krem about in a hopping routine that could only loosely be described as dancing. Berta soon said her good nights, insisting that sleep was necessary because she would have to work in the infirmary again tomorrow. It was cold outside the Herald’s Rest and she hustled back to her tent in the infirmary, snuggling into her scrubs and sweatshirt and falling into a hard sleep on her cot.

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In the morning, Berta felt slightly worse for wear, her headache having returned with a vengeance which she attributed to the final stages of caffeine withdrawal combined with inadequate sleep as two glasses of wine, even with Dorian’s generous pours, was not nearly enough to make her hung over.

Berta exited her tent a little surprised that she was the first one in the infirmary, but Meena arrived soon after bringing her usual morning tray of bread and cheese. She placed the food on the desk and started building up the fire from the embers. Berta carried over two logs from the wood pile that had been built up by the soldiers Commander Cullen had sent to do her bidding the day before.

“Oh, no, m’lady. You musn’t.” Meena practically grabbed the logs away from her, shooing her towards the food. “I’ve brought your breakfast. Leave this to me.”

“Meena, I’m not helpless.” Berta watched the slight elf lift the logs onto the fire.

“I know, m’lady. But you should be breaking your fast and getting ready for your patients. You can leave things like this to me. I can’t do any of the things you can do.” She knelt by the fire briefly, blowing into the embers, getting the flames going.

Berta thought that Meena had more in common with the house elves of Hogwarts than made Berta comfortable. Berta leaned on the edge of the desk and buttered a slice of bread while watching Meena work, tidying up around the fire and taking the scrubs to be washed again. “Meena, how did you come to serve the Inquisition?”

“Me, m’lady? I was a maid servant to the Grand Cleric in Starkhaven. I came with her to the Conclave. After all the confusion, Lady Montilyet asked all of us who lost our masters if we’d like to stay on with the Inquisition. So here I am.”

Berta chewed on the bread thoughtfully. “You didn’t want to go home?”

Meena shrugged as she straightened the blankets on a bedroll by the fire. “I miss the Chantry sometimes. It was always so quiet, and the incense made it smell nice and the candles all lit up were so pretty.”

“What about your family?”

“Oh, I don’t have one.” She stood and looked around the infirmary to try to find something else to do. “I was given to the Chantry as a baby and the sisters raised me.”

Berta imagined a tiny Meena left on a doorstep and thought maybe she understood a little better the elven woman’s desire to please. “That must have been hard.”

Meena raised her eyebrows in confusion. “Oh no, we were so much better off than the children in
the alienage. We always had food and blankets and someone to look after us.” Seeing nothing else she could do in the infirmary she wiped her hands on her apron and looked at Berta. “Do you need anything else, m’lady?”

Berta hated to ask for anything given Meena’s overzealous enthusiasm to serve but her desire for legal addictive stimulants outweighed her need to avoid overburdening her maid. “Meena, do they have coffee in the kitchens?”

Meena cocked her head. “Coffee? What is that?”

Berta sighed in disappointment. “It’s a hot drink, usually with breakfast but I can drink it any time of day.” Seeing no further look of understanding she continued. “There’s a plant that produces berries that are bright red when they’re ripe. It probably wouldn’t grow around here. Maybe far in the north?”

Meena looked like she wanted to be helpful. “Like a bloodberry?”

“I don’t know. The seed inside the berry is cleaned, roasted, ground up and then boiled with water and then the ground up seed is filtered out and you drink what’s left. It’s a dark brown, watery drink,” Berta elaborated further. “Some people put milk and sugar in it.”

Meena shook her head. “I’ve never seen anything like that. But some people put milk or sugar in their tea.”

Berta brightened. Tea could have just as much caffeine as coffee, but only if it was the same plant she was thinking of from home. “I’d love some tea if you could find some.”

“Right away, m’lady.” She practically ran off towards the kitchen, leaving Berta feeling only slightly guilty for imposing. Whatever this day might hold, she wouldn’t have to face it decaffeinated.
O, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in't!
-Miranda, act V, scene 1, The Tempest
-William Shakespeare
Musical Accompaniment:
“Legend” - The Score

Thedosian tea was no substitute for a light roast Robusta double espresso but it was better than nothing. Unfortunately, being caffeinated had no effect on the passage of time and the next two days crawled slowly by as Berta waited for the return of the Inquisitor and Solas. She had been in a heightened state of anticipation since Josephine had told her that the party was on their way back to Skyhold and every person that came through the gate was subject to Berta’s laser focused gaze, looking for anyone matching Solas’s description. She could feel her anxiety ratcheting higher, her fingers almost twitching, as she waited for the Inquisitor’s band to arrive and imagining the worst going on at home. She comforted herself by being grateful that there had been no repeat of the uncomfortable dinner at the nobles’ table; the Arl had left the day after to return to Redcliffe, taking the dinner table hostility with him and Berta found her companions much more companionable in his absence. Vivienne thankfully dined alone on her balcony in the great hall, her usual haunt when there wasn’t a noble around to suck up to and from where she could judge everyone from on high; Leliana had taken her seat the next evening. The Arl had stopped briefly in the infirmary on his way out of the keep, inviting Berta to visit once everything had calmed down, though whether he meant in Redcliffe or in the Inquisition, Berta wasn’t clear. Remarkably, Varric had successfully lobbied Cullen for the still and sent a raven to Denerim to procure the hardware from a contact in the capitol. If she hadn’t been so anxious to meet with Solas and get out of Thedas altogether, Berta might have been pleased at how things were going.

On the third day, Berta entered the Herald’s Rest, looking for Cabot and feeling irritable. That morning she had awoken with a start, panic ripping her from sleep, wondering what time it was at home. Today was her OR day and the first day she was supposed to be back to work after her vacation. Mr. Spaulding was on her schedule to have his gallbladder removed and Mrs. Ladd and Mrs. Hartmeier were both scheduled for mastectomies. There would probably be one or two cases from last night’s call to add on. Mike Nicola, the anesthesia chief would be pissed. A surgeon is never late for the OR was a sacred rule and especially not when the surgeon in question had the first case of the day. Mike was famously laid back until he wasn’t and today would be a hell of a day. Whoever was on call yesterday could pinch hit for her or they might reschedule her patients, except the OR staff wouldn’t know when to reschedule them because no one would know where she was. She thought about Mr. Spaulding’s wife, a sweet woman who worked as a grocery cashier and was concerned about taking time off work to care for her husband. Mrs. Hartmeier’s son was flying out from San Diego to be with his mom for her surgery. His plans were getting screwed too. Berta wondered how long it would take before someone called the police. She suspected when they looked for her, she and her entire car would have vanished without a trace. The police would probably try to contact her father. That would not go well.
Cabot was standing at the bar, polishing a set of pewter goblets with a rag.

“Good morning,” Berta greeted him. He grunted in response. “How are things?”

“Mellifluous.”

Berta didn’t know what to say to that. Each day that she had come to attempt to chat with him about placement of the still and planning for sharing its use, he had greeted her with a different SAT word. Yesterday he had been impecunious and the day before commodious, which Berta had found funny given his short stature. “That’s...great. Any sign of our still yet?”

“It’s coming from Denerim,” the barkeep grumbled. “Don’t hold your breath.”

Berta tried to remember back to the maps she had looked at with Dorian. “That’s pretty far?”

Cabot shook his head in exasperation. “It’s a ways.” He set down the rag and goblet he’d been cleaning. “Tell you what healer, you don’t bother me, and I’ll tell you the instant it arrives. Deal?”

“Fine.” Berta stalked away, annoyed with the dwarf. She turned around half way to the door. “You shouldn’t prevaricate when someone inquires how you are. You’re not mellifluous. You’re vituperative,” she spat at him before heading out to the courtyard. She heard Cabot chuckle behind her as she left.

Outside the tavern, Commander Cullen was inspecting two rows of soldiers standing at attention. He handed a piece of parchment to the soldier standing slightly apart from the first row, who saluted briskly and then began barking orders for assignments for the day. Berta headed for the stairs, hoping to avoid him, but Cullen saw her and moved to intercept her.

“Healer,” he called, stopping her from escaping down the stairs back to the infirmary.

“Yes, Commander?” Berta turned and tried to lighten the scowl she’d been left with from her interaction with Cabot.

“I haven’t had the chance to thank you for saving Sergeant Alia.” He shifted the wooden sparring sword he held from one hand to the other. “Will she be back to duty soon?”

“That largely depends on her.” Berta chewed her lip thoughtfully. She knew how long it would take for second degree burns to heal in her hospital, but here there were variables that were unknown to her. “If the salves continue to do their work and her ribs aren’t bothering her too much, maybe a week before she’s back on her feet. If she would consent to letting Fiona treat her, she could probably be back on duty tomorrow.”

Cullen’s forehead wrinkled in thought, but he didn’t immediately jump down her throat ranting about mages, so Berta considered that a win. “I’ll speak to her. Having her back on duty would go a long way to helping the men put their anger at the attack behind them.”

Berta nodded in agreement. “I would think so.”

“There’s something else I wanted to discuss.” His face fell back into his usual Commander glower and Berta braced herself. “You offered to Arl Teagan to have his nephew work in the infirmary. In light of the attack on the gate, I think it best if we leave such decisions up to the Inquisitor.”

“Oh. That hadn’t occurred to me.” Berta was used to working in a setting where she was in charge and able to make those kinds of decisions herself. “I’m sorry if I stepped on anyone’s toes.”
Cullen looked quizzically at her. “You use the most interesting idioms.”

Before Berta could reply, three loud trumpet blasts sounded, echoing over the keep. Cullen’s spine straightened, and Berta swore he perked up like a hound sensing its master coming home. He turned and tossed his sparring sword to Jim, who hovered behind him.

“That’ll be the Inquisitor.” He set off quickly down the stairs to the gate.

Berta felt her heart begin racing, thrumming with equal parts impatience and nervousness. She nodded to Jim and trotted down the stairs, worrying about whether she should make sure to look busy or be waiting attentively for the Inquisitor’s arrival and wondering how soon would be appropriate to ask to meet with Solas.

There was a cluster of people about the gate in addition to the Commander. The gate guards were standing stiffly at attention. Sue and Meena had stopped what they were doing and were standing near the fire, craning their necks, looking down the causeway. More castle denizens and traders were milling about by the scaffolding, trying to look like they had a good reason to be there but, Berta suspected, angling to get a glimpse of the Inquisitor. Two of the tavern girls stood at the base of the stairs, giggling and gaggle of Chantry sisters came down the other stairs, whispering excitedly. Fiona hung back by Berta’s tent, apparently wishing to be as inconspicuous as possible. Berta went over to her makeshift desk where she had a direct line of sight down the causeway without being too obvious.

Within moments, Berta could see the woman herself heading towards the keep from the distant gatehouse. All she could see at first was that the Inquisitor was taller than she expected for an elf, but had the same, almost anorexic appearance of the other elves she had seen. The Inquisitor moved differently, though, with an almost bow-legged swagger that made her look ready to spring into a fight at a moment’s notice. She would not curtsy and tremble the way Meena did. As she came closer, Berta could see the details of her silver scale armor with its black leather buckles and emerald green undercoat and the shining jeweled hilts of her daggers peeking up over her shoulders. She carried her helm under one arm, leaving her head bare. Her hair was almost white, pulled back from her deeply tanned, leathery face, shaved over one ear and braided along the side. Her eyes were narrow and a cat-like yellow-green, the bridge of her nose prominent, giving her an almost alien look. Her ears were larger and pointed more laterally than other elves Berta had seen. And like the other Dalish, the Inquisitor had the traditional facial tattoos, though hers were jet black and more aggressive looking than most, arching over her high forehead and around her eyes, bisecting her lips and chin. Watching her walk, her utter confidence and controlled strength, Berta realized that she was looking at the woman who had cast that inexplicable shadow outside her cell the first night Berta had spent in the keep’s dungeon.

Berta was so transfixed by the Inquisitor that she had barely noticed her companions. There was a burly bearded man on her right wearing a winged helm, the horns of Iron Bull behind her and a bald, tall, elven man carrying a staff on her left that had to be Solas. Watching them progress down the causeway Berta was suddenly struck that if this were a movie the Inquisitor and her posse would be slow-mo walking to some kick ass rock music and looking impossibly cool while they did it.

The guards saluted as the Inquisitor passed while Iron Bull winked at the red headed tavern girl. Berta thought the girl might swoon. Cullen stepped up to greet the Inquisitor’s party. She almost expected him to click his heels together.

“Inquisitor, welcome back. We’ve made excellent progress on the keep in your absence. Ambassador Montilyet and Sister Leliana are ready to brief you at your word.” He clasped his hands behind his back and trailed after the elf as she strode across the courtyard.
She stopped abruptly near the stairs within ear shot of Berta, who remained perched on the edge of her desk. Up close, Berta found it difficult to guess the Inquisitor’s age. Her white hair and quiet confidence made her seem older, but her face was unlined, but deeply tanned indicating she spent most of her time living out of doors.

The Inquisitor held up a small hand to Cullen. “The soldiers we rescued will be here tomorrow. We left them at Redcliffe. They have wounded. And there were signs of a plague in the Mire.” Her accent was precise and British, but not stuffy. She turned and looked at Iron Bull. “Bull- get that leg looked at.”

Bull opened his mouth as if to protest before the Inquisitor looked at him sharply. “Now.”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

The Inquisitor glanced at her bearded guard and Solas. “Go give your report to the Nightingale.” And then to Cullen, “War room- half an hour.” The elf turned crisply and headed up the stairs. As she did, Berta felt the elf’s eyes slide over her and meet hers ever so briefly, acknowledging and judging her before leaving, taking all the air in the courtyard with her. Berta felt her mouth go dry and she wanted to race after her, demand to see Solas right away, but the words died in her throat. This was not a woman to fuck with.

Solas and the bearded soldier followed her, taking any chance of Berta grabbing Solas’s attention with them. Cullen headed towards the stairs, but Berta stopped him before he got far.

“Commander,” she called after him. He turned on the bottom of the steps looking somewhat impatient. “I couldn’t help but overhear...” she rushed ahead before he could comment, “…if there were signs of a plague, we should quarantine any soldiers returning from the Mire. I’d also like to know what the Inquisitor saw so I could examine everyone returning for signs of infection.”

Cullen nodded curtly. “Talk to Iron Bull about what they saw. I will discuss it with the Inquisitor at the war council.”

“Everyone, Commander. The Inquisitor included.” Berta tried to look almost apologetic. “A plague loose in the keep would be a disaster.”

The Commander nodded seriously and at least had the good grace to look concerned even if he did not agree with her. The tradesmen and kitchen workers in the courtyard drifted away, back to their stalls and hearths. Sue returned to the pot of whatever she was boiling over the fire, glancing back over her shoulder at Bull and Fiona remained hanging back near Berta’s tent, clearly uninterested in getting near the Qunari.

Berta looked at the hulking mass of Iron Bull. She was equal parts trepidatious and curious. She glanced at Sue as the surgeon added more herbs to the pot of water.

“He’s all yours,” Sue said. “I’m not touching that.”

Berta sauntered over to Bull casually, trying to appear self-assured. The Qunari stood tall, a small horned mountain wearing a massive amount of armor, his presence dominating half the infirmary.

“I’m Doctor Shaw.” She wasn’t sure what the proper etiquette was for greeting your former jailer. “Let’s see this leg the Inquisitor was concerned about.”

The horned giant looked down at her with his one good eye. “You don’t look too worse for wear.”

Berta gave a half smile. “Krem said the exact same thing.”
“I guess we’ve rubbed off on each other.” He shifted his weight and looked back at her.

“You’ve known each other a long time?”

“Long enough. Saved his life. Lost my eye. It was a fair trade.” He shifted again. “Let’s get this over with.”

She took a deep breath. "First, I need you out of that armor." There was a sudden twittering giggle and Berta looked around Iron Bull's shoulder to see the two serving girls from the Herald's Rest making cow eyes at the Qunari. The red headed one bit her lip and then smiled coyly when Bull glanced back over his shoulder at her.

"Right." He started shedding metal, setting the pieces aside with just enough flair to make the tavern girls sigh. Berta rolled her eyes and looked away while Iron Bull disrobed for his fan club.

"Watch where you put that, you big..." Sue trailed off, picking up one giant metal glove that had been carelessly flung onto a bed roll. “You can’t just toss it anywhere. This is an infirmary,” she added stiffly.

"Excuse me, m'lady, but would you like me to fetch an armorer?" Meena left her spot by the fire and curtsied perfunctorily to Berta. “The armor’ll need cleaning.”

“Oh, uh, sure,” she muttered looking to Iron Bull who nodded in agreement as he stretched around his back, straining to reach the buckles. “That would be great.” Berta hadn’t the slightest clue about the care and maintenance of armor but removing it from the infirmary would be preferable.

“Here, let me, m’lord.” Bull looked entertained by the honorific but said nothing as Meena helped him undo the rest of his armor, leaving him shirtless except for the black body paint covering his chest and back and baggy striped pants. The Qunari looked ready for Hammer time.

Once done, Meena curtsied again. "I'll fetch one of the armorer, m'lady." She turned and hustled up the stairs, past the group of Chantry sisters who were still hanging around and eyeing Bull. Berta quickly went to the tavern girls. "Ladies, if you please..." she said mildly, gesturing to the stairs. The red head pouted prettily, and she and her friend flounced away.

"How come they get to stay?" asked one gesturing to the tavern girls with her chin.

"They will be on their way as well," Berta replied. "Shortly."

The sisters left, walking slowly up the stairs with a few lingering glances at Iron Bull. Berta quickly went to the tavern girls. "Ladies, if you please..." she said mildly, gesturing to the stairs. The red head pouted prettily, and she and her friend flounced away.

Berta turned back to Bull, seeing him watch the girls go. "Mmm. Red heads..." he murmured to himself.

Berta bit the inside of her cheek and tried not to grimace. She could not begin to imagine the logistics involved with what the red head clearly had in mind. She tried to purge the mental image and get back to business. “So, what did you see in the Mire that made the Inquisitor think there had been a plague?” Berta gestured to her stool for Bull to sit.

“Lots of bodies. Lots of funeral pyres.” Bull looked at her carefully before sitting. He leaned over to take off his boot and began rolling up his pant leg. “Lots of undead.”
“Undead?” Berta blinked at him. Was he kidding?

“Yeah, the swamp is full of them.” He shrugged, noting her confusion. “It’s what happens when a lot of people die and there’s no one left to burn the bodies.”

She knelt to examine Bull’s lower thigh where he’d pulled up the pant leg. There was a massive dark bruise discoloring his otherwise gray skin a deep mottled blue beginning just above the kneecap. “So, does that happen often?”

Bull arched his eyebrow at her. “A lot of people dying, or a lot of corpses being possessed?”

“Uh, the possession thing.”

Bull pulled the pant leg up a little higher and grimaced at the huge swollen bruise. “Yeah, it’s common.”

“Great,” Berta muttered under her breath, thinking that she’d set aside time to worry about the zombie apocalypse later. She looked at Bull’s knee. Qunari anatomy looked identical to human anatomy. He had a patella and the muscles of the thigh and lower leg looked the same if larger and better defined than most humans. He was built like a pro wrestler but on a bigger scale than any human Berta had ever seen. His hand looked like it could crush her skull with minimal effort.

“Doc, if you’re done ogling…” Berta glanced up to see him smirking at her.

She returned her attention to his knee. “I’m not ogling, I’m inspecting. It’s the standard first part of a physical exam.” She placed her hands on either side of his knee and felt along the joint line. “Any pain?”

“Naw. Just up here.” He pointed just above the knee cap.

“This may hurt,” Berta warned. She moved her hands up, pressing down on the knee cap and looking at his face to see if she was causing him discomfort. His skin was warm, and Berta realized she had been expecting his gray skin to feel cooler than a human’s. Iron Bull remained stone faced, so she moved up further, feeling along the superior margin of the patella, pressing on where the distal quadriceps tendon should be. He sucked his breath in sharply as she pressed, trying to feel for any defect in the tendon that would indicate a tear. She moved sideways along the vastus medialis and vastus lateralis muscles feeling the swelling but not eliciting much pain. She put her hand along the front of his left ankle. “Push your leg against my hand.”

The Iron Bull pushed, and Berta, perhaps expectedly, fell over backward, landing on her ass. “I guess there’s no problem there,” she observed wryly, dusting herself off and crouching back by his right ankle. “And on this side,” she instructed, repeating the exercise. Bull winced and pushed but didn’t succeed in toppling her again. The left leg was definitely stronger.

Berta stood, brushing her hands off on her apron. “Did you get any indication of what symptoms the plague might have caused?”

“Yeah, we found a diary from a village healer. First sign is cough, then going pale, then the next day a fever. I got the sense that they went downhill quickly after that.”

Berta nodded. “If it progressed quickly so much the better. A long latency or prodromal phase would make it harder to detect and harder to keep from spreading.” She stood and pulled her stethoscope out of her apron, popping it into her ears.

Bull looked curious. “What’s that?”
“A stethoscope. It’s for listening to your heart and lungs.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my heart and lungs,” he balked.

“I’m checking to make sure you haven’t carried any plague back with you.” She couldn’t be sure that this would really identify a plague carrier, but she could at least give him a cursory exam. She wouldn’t find anything if she didn’t look.

“Just breathe normally,” she instructed. Berta pressed the stethoscope to the upper right margin of his sternum, listening carefully, her other hand drifting to his wrist to palpate his radial artery while she listened. His heart beat was steady and just like a human’s, the steady lub-dub implying that he had the same four chambered anatomy she did. She moved over to the left, listening along the upper and lower borders of the sternum, trying to hear any difference in his pulmonic or mitral valves, though admittedly she was no cardiologist. She pressed her hand along his chest, trying to feel where a Qunari’s cardiac apex might be. She couldn’t feel anything, but he was so muscular she wasn’t surprised she couldn’t feel his heart beat through his chest wall.

She moved around to his back. “Take a deep breath and blow it out. Again.” She looked at his horns while she stood behind him, listening to his lungs, able to stare openly without him observing her. The horns seemed to form out of the skin rather than through it and they were smooth, like a rhinoceros rather than textured like a big horn sheep. She immediately felt guilty, mentally comparing her patient and his horns to an animal.

Berta pulled the stethoscope out of her ears and put it back in her apron pocket. She came back around and stood in front of him. She looked at his eye, the white clear and gently pulled down on the lower lid. “Look up.” She didn’t see any redness or excessive tearing to indicate infection. “Look right at my nose, open your mouth wide. Stick your tongue out. Say ‘ah.’”

Bull looked amused by her instructions but complied. Berta peered into his mouth, wishing she had a pen light. His pharynx was the first thing she found, other than his obvious skin color and horns, that was different from a human, as he had no uvula. The rest of the pharynx appeared the same, even with the same pink coloration of a human throat. “Any cough? Fever? Loss of appetite? Any difficulty sleeping?”

“No.”

She reached up to pull on his right ear, thinking to check for any tenderness that might indicate an external auditory canal infection.

“Hey, easy on the ears.” He batted her hand away.

Berta withdrew her hand, quickly, feeling chastised. “Does that hurt?”

Iron Bull almost growled. “They’re sensitive.”

“Oh, sorry.” She reached out with both her hands to feel his neck, searching for any swollen lymph nodes, assuming Qunari had lymph nodes. “Any tenderness?”

“No.”

She palpated along the base of his neck out over his collar bones, thinking she’d have a hard time feeling his lymph nodes given his muscle mass. Berta glanced up again at his horns, wondering how he slept- on his back, she supposed.

Iron Bull sighed. “Go ahead and ask.”
Berta looked at him sharply. “What?”

“What you want to ask about.” He held her gaze for a moment. “The horns.”

“Oh.” Berta felt inexplicably embarrassed. “Do they...are they...I’m assuming they don’t have sensation?”

“Not really, but they can get itchy at the bases.” He looked entertained by Berta’s interest. “You humans, you always want to know about the horns.”

“Well, they are the most obvious difference between us. You can’t blame me for being curious.” She gave a shy smile. “They are kind of badass.”

Bull looked pleased. “I know, right?” Bull looked at her as if considering something. “You can touch them if you want.” And seeing Berta’s hesitancy, he added, “You know, in the interest of scientific discovery.”

As a physician, Berta was used to touching the body in ways that might have been intimate in a different context but this felt odd even to her, as if she was running her fingers through a patient’s hair during a physical exam, but Bull didn’t seem to think of it the same way so she examined his horns, feeling the skin where they merged with his skull and noting the faint ridges under her fingertips.

“Are Qunari born with horns? Do they ever stop growing? I’ve heard that some Qunari have more than two. Are they all shaped like yours?” Berta couldn’t stop the flood of curiosity now that she had permission to ask away.

Bull laughed. “Pace yourself. We don’t want your head to explode.”

Berta laughed at herself and withdrew her hands. “Sorry. I can be overzealous.”

“Iron Bull, how was the armor? Need any adjustments?” Berta turned to glance at the armorer who had appeared and was sorting through Bull’s discarded equipment, handing off the smaller pieces to two boys who looked like apprentices.

“No, Harritt, it was all good. Thanks for finding something to fit me.”

Harritt mumbled something about further strengthening the gusset, whatever that was, and gathered up the larger pieces himself before heading back towards the armory.

Bull stood and stretched, Berta stepped back, again feeling overwhelmed by his height and size. “Anything else you need, Doc? The Nightingale will want me to report in.”

“I’d like to have our mage take a look at your knee. I think you’ve torn your tendon.” She glanced over at Fiona to see if she was listening. Fiona stared back and gave a small, silent shake her head, No.

Iron Bull frowned. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

Berta rested her hands on her hips. “You don’t think you have a tendon tear, or you won’t let a mage heal you?”

“I’m not crazy about mages.”

Berta clenched her teeth together. This fear of magic crap was getting old fast. “If you want to be
able to straighten your leg with your full strength, you’ll let her look at you.”

Bull grumbled something under his breath. “She can look all she wants but she’s not touching me.”

Berta was inclined to tell him not to be such a big baby.

“Perhaps I can be of assistance.”

Berta turned toward the voice to see Solas. He had changed out of his traveling clothes and stood before Berta wearing a tan tunic with some sort of animal jaw necklace and green leggings. He was barefoot. He proffered a small glass bottle containing a vibrant red liquid. Bull reached for the bottle, popped the cork with his thumb and chugged it, emptying it entirely before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Thanks.” Iron Bull grunted and kicked his right leg like he was working the kinks out. Berta glanced down to where his pant leg was still rolled up and watched the bruises fading before her eyes. She bent down, running her hand over his knee.

“What the hell was that?” She asked, looking to the empty bottle in Bull’s hand.

“A healing potion,” explained Solas. “An extract derived from large amounts of elfroot, dawn lotus, spindleweed and prophet’s laurel. The representative from the College of Apothecaries has been brewing them for the Inquisitor.”

“That’s amazing.” Berta took the empty bottle from Iron Bull and sniffed it, noting the same menthol and seaweed odor as the poultices Sue sometimes prepared but easily tenfold stronger. She ran her index finger inside the mouth of the bottle and then rubbed her finger and thumb together feeling the unctuous fluid and a slight tingle where the liquid touched her skin. “Do you think Elan would make some of this for the infirmary?”

Solas looked askance at Berta. “It is quite dear. She so far has only made enough for the Inquisitor and her immediate party.”

“Oh.” Berta was disappointed. It would have been fantastic to have another effective healing tool at her disposal without needing a mage.

“But I suspect you have more pressing matters on your mind than healing potions and apothecaries.” He looked at her expectantly, his hands clasped behind his back. His face was narrow and without vallaslin. A small, expectant smile graced his mouth.

Berta nodded eagerly. “Josephine said you’re an expert on rifts and the Fade.”

“And on that note, I’m outta here. The Nightingale’s in her roost I assume?” Iron Bull shook his pant leg down and looked at Solas who nodded.

“Anxiously awaiting your Ben Hassrath report for any details that eluded the rest of us.” The words were benign, but Berta could hear a tinge of disapproval.

Bull smirked and headed up the stairs. “I’ll fill her in on anything you missed.” He gave Berta a casual one-handed salute goodbye.

“Now,” said Solas. “Let us find somewhere quiet to talk and we’ll see what I can do about getting you home.”
Can I create an entire story out codex entries and war table operations? Apparently, yes.
The Counsel of the Council of Mages

Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people.
-Henry Thomas Buckle

Musical Accompaniment:
“Hotel California” - Low Strung

Solas walked around the table in the center of the rotunda below the library and gestured for Berta to sit in the single chair. The table was covered with scholarly and artistic detritus: books, candles, empty mugs, a stone slab bas relief sculpture of a skull, an actual skull, scraps of scribbled on parchment and a small stack of scrolls. Berta sat, feeling eager and hopeful, folding her hands in her lap to keep from fidgeting.

Solas stood over the table, resting his fingertips on the table top between something that looked like a snake skin and a collection of paint pots and brushes. He regarded her coolly, his face impassive as he studied her. Berta looked back at him, waiting for him to speak.

“You do not seem particularly otherworldly,” he observed.

Berta blinked at him. “Sorry to disappoint.”

He continued to study her. “The Inquisitor asked me to avail you of my knowledge of the Fade. She would see you returned to your world.”

Berta nodded politely. “Thank you.”

Perhaps we should begin with how you came to Thedas. Do not spare any detail.”

“No, no, no. You mustn’t start without us.”

Berta glanced over to her right and smiled at Dorian breezing down the stairs from the upper library. Unfortunately, Lady Vivienne glided in behind him.

“Dorian be a dear and fetch me a seat.” She languidly gestured to the formal sofa pushed against the wall by the stairwell.

Dorian sighed heavily and grabbed the arm of the sofa and dragged it across the room until it was alongside the table opposite Berta, the screeching sound of the wooden legs on the stone floor ensuring no conversation could take place until he was done. Vivienne took her seat primly on the edge of the sofa, smoothing her over skirt, while Dorian lounged back, propping his ankle on his opposite knee. “There we are. You may begin now that Thedas’—”

“-foremost magical scholar, yes, we’re all aware of your pedigree, darling.” Vivienne patted him on the thigh.

Solas regarded Vivienne. “I was not aware that you had interest in Fade theory.”

Vivienne looked archly in turn at Solas and Dorian. “The Circles must be represented. I am here in case you succeed. Such a historic undertaking must be witnessed by someone other than an apostate and a Tevinter.” She smiled reservedly.
Berta turned to Solas. “Should maybe we fetch Fiona too?” If the sum total of senior magical know-
how of the Inquisition was being brought to bear on Berta’s predicament, she thought the former
Grand Enchanter should be there.

“I’m not sure what she could possibly do to assist in this enterprise,” Vivienne drawled. “In her
dotage-”

“-I find that my wisdom has grown.” Fiona walked through the door calmly. “I see no reason that I
should not listen and perhaps help defend the best interests of our most adept healer.” She met
Berta’s eye and gave a small smile. Berta smiled back. She realized that she was beginning to think
of Fiona as a friend and was glad for her presence. Fiona perched on the arm of the sofa beside
Vivienne.

“Ah, the more the merrier! We are a veritable Council of Mages,” chimed Dorian. Vivienne did not
look merry.

Solas calmly looked round at the other mages and Berta, apparently unruffled by the interruption.
“Now, if everyone is satisfied, let us proceed. Tell us everything.”

Berta nodded and took a breath. “Alright. It was evening. I was going home from work. I was in a
car- it’s kind of like a wagon but without horses. It moves under its own power.”

“I thought you don’t have magic,” interrupted Dorian.

Berta shook her head. “We don’t. A car is a machine.” She gauged Solas’s demeanor to see if he
was questioning her veracity, but he merely crossed his arms and rested his curled fingers against his
chin while listening. “It had been snowing heavily all day. As I left town, it began to thunder. At
first, I could barely hear it over my music-”

“You had musicians with you?” Vivienne was dubious.

“No, no, I have a device that plays music that’s been recorded,” Berta explained. Seeing their blank
looks she added, “I don’t think it’s relevant. At any rate, I don’t know if that sort of weather is
normal here, but in my world, thunder and lightning during a snow storm is rare.”

“It is rare in this world as well.” Solas inclined his head towards her. “Continue.”

Berta licked her lips. “As I was going along, lightning struck the middle of the road ahead of me and
it startled me, so I tried to stop the car, but it slid in the snow- cars are quite heavy and if the road is
slippery, they can slide when you try to stop.” Berta furrowed her forehead, trying to describe
exactly what happened next. “The light was more sustained than a lightning strike should have been
and green and then the car slid through the light and off the road. I got out of the car when it stopped
and climbed up to where I thought the road would be, but it wasn’t there and instead there was a rift
and I was attacked by a demon and I blacked out.”

“A despair demon. The rift had spawned several.” Solas stood quietly, considering further. “You
were alone?”

“Yes.”

Dorian leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and templing his fingers before his chin. “So,
your car...” he spoke the word slowly as if sensing how it felt in his mouth, “came through the rift
with you? I should like to see that...” He trailed off, perhaps imagining what a car looked like.

“Yes. I’m assuming it’s still wherever I was found,” Berta replied. “May I ask a question?”
Solas clasped his hands behind his back. “Certainly.”

“Varric said you and the Commander found me? What happened?”

“Avyanna and I were leading the Inquisition soldiers at the front of the column of survivors from Haven. We came upon a rift.” He paused. “I should explain. Rifts are quiescent until a sentient being approaches. Then it will spawn demons, drawn from their home in the Fade to the life and emotions they sense. This rift had already been triggered when we approached so we knew there was someone nearby. After we dispatched the demons and Avyanna closed the rift, we searched the area and the Commander stumbled upon you. We did not come across your car, but it was dark and starting to snow again. You were transported with the other wounded to the refugee camp by the lake. Sister Leliana thought you might be important given your strange appearance.”

Berta sighed. “I guess she was disappointed, too.”

“On the contrary, I hear your skills have been quite useful.” He looked at her speculatively. “I suppose time will tell if you’re a Venatori spy, but I think not. Cole senses no deception in you.”

“That demon…” Vivienne began.

“Usually glimpses the truth of any matter,” Solas replied, cutting her off.

“He’s a demon?” Berta looked from Vivienne to Solas, unsettled.

“Cole is a spirit. He can read other’s thoughts and emotions, walk inside their memories. ‘Black ink on plain parchment,’ is, I believe, how he described you.”

Vivienne gave her usual contemptuous smile, her pale eyes glancing over Berta. “Plain parchment...how perfect.” Fiona had the decency to look annoyed on Berta’s behalf.

Berta ignored the Court Enchanter. She supposed there was something in Cole’s comment about being straightforwardly easy to read that was complementary. “So back to the rifts...what are they exactly? And how did it bring me to Thedas?”

“That is the question, is it not?” Solas paced around the table. “The rifts are tears in the Veil, the border which separates this world from the dream world of the Fade where demons and spirits reside.” His eyes narrowed slightly as he paced. “To come through a rift is to come through the Fade. It would follow then that you entered the Fade from your world through a rift before coming to ours.”

“But the journey didn’t seem to take any time. Isn’t it possible that the rift connected my world and Thedas directly?”

Solas shook his head. “Unlikely. If there was a direct connection, bypassing the Fade, why would demons appear from the rift on this side?” He shook his head. “No there has to be a connection with the Fade.”

Berta frowned. “But that would mean that there are rifts connected to the Fade in my world as well. I’ve never seen or heard of anything like that happening before.”

“And you would know if a rift formed anywhere in your world?” He looked skeptical.

Berta shrugged. “Not necessarily, but my world is interconnected in a way that I can’t even begin to explain to you. Nothing as freaky as demons pouring out of a big green floating light would go unnoticed for long.”
“And yet it has happened,” observed Fiona. “Perhaps the breach created by Corypheus at the Conclave thinned the Veil in your world as well as in ours.”

Berta’s brow knitted together. “So that would mean that my world has a Veil, but people in my world don’t all go to the same mystical place when we dream. And we sure don’t have demons or spirits.”

“Do you not?” Solas looked amused.

“Well…” Berta foundered. “I don’t think we do.”

Fiona looked intently at Berta. “Only mages can be conscious in dreams. And your world does not have mages, yes?”

Berta shook her head. “No, we don’t.”

Solas spread his hands as if laying out an explanation before him. “Therefore, the Veil and the Fade could exist in your world, but your people cannot consciously reach it.”

Berta sighed impatiently. “But all of that is immaterial. How does this help me get home?”

Solas looked sternly at Berta as if she were a particularly trying toddler. “I must understand how you came to be here before I can hope to send you back. Now, a few more questions.”

Berta folded her hands back in her lap and did her best to be patient.

“The place where the lightning struck, as you put it, does it have any significance? Any history?”

Berta considered. “The area where I live has a ton of history, at least relative to most of my country, but I’m not sure if anything particularly significant happened there. It’s just a road through a farming area.”

Solas’s brow furrowed. “The Veil often becomes particularly thinned in places of great upheaval or violence.”

Berta blew out her breath trying to think. “There was a Native American raid on the city once. Something like a quarter of the town was wiped out in an afternoon.”

“That sounds violent,” Dorian observed nonchalantly.

“But I don’t know if the violence reached that far south of town. And that was over 300 hundred years ago. Would that really affect the Veil today?” Berta asked.

Solas nodded sagely. “The Fade and the Veil reflect echoes of both the recent past and things that have gone long before. Events from thousands of years ago leave their traces behind if you know how to look.”

“So, we just go to an old battlefield and pop open a rift and I can go home?” Berta looked hopefully at Solas.

“I doubt it would be that simple,” Vivienne said dismissively.

“And we have no way to open a rift, do we?” Fiona looked to Solas.

Solas shook his head. “Even if we wanted to open a rift, I’m not sure Avyanna can. She has the anchor, an effect of the explosion at the conclave that gives her the power to close the rifts,” he explained to Berta, “and she has been able to completely open rifts that are unstable, so they can then
be closed cleanly and permanently...but to open a rift anew...I don’t know if that is possible.”

“And even if the Inquisitor could open a new rift, would it lead back to your world?” Fiona frowned slightly as she looked at Berta. “Would you not just be trapped in the Fade forever?”

Everyone was quiet for a moment, each musing over the problem.

Berta broke the silence first. “Is there another way to get into the Fade or go between worlds?”

Solas raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Physically, you mean?”

Vivienne folded her arms across her chest. “Is there another way that matters for our purposes?”

“Corypheus apparently succeeded in doing so but only at great cost in both lyrium and the blood of slaves,” Solas said.

“So that’s off the table,” Dorian added.

Berta pursed her lips in thought. “So, let me ask you something else: have there been any other people from my world to appear in Thedas?”

Solas shook his head. “None that I am aware of.”

Berta held her hand up for everyone to give her a moment. “So, hear me out: We speak the same language, right? How is that possible?”

Vivienne smirked. “Well, my dear, you speak common.”

“I speak parfaitement Orlesian ainsi, merci beaucoup,” Berta replied caustically. “If I can speak common and Orlesian, doesn’t it follow that there has to be some kind of ongoing ‘cross contamination’ between our worlds. Language evolves pretty rapidly last I checked, yet we can understand each other. That has to mean that others from my world have come here or vice versa.”

Everyone looked at her skeptically, so she plowed ahead. “I’ve been reading that book you gave me, the one by Brother Genitivi,” she said to Dorian. “The Elves and Dwarves were once the only races in Thedas. Then the humans came. Where did they come from? Maybe from my world?”

Fiona cocked her head thoughtfully. “The Qunari also appeared several hundred years ago.”

“Definitely not from my world,” Berta replied pointedly.

“But why not from another?” asked Fiona.

Dorian tapped his fingers on his lips. “Then how would we know if we’re returning Berta to her world or some other world on the other side of the Fade?” Dorian looked concerned. “Tossing her into a rift, goodbye, best of luck, and hoping she lands back where she came from is too great a risk.”

Vivienne glanced sidelong at her compatriot mages. “Are we seriously proposing that there are multiple worlds connected through the Fade and now made accessible by Corypheus creating these rifts?”

Solas sighed, resting his fingertips upon the table again. “I think it is unlikely that he intended this to happen. I suspect this is an unforeseen side effect of the explosion at the Conclave.”

Berta sighed too. “So, all of this is very academically interesting but where does this leave me?
What’s the plan?”

Everyone looked at Solas. He straightened, looking determined. “If there have been others who have come to Thedas from your world, or connections from your world to the Fade, though rifts or otherwise, there should be echoes of your world in the Fade, but I might not recognize them for what they are if they are sufficiently foreign. I should watch your dreams to see a glimpse of your world.”

“Excuse me?” Berta was a little confused. “How does that work?”

“You sleep, you dream, I observe in the Fade, and share in your dream. I can see what you see. Once I am familiar with your memories of your world, I can look for other signs of connection in the Fade.”

Because that’s not creepy, Berta thought.

Dorian tapped his lip in thought. “I will research any instances of otherworldly visitors in the library here. And I’ll write to my contacts in Minrathous.”

Vivienne pursed her lips as if what she was about to say was distasteful. “I will contact the remaining Loyalist circles and see if they have any pertinent information in their archives.”

Fiona nodded encouragingly. “We have some academics amongst the Libertarians. I will ask amongst them and see if we have anyone with additional expertise we can bring to bear.”

Solas gave a small nod to each of them in turn. “Then we have our plan. At least for the immediate future.”

Berta was grateful but felt despondent. Her situation was not hopeless but far more complicated that she had imagined. “Well,” she said, slapping her thighs before standing, “is there anything else I can do?”

“Merely sleep.” Solas gave a slight bow of his head. “I will see you tonight in your dreams.”

Berta repressed a shudder and smiled weakly. This was going to be weird.

“I’m sorry to interrupt m’lady,” Meena stood at the door hesitantly hovering, “but the Inquisitor wants to see you.”

Everyone went quiet around the table. “Best not to keep her waiting,” Solas advised.

Berta excused herself from the mages and followed Meena. “This way, m’lady.”

They crossed the great hall to the door adjacent to the throne and dais. “Her chambers are at the top of the stairs.” Meena curtsied and left. Berta opened the door and immediately startled, something large and covered in a cloth drape looking like a classic ghost stood in the corner of the stairwell. She shook her head at herself, realizing that it was probably only a suit of armor under a sheet and stepped inside. She was more on edge to meet the Inquisitor than she wanted to admit to herself. The door led into a dilapidated tower lit with torches with a wooden floor scattered with spare planks and steps skirting the edge of the tower. There were crows nesting in the rafters opposite the stair, coming and going as they pleased through a gaping hole in the stones along the side of the tower. She glanced over the railing only to more stacks of lumber and stone below. She headed up the stairs before coming to another door. She took a deep breath, gathered herself and knocked.

“Enter,” came the Inquisitor’s voice.
Berta opened the door to find yet another stair, this one made of stone. She walked quickly up the steps. The room she entered was remarkable. There was a curtained and richly ornamented four poster bed, soft deep carpets covering the stone floors, and a several paintings and a bureau against one wall. The glass doors were thrown open allowing fresh air to flood the room and showing the stunning vista of the Frostback mountains beyond. There was a fire crackling in the fire place. In the corner opposite the top of the stairs was a large wooden desk, backed by bookshelves and a lute sitting to one side. The Inquisitor sat at the desk, reading something on a piece of parchment in front of her. She set it aside and raised her head, gazing at Berta. She had changed from her armor and now wore a leather vest and cream-colored scarf over a fitted scarlet shirt with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. A pair of long pale kid gloves were cast aside carelessly on the desk next to her. There were candles illuminating her work space and sunlight streaming in through the open door. There was a tray of food and a glass of wine sitting beside her, untouched. She kept her left hand clenched in a fist on the desk.

Berta crossed to stand in front of the desk trying to think how to address the Inquisitor. Your highness? Your holiness? She couldn’t remember hearing anyone use those honorifics. She settled on “You wanted to see me, my lady?”

The Inquisitor said nothing, studying Berta as if she was a particularly rare breed of animal at the zoo. Berta tried not to shift under her gaze and stared back. The elf finally spoke.

“You cared for one of the fallen workmen.”

It wasn’t a question, but Berta felt compelled to say something in reply. “Yes, Inquisitor.”

“And you saved Sergeant Alia’s life.”

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

“You had a long list of items for our quartermaster.”

Berta couldn’t tell if she was irritated. “Only what was necessary, my lady.”

“Do you have everything you need to care for my army?” The Inquisitor tightened her fist and leaned back against the chair, resting the heel of her clenched hand against the edge of the desk and looking hard at Berta over her papers.

“Almost, my lady. I’m waiting on a still from Denerim so I can manufacture solutions to fight infection. I’m waiting on additional tents to house patients and I would like to get down to see to the health of the refugees as well, if time allows.” The Inquisitor said nothing, continuing to stare at her so Berta continued. “I’d like to better understand our water supply and make plans for waste water disposal. I could use additional unskilled labor in the infirmary for making bandages, tending fires, and the like. I’d like to recruit additional mages to work in the infirmary~”

The Inquisitor held up her right hand to stop her. “Very busy,” she observed and drummed her fingers on the desk. “Speak to the Commander regarding the water supply. He is ahead of you there.” She picked up the piece of parchment she had been perusing before and returned to reading. “You may go.”

Berta felt confused. What had just happened? “Inquisitor?”

She looked up over the paper, her narrow yellow eyes boring into Berta. “You are dismissed.”

Berta turned and walked away, belatedly dropping an awkward curtsy at the top of the stairs. “Thank you, Inquisitor.” She headed down the stairs and back to the great hall. She ran the conversation over
in her head on the way back to the infirmary, unsure what the point of that interaction had been, and
cursing herself for forgetting to ask for permission to quarantine the soldiers returning from the Mire
and to examine the Inquisitor herself. When she arrived back at the infirmary, there were several
patients waiting and Sue looked irritated at having been left alone for so long. Berta jumped back in,
figuring that she would help get caught up before sending Meena to locate the Commander and ask
for a moment of his time.

As it was, a fractured elbow, a plantar fasciitis, a sprained wrist and a possible pneumonia later,
Commander Cullen came to find her. She was finishing up coaching Fiona with the pneumonia,
explaining the anatomy and physiology of the lung to her in order to help her hopefully treat the
incessantly coughing soldier when Cullen came and stood not far away, his arms folded across his
chest, clearly waiting for her to be done. She left Fiona to hopefully heal the soldier and washed her
hands before walking over to the Commander, drying them on her apron.

“Yes, Commander?”

“A word, in private.” He turned and headed up the short flight of steps to the side of the gate without
waiting for her reply. Berta followed after him, walking through the door at the top of the steps that
he held open for her. The room inside was a disused guard room, stacked with boxes and crates,
cobwebs over everything. Berta turned and looked up at the Commander and was struck again at
how impossibly good looking he was. He let the door close behind them.

The Commander cleared his throat. “The Inquisitor has ordered me to place you in charge of the
healing of our army and the refugees.”

Berta was stunned into silence.

“As such, you will report directly to me. You will have a fair amount of latitude in requisitioning
anything you need and organizing your personnel as you see fit, including whatever mages you
require. Each of the captains under my command meet with me in my office each morning half past
dawn. Do not be late.”

Berta nodded dumbly. “Yes, Commander.”

“Do not discuss this with anyone today. I will speak to...anyone who needs to be apprised and you
can begin your duties tomorrow morning. That is all.” He turned to leave.

“Commander?”

“Yes?” He turned back to her, his usual exasperation faintly showing.

“The Inquisitor ordered you to do this?” Berta wanted to know if this was against his will.

His brow furrowed briefly. “Yes. And I follow orders.” He turned to leave again before stopping
short at the door and glancing back at Berta. “But...some orders are easier to follow than others. I’m
sure you’ll do well.” The corner of his mouth almost curled up into a smile before he left.

Berta stood a moment, and took a deep breath, feeling involuntarily excited at this turn of events. She
had a lot of work to do.

*~~~~~*~~~~~*

The Commander, true to his word, had spoken with Sergeant Alia and either ordered or cajoled her
into letting Fiona treat her. Her wounds closed, and her ribs healed, she headed back to her barracks,
leaving the infirmary empty for the evening.
Berta arrived in the great hall for dinner and headed to her usual table but found it half empty as another table had been added to the dais itself and the Inquisitor dined there with Cassandra, Josephine, Leliana, Cullen, Marian and Solas. Berta had never found it difficult to keep secrets but found herself dying to tell Dorian about her promotion and wondering what he would think. She internally swung from excitement at the new position to incredulous irritation with herself that something other getting home was intruding to become a higher priority. Half of her was eager to show these Thedosians how a medical service should be run while the other half of her was terrified of never getting home. She had no need to keep up appearances or conversation though, for fortunately, or unfortunately as Berta saw it, Vivienne had descended to join them and occupied Dorian’s attention with a discussion about Orlesian fashion and the new slippers she had ordered from Val Royeaux. The great hall seemed subdued over dinner, quieter than Berta had ever heard it and she assumed it was everyone being on their best behavior with the Inquisitor in residence.

After dinner Solas left the Inquisitor’s side and intercepted Berta before she could leave the great hall.

“For you,” he said, handing her a folded packet of parchment.

“What is this?” Berta looked suspiciously at the packet.

“Add this to hot water and drink it just before bed. It will enhance your sleep and help you to dream,” Solas replied. “I will meet you in the Fade.”

Berta nodded soberly, noting that he hadn’t answered her question and hoping that she didn’t have any embarrassing showing-up-naked-in-the-OR variety of dreams. She was anxious about having someone mucking around in her head while she slept, but she also knew that currently this was her best first step for getting home. She took the packet and headed back to her tent, hoping that Solas would find what he was looking for in her dreams.

The weather had taken a sudden turn colder, a blasting frigid wind chasing her down the steps on her way back to the infirmary. Meena brought her a mug of hot water from the kitchens at her request and set her bath but the water rapidly cooled in the chill air, even with her tent flaps tightly closed. Berta splashed herself off perfunctorily, wishing for a long soak in a hot tub. After putting on her scrubs, she dumped the contents of the packet into the mug and drank it quickly. It was bitter and left her tongue with a coated sensation.

She climbed into her cot, shivering. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, hoping to fall asleep quickly but her mind was racing with all the things she would need to do tomorrow in her new role and all the hopes that had been dashed in her conversation with the council of mages today. After what felt like an hour, she got up and put on her socks and sweatshirt, trying to get warm. After another half hour she got up and added her hat, scarf and parka and clambered back into bed. Her nose was cold, and she was sure that she could have seen her breath if there had been enough light in the tent to see. She pulled the wool blanket over her head, cocooning herself, trapping the warmth of her breath, but it did little good. She thought of the refugees down by the lake and the soldiers out on the battlements and thought their lot was probably far worse, but it didn’t make her any warmer. She finally gave up, getting up and wrapping the blanket around her shoulders and slipping her feet into her unlaced boots. She decided to go in search of another blanket.

Berta left her tent, her breath forming a thick fog in front of her face. With no patients in the infirmary that night, Meena had not banked the fire and it was completely out. She headed for the supply tent next to hers, but an orange glow caught her eye, shining from the barn by the stables. While she couldn’t take a fire back to bed, she could warm up before she looked for another blanket.

She headed towards the barn. The front doors were wide open and there was a large fire burning
brightly in a shallow iron brazier in a ring of stones on the bare earthen floor near the back. A man sat on a upturned log, whittling a bit of wood in his large hands. Berta realized it was the burly bearded man who had returned with the Inquisitor, the one Dorian had needed to talk to about the Wardens. She couldn’t remember his name. Black something? He wasn’t wearing his armor tonight, clad in an army green padded coat and breeches and heavy boots. His hair was dark and long, almost to his shoulders, pushed back from his face which was covered by a beard that would have made a hipster proud. He had a nose that looked like it had been broken more than once and deep-set eyes. He looked up as Berta approached.

“May I share your fire?” she asked.

He nodded, standing and almost bowing as he gestured for her to sit. “I’m happy to share.” His accent was not quite Fereldan. It sounded Scottish to her ears, so she guessed he was from the Free Marches.

Berta plopped down on the floor, sitting cross legged near the fire, pulling her blanket around her shoulders, pulling off her gloves and then holding her hands out to warm them. “Ah,” she sighed. “Thank you.”

He chuckled at her obvious pleasure in getting warm. Berta rubbed her hands together and smiled back at him. “I’m Berta. I’m-

“The healer,” he finished for her. “The one anybody who needs stitches hopes to get.”

Berta arched an eyebrow. “My reputation proceeds me.”

“Mother Giselle was telling Sister Leliana how useful you’ve been.”

“I guess I’ll consider myself lucky that Mother Giselle had good things to say.” Berta shook her head. “She’s usually admonishing me for my foul mouth.”

He frowned as if puzzled. “When I think of foul language, I think mercenaries or tavern wenches, not healers.”

“Well, where I come from, it’s something of a prerequisite.”

She sighed looking into the fire, thinking that where she came from was so very far away that she might never see it again. She tossed her hair out of her eyes and clenched her jaw. Best not to think on that.

“So, you’re from the other side of the Fade?” He sounded skeptical.

So much for not thinking about it. “So Solas tells me.”

“What, you don’t know?” He looked surprised.

Berta shook her head. “Where I come from, no one’s ever heard of such thing as the Fade or the Veil. So, no, I don’t really know if my world is on the other side of the Fade. But I do know that I am from a different world. Maybe even a whole different universe.”

His forehead furrowed. “You don’t dream in your world?”

“No, we do, I guess we just didn’t know that we’re all going to some mystical location when we dream.” She shrugged. “I’m not sure I really understand it. Solas might explain it better.”
He grunted in reply. “Mother Giselle said you don’t have magic where you...what’s your world called?”

“Earth.”

He looked at her as if she had told him her world was called “dirt.” “In Earth...”

“On Earth,” she corrected, unable to help herself. “We say ‘on.’”

“Alright, on Earth, there’s no magic?”

“No magic.”

He pondered that in silence, trying to imagine what that might mean.

“So, you’re one of the Inquisitor’s body guards?” she asked, changing the subject. “I saw you return with her today.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Bodyguard?” He chuckled. “You clearly haven’t seen the Inquisitor fight.”

“Oh.” Berta felt at a loss. “No, I haven’t. I haven’t even left Skyhold since I arrived. I’ve only been here a week. There are a lot of things I haven’t seen.”

He gestured up towards the infirmary with his chin. “You’ll see her in the upper courtyard training in the morning if you come up around sunrise. She likes to get an early start.”

She considered. “Hmm, as tempting as that might be, if she saw me hanging about gawking instead of working, she’d probably have my head on a pike or at least throw me back in a cell.” The Inquisitor was too hard to read for Berta to push her luck.

“You’re wrong,” he said flatly. “Lavellen is a hard woman- she’s had to be. But she’s not cruel. She’s principled. Fair minded.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.” Berta shrugged apologetically. “I don’t know much of her except how I was treated when I first arrived.” Those first days of disorientation and isolation in a basement cell in Skyhold did not leave her with a positive first impression.

He seemed to accept her apology and made no further complaint. They sat in silence for a few moments, Berta wondering if she had worn out her welcome at the man’s hearth. She stood, brushing the straw from her pants.

“I should probably go to bed. I’ve got to get up early in the morning...”

“Sit.” He ordered her abruptly. “Your tent hasn’t gotten any warmer and I’m enjoying the company. Usually it’s just me and the horses.”

Berta hovered uncertainly for a moment before she sat back down, curling up against one of the hay bales, pulling the blanket around her shoulders tightly again. “Well, thanks again...” She trailed off. “I don’t know your name.”

“Blackwall.”

“Thank you, Blackwall.” She decided to take her boots off, settling against the hay bale and stretching her feet out to the fire to warm them. “Just Blackwall?”

He shrugged. “It’s been Warden Blackwall for a long time.”
“No, I mean, do you have a given name or is it just Blackwall?” She glanced at him. He made no reply, not meeting her eyes. “No, wait, let me guess, Tom, Dick or Harry?”

He looked at her startled, and she wondered for a moment what she had said to upset him. He looked away to the fire. “It’s Gordon, but no one calls me that.”

“Well, I’m Alberta but no one calls me that either.” Berta drew her knees up now that her feet were warm, relaxing back against the hay bale. “So, is your accent from the Free Marches?”

“Markham,” he acknowledged. “I thought you weren’t from here.”

“Dorian Pavus has been tutoring me in his spare time.”

“So, what has the preening peacock taught you about the Free Marches?”

It was her turn to be offended on her friend’s behalf. “Dorian is flamboyant but he’s kind. And quite knowledgeable.”

“It must be out of kindness that he calls me the hairy lummox.”

Berta had to admit that she could imagine Dorian saying just such a thing. “Perhaps he jests. And he’s still not as much of a bitch as Madame de Fer.”

“On that we agree.”

Berta smiled conspiratorially at him. “I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

He leaned forward to whisper his reply, “I think everyone already knows.”

Berta laughed. She was feeling warmer already.
Chapter Notes

So...now we travel to some pretty dark places in Berta's past. Written sober and edited drunk and only half beta-read. Caveat lector. (Totally random aside, Berta's house is renovated and back on the market. MLS: 4712872)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

People think dreams aren't real just because they aren't made of matter, of particles. Dreams are real. But they are made of viewpoints, of images, of memories and puns and lost hopes.
-Neil Gaiman
Musical accompaniment:
“Leaving on a Jet Plane” - Headwound
“Ye Ye Ye” - Geoffrey Oryema
“Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)” - Scala and Kolacny Brothers

The Dread Wolf paced the Fade. He had sculpted it to coalesce into an expanse of parched, yellow knee-high grass, whispering softly in the breeze as far as the eye could see, meeting the flat gray sky on the horizon. It was his chosen neutral starting point, a centering scene of no particular place or time that, after painting it with his mind, he would then let go, letting it drift away like a dried autumn leaf on the wind. The echoes of the place his body remained would then begin to bleed into the edges of his dream consciousness, declaring themselves present and creating an immediacy that belied how long dormant they had lain, forgotten in history, faded and ancient. Tonight was different though. Tonight, he focused on the sleeping minds around him. He had the ability, as some mages did, to sense the presence of others in the Fade and lasso their minds, forcing them to bring him along on their subconscious wanderings. Most of the time, he couldn’t be bothered, the mundane and petty dreams of most humans, elves, or Qunari, holding no interest for him. What was the pull of an anxious dream in which all a hunter’s traps were empty or a servant couldn’t find their master’s favorite boots? Tonight, he had purpose though, reaching into the dreams of one errant human. He mused that her presence was at worst a distraction, at best a subtle warning. Do you really want to go down this path, Wolf? Do you seek the destruction of all worlds?

Solas turned in the Fade, letting the field flicker in places where he sensed an unconscious mind, letting its dream present a blurry image before blocking it, erasing the intrusion as so much clutter. He had not felt the Fade presence of the healer. Why had she not yet fallen asleep? Did she not drink the herbs as she was told?

Almost the moment he thought his last, there she was. She was drifting slowly on the edge of sleep, on the periphery of his vision, her mind not yet ready to open entirely. He waited patiently. As soon as she slipped further under, he would give her a pull. He felt undeniably excited, salivating at a whole new world opening to him. He had seen so much here, so much of it more real to him than his waking life, his waking past. But now there would be even more.

He reached out his mind, grasping at the healer’s, giving a slow, steady pull, down, bringing her into a deep sleep where he could let her memories shape the Fade around them, bypassing the more
superficial and usual confused fodder of dreams. He pushed her towards her strongest emotions for they would paint and color the clearest pictures for him. Almost immediately, the field began to soften and spin, forming a new landscape. The edges of the scene were blurred, flying past at high speed, a smear of deep green surrounding him. The Wolf smiled, looking about him, fascinated by the streaks of color. He had never seen a phenomenon like this in the Fade before. And then he was seated next to the healer, her hands on a large leather ring almost as wide as her body, turning it as she gazed ahead. She was tapping the ring with one hand in time to the music that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere around them, loud and angry, more noise than melody. He looked around for the singer, or screamer as the case was, but seeing no one other than himself and healer, decided the music was coming from the device the healer had described. If you could capture any music to listen to later, why would someone listen to this?

The Wolf pulled his eyes away from the blurring colors and looked down at his hands, feeling his stomach swim. The air around him was frigid and acrid, an overpowering artificial smell assaulting his nostrils, making it hard to breathe. The chair he was sitting in, by contrast, was so comfortable as to be voluptuous, conforming to his legs and back, cradling him. There was a wide band of fabric stretched across his lap and his chest, tying him to the chair. He looked over at the healer, studying her clothing. Her shirt, if one could call it that, had no sleeves, the arm holes ragged, curling up where the fabric looked like it had been cut but not hemmed, and knotted at her waist, the neckline coming to a V over her chest. The bottom half of her clothing was a worn blue fabric as coarse as canvas but cut short at the top of her naked thighs, the edges of the material fraying. Why was she dressed so shabbily? And why would she wear her pearl earrings and the same ruby pendant he had seen adorning her neck with such rags?

The Fade around them snapped into focus, the flying colors became trees and fields whipping by. They were enclosed in a cocoon of dark gray leather and crystal-clear perfect glass with a haze of moisture fogging it along its edges. He had never seen its like. He traced his fingers down the glass, feeling its unnatural smoothness. He looked ahead of them, a sweeping curve of homogenous gray laying over the next small rolling hill, stripes of yellow and white painted along the road. It was smoother than even the ancient marbled cobbles of Arlathan.

The car, for that had to be what it was, slowed and turned off onto a dirt road, jostling him as it left the surface behind. The car stopped, and the healer quickly released herself from the restraints and opened a door in the side of the car. She hopped out, closing the door behind her, leaving the caustic music blaring. The Wolf craned his neck to follow her, unable to see what she was doing, from his angle. Before he could try to release himself, the healer was climbing back into the car, handing a stack of papers to him, noting him but not acknowledging him at the same time. She did not tie herself back into her seat. She reached down and pulled a lever and the car began to move again down the dirt road.

Solas looked at the papers the healer had handed to him. It was paper, definitively, but so colorful as to be nearly unrecognizable. There were pictures of people so realistic that they could almost be alive, except for the fact that they were, of course, not moving. There were bright colors and small envelopes and a large folded stack of black and white printed paper, as finely printed as a printing press's product, but loose, unlike the books he had seen produced by the printers in the Free Marches. It left a faint smear of ink on his hands as he fingered the folded pages. The brightly colored paper was almost slippery it was so smooth. Nothing in the stack the healer handed him appeared to be hand lettered. Apparently, printing was far more advanced in the healer's world.

The Wolf looked up from the papers, his stomach feeling queasy as he tried to examine the print in the moving car. Not far ahead there was a building, a large, squat rectangle with paned windows in two neat rows along its front and in the middle a golden yellow plank door. The roof pitched down steeply, and a single chimney sprouted from the slate roof line in the center. There was a smaller
outbuilding to the side, painted the same dark red, probably a barn, he surmised. There were three
chickens scratching in the short grass before the front step, clucking contentedly in the afternoon sun.

The car stopped to the side of the house and the healer took the papers from him, not registering his
presence. The music cut off suddenly and Solas realized that he had been feeling a faint vibration
through the seat that stopped when the healer got out of the car. The Wolf watched carefully to see
how she released herself. She went around to open another door to the car at the back, this one
opening upwards instead of to the side, and removed a brown box and two bags made of a loud,
rustling material that he could faintly see through as he watched her walk away from the car and
toward the building.

He tried to undo the straps tying him. There was some kind of mechanism next to his hip, but he
couldn’t quite see it while sitting in the chair. He felt around the device, pulling and pushing until
suddenly the ropes flew off him, the clasp hitting him in the face. He jumped, startled, and yanked on
the latch for the door, nearly falling out of his seat. Now outside the car he could look at it more
carefully. He pushed the door closed and it latched with a satisfying thunk. He ran his hand along the
car's side, tapping his finger tips on its smooth, shiny surface. It seemed to be made of metal, hard
and glossy, hot in the baking afternoon sun.

Solas looked around him. There were trees and fields, chickens and a perfectly normal blue sky.
None of this felt like he was in any world other than Thedas, except perhaps for the unfamiliar
architecture of the building. Frowning in disappointment, he followed the healer up the brick path
towards the door.

"Shoo," Berta said, kicking her foot towards the most curious black and white bird. "Go home and
shit on your own stoop." The chicken clucked indignantly and strutted off with her lady friends
across the grass. Solas looked at her shoes as she walked up the path. They were cut low around her
ankles with wide white soles reaching up over the toes and white laces across the top. They were a
vivid green.

Small intricate keys jangled in the healer’s hand as she balanced the box on her hip and opened the
door. The Wolf held the door a moment behind her and slipped inside, unnoticed. He entered a small
dim foyer with a steep stair way heading up to a second level. Solas craned his neck to look upwards
but he could see nothing of the second floor beyond an unlit lamp hanging from the ceiling over the
stairwell.

Berta entered the room to the left of the small foyer, and unceremoniously dumped the box she was
carrying, the two rustling bags and the papers on the hearth. The large brick fireplace was empty,
even of ashes, except for a grate as if it had recently been scrupulously cleaned. The room was low
ceilinged, like a Fereldan freeholder's cottage with broad wooden beams and plain plaster walls.
There was no furniture but many of the same brown boxes of differing sizes, but all large, stacked
around the periphery of the room. He ran his fingers over the boxes. They felt like they were made of
paper, dry and smooth, with large black characters written on them.

The healer reached past his shoulder and flicked a small switch on the wall that he had not at first
noticed. Illumination instantly blazed from two sconces affixed to the wall on either side of the
fireplace, casting a clear white light around the room, not flickering like fire, nor orange like the
magical lanterns used in most wealthy homes in Orlais. Solas peered into the sconce briefly but had
to look away from the brightness, blinking his eyes with the afterglow.

The healer crouched and pressed her finger onto a small irregularly shaped, shiny dark box sitting on
the floor that had a red light blinking on it and a long stiff string coiled in a mess behind it.

A disembodied voice began coming from the box. "Hey, B, it's Annie. I saw on Facebook that you
closed so I just wanted to give you a quick call to tell you congratulations. Also, Derrick and I are going up to Acadia on the 12th for two weeks and wanted to see if maybe you could meet us there for a weekend or something. Anyway, I'm on call so give me a jingle on my cell. Talk to you soon. Bye."

Berta lifted a rectangular piece up from the box and stood. It made small musical noises as she did something to it with her thumb. She raised it to her ear and then cradled it against her head, holding it with her shoulder while she picked up the pile of papers from the top of the box where she'd left them by the fireplace. She turned and sat wide legged on the floor, leaning back against the wall, dropping the papers in a pile in front of her.

"Hello there," she said.

Solas looked sharply at her, at first thinking that the healer was talking to him when he had been so careful to be unobtrusive, but then realized that she was speaking into the small box by her ear. He could hear a tiny faint voice and realized that someone must be speaking to her through the small box, just like a sending crystal.

"Yes, thank you. As a matter of fact, I just returned from my first of what I'm sure will be many trips to Home Despot." She smiled and laughed as she paused. "Yeah, the joys of home ownership."

She sat quietly for a few moments, opening envelopes and sorting through the papers on the floor in front of her, putting them in two piles while making acknowledging noises into the small box. "Are you going to rent that same house?" Pause. "Well if you don't mind letting me crash on your couch, I'd love to. You just have to promise me we're going to Jordan Pond to gorge ourselves on popovers and strawberry butter." The voice in the box said something and the healer laughed again. "Yeah right. Like Derrick would do that."

Solas watched her, fascinated with the one-sided conversation, wondering where the person the healer spoke to was located. How far away could someone be and still speak through this sending box? How could she maintain that her world had no magic when such things were possible? If it was not magic, then what was it?

The healer picked up a square envelope made of creamy white heavy paper from the pile and flipped it over, examining it, her forehead knitting. "No, it'll just be me." She slid her thumb between the folds of paper, tearing the envelope open and pulling out a square card. Solas saw her eyes sliding over the card as she slowly raised her hand to her mouth. She read it twice as she chewed on the pad of her thumb. "Yeah, I'm still here. Hey, listen, there's someone at the door. It's probably the cable guy. Can I call you back?"

Solas glanced over his shoulder towards the front door. He hadn't heard anything.

"Yeah, so just email me the dates and the address again and I'll double check my weekends but that should work...yeah, it'll be awesome to catch up. Ok, I gotta go, bye, Annie."

The small box beeped again, and the healer replaced it on the larger device. She still held the card, twirling it in her fingers. She looked at it again and then slowly ripped it in half and then again into quarters. "Fuck you, asshole," she said aloud, grimacing. She got up off the floor and walked over to the fireplace, dropping the pieces of the card into the otherwise empty grate. She grabbed a pair of heavy leather gloves off the top of a stack of boxes by the door and pulled them on, leaving out the way they had come, letting the door slam behind her.

Solas bent to the grate, picking up a piece of the ruined card, feeling the heavy paper, running his thumb over the raised script. He could not read it, but it looked and felt elegant, formal. He left the
torn paper in the hearth and followed Berta outside, wondering what about the fancy card had upset her.

He found her around the side of the house attacking an area of compacted dirt along the edge of an overgrown garden bed, wielding a pick axe with a fury. She raised the pick above her head and brought it down hard, burying the blade in the dirt. She yanked upward on the handle, breaking the surface of the earth before raising the pick and bringing it down again. Solas stood back, crossing his arms and observing her dispassionately as she worked, until her face was red, and her shirt soaked through, sweat dripping from her hair.

He wandered away across the small courtyard like space between the house and the barn. The windows alongside the barn were also made with the same fine, regular, perfectly clear glass. The healer had to be wealthy to have such windows even in her barn. He peered through into the barn's dim interior, seeing little but gardening tools, a rake, a pitchfork and shears, gathering dust and cobwebs.

There was a scream behind him and Solas turned to see the healer launching the pick axe into the air, throwing it with all her strength towards the tree line behind the house, yelling a cry of rage at nothing. To her credit, it flew at least twenty feet, landing in the short grass behind the house, its heavy blade cutting a deep scar into the ground, leaving a streak of dirt on the otherwise green lawn.

The healer pulled off the gloves, throwing them down beside the garden bed, and collapsed on the carved granite steps up to the side door to the house. She sat with her legs bent, resting her forearms on her knees. She untied her shirt and lifted the front of it to wipe her face. “Berta you are such a fucking fool,” she said. She pinched the bridge of her nose with her fingers, then wiped her face again, from either sweat or tears he could not tell, and stood. She walked over to the pick axe and picked it up, leaning on it like a cane as she pushed the marred grass back over the swath of dirt she had made, tamping it down with her foot. She shouldered the axe and set it down beside the steps, before walking up to the side door and disappearing back into the house.

Solas watched her go but did not follow. He had seen her home’s interior and wanted something bigger, new and more foreign. He pushed the healer to release the memory, letting her mind turn elsewhere. The house disappeared in a flash of smoke and dust, blowing away into the Fade. He could feel her momentary disorientation as her mind stumbled away from the dream and he gave another small pull, sinking her deeper, darker. Show me something else, he thought. Show me something more.

The Fade around him began to shimmer and then lighten, slowly creeping towards dawn. The air became thicker, hotter, still and sweltering. Then the smell hit him, a sanguine tang and underneath it something else, something fearful, sour and unwashed, almost making him gag, stifling him. The light became brighter still until white plaster walls formed around him. The light came from an unnaturally steady and ferociously bright white disc suspended over the center of the room. Beneath the light was a table, and on the table was a bloody mess. A female figure stood over the twists of guts and blood, a white mask tied over her face, cloaked in a green cloth robe, her head covered with a close-fitting cap in the same green fabric and gloves on her hands, red with blood but made of a tight white material he had never seen before.

“How’s her pressure?” The woman asked. The voice was the healer’s.

The man standing at the head of the table shook his head. He was clothed in a dark green shirt and breeches just like the pale blue ones the healer had been wearing when she was found. “Dropping.” He was pushing rhythmically on a black device that looked a bit like an instrument he had seen an Orlesian bard play once. What was it called? An accordion?
“Christ, this is a mess.” The healer was moving her hands through the loops of intestine surrounded by carefully draped thin blue blankets. “I can’t find the bleed. Her spleen’s normal and there’s nothing in her pelvis.” The healer reached deeper into the pile of offal, her hand disappearing. “Goddamnit. Suction.”

A tall, thin man, standing to her right, dressed in the same green robes pushed a tube between the loops of intestine, a slurping sound accompanying his movements, and the glass jar of blood near the man at the head of the table began to bubble and dance, blood dripping from the top. Solas looked at him more closely, his face partially covered by the same type of cloth mask that the healer wore, the whites of his eyes brilliant against his dark brown skin, darker even than Lady Vivienne.

“Gently,” the healer snapped. Solas saw her take a deep breath, her hands stilling, her eyes blinking rapidly. “I don’t know what the fuck to do.”

“Whatever you’re going to do, do it quick,” the green clad man at the head of the table said. His accent was almost Fereldan, but different, sharper.

“Just open up her fluids, I need- she needs just a little more time.” Solas could hear her fear, panic ringing the edge of her voice. He walked forward, closer to the table. There was a head protruding from above the blue blankets, a tube disappearing into one nostril and another into the mouth, the eyes secured closed with two pieces of fabric. It was a girl, a young woman, her skin dark brown like the assistant standing next to the healer, her hair tightly braided in rows on her head like a Qunari. Solas pulled back, repulsed, realizing that it was a human on the table, flayed open with the healer sifting through her innards.

The man at the head of the table moved to the victim’s arm, outstretched on the other side of the table, pushing something against her elbow that was connected to his ears and pumping a black band of fabric tight around her arm. “Systolic is 60.” He shook his head. “She’s already got shock bowel. I give her much more fluid and she’s gonna end up with abdominal compartment-”

“Yeah, I know. Fuck. Lemme run her bowel, maybe there’s...”

“She’s in arrest,” the man replied tersely.

Berta stopped her exploration of the women’s belly and moved up towards her head, pushing the cloth draped over her aside, leaving her naked chest exposed, beginning to push rhythmically on the woman’s breastbone with her hands interlocked. Solas thought this must be what she had done for Sergeant Alia. Would it work here as well? He couldn’t imagine the woman would ever recover from the giant gaping wound in her belly. He could see all her torso now, the nightmarish vision of her abdomen split open, her intestines protruding below her breasts, a giant metal claw holding the wound open.

“Get rid of the retractor,” Berta barked and the man at the foot of the table removed the device, its jaws letting go of the woman’s wound, blood dripping from its teeth. Solas wrinkled his nose in disgust. This was barbaric.

He looked away from the blood and the death, trying to salvage this glimpse into the healer’s memory, looking more carefully around the room. There was a cabinet on one wall with that same fine, clear glass set into its doors. There were bags of clear fluid stacked in the cabinet and metal boxes and other supplies, none of it familiar. There were two large, wide swinging doors on the opposite side of the room, painted brown with small inset glass windows. There was a large white, cracked porcelain basin affixed to the wall by the door. He drifted to the door and looked through the window, the cross hatch of a pattern in the glass partially obscuring the dim hall way beyond. It was suddenly very quiet behind him.
“Ok. We’re...we’re done.” The healer’s voice was hollow. She sniffed. “Where’s her family?”

“Outside the infirmary.” The thin dark-skinned man had spoken, his voice melodious, like common was less musical than his native tongue. “I will go tell them. They don’t want a white expat to tell them their daughter and sister is dead.”

The healer’s face was still hidden by her mask but Solas could see the hurt in her eyes. She nodded slowly. “Thank you, Tamba. Will you let the orderlies know to come get her body in a few minutes? I want to clean her up first.”

Tamba nodded and left the room pulling off his gloves and doffing his robe on the way out the door. The healer slowly pulled the blankets off the body as the man at the head of the table pulled the tubes from the nose and mouth. He pulled his mask down, showing a handsome white face with a silver ring pierced through his lower lip like a Rivaini. He looked at Berta, resting his hands on the head of the table.

The healer stared at the dead girl’s face. “I thought I was giving her a chance. I didn’t plan on being her executioner.”

The man blew his breath out and shook his head. “Berta, cut that shit out. It happens.”

The healer said nothing and stared at the body a moment longer. “I’ll close her up.”

The man looked at the body and then the healer, resigning himself to helping her. Solas couldn’t see any emotion in his eyes. “Yeah, sure. Let me give you a hand.”

The healer held the edges of the belly wound together with tiny silver pincers and the man pushed a small, hand held device against the wound that made clicking sounds when he squeezed it, leaving behind tiny metal clasps that held the skin together. They then pressed a wide band of sticky white fabric over the wound from a roll, covering it entirely, hiding the gore. The healer refolded one of the blue blankets and covered the body up to the chin. She started taking off her gloves. The man stepped up behind her and untied the neck of the robe. She shrugged it off, dropping it and the rest of the blankets into a bin in the corner. Underneath, Berta wore the same green uniform, the shapeless shirt and pants draping a figure that was thinner, smaller than the healer Solas knew from Skyhold.

The door swung open and a large, light skinned man with scruffy sandy blonde hair entered wearing the same green clothing, albeit in a larger size as he was built like an Avvar. “Berta? Nigel?”

The healer turned and gave a nod. “Jean. Welcome back to Bangolo. When did you get in?”

The large man shrugged. “Not long ago. They said I’d find you here.” Solas cocked his head, listening to the man’s Orlesian accent.

“How long are you staying, mate?” asked the man at the head of the bed, who had to be Nigel.

“We’ve pulled out of Abidjan permanently.” He shook his head, frowning. “Fighting’s too intense.”

“No one’s taken any shots at me in weeks,” Nigel laughed.

Berta removed her mask and hat. Her hair was long, pulled up into a dirty bun at the back of her head. “Let me wash up and I can introduce you to the new nurses. We’ve got two new national docs from Liberia.”

“I can muddle through. I’m here to relieve you.”
Berta shook her head in protest. “But you’ve been driving all night—”

“No, Dolo did all the driving. I slept most of the night in the back. I’m practically refreshed.” He smirked, shrugging his shoulders.

Berta looked about to decline but then seemed to think better of it, pressing her lips together. “Ok, I’ll take you up on that.”

The man nodded towards the body on the table. “What happened here?”

Berta folded her arms over her chest, tucking her hands into her arm pits and chewing on her lip, not looking at the body. “I’m not sure,” she said flatly. “Bleeding diasthesis of some kind. Sepsis, DIC maybe, who knows, could even be leukemia. I thought...” she trailed off and clenched her jaw. “It seemed like a surgical abdomen. She had a massive hemoperitoneum.”

“Pregnant?” the Orlesian asked.

“No.”

“Huh.” The Orlesian frowned and looked at the girl's head, as if he stared hard enough, he would be able to see her diagnosis. The two men stood in silence for a moment each looking at the body. Berta turned away, shifting uncomfortably.

“Ok,” Berta said, breaking them out of their reveries. “I’ll be in the dormitory if you need me.”

The big man smiled wanly. “I’ll leave you alone for a few hours.”

Berta washed her hands at the basin on the wall, water coming from the metal spout, and left through the double doors, headed down the hall, the two men chatting casually behind her. The corridor was dim with none of those strange, steady lights he’d seen in the healer’s home. There were stairs heading up to another level and a lattice work of painted white regular stone beyond to the left, letting in the thin early morning light from outside. To the right were other rooms crammed full of small wooden beds, the sleeping figures on them partially obscured by the pale gauzy material hanging from the ceiling over every bed like a tent. The hallway opened to a wide porch and a sloping mortared ramp leading down to an expansive dirt square with a dry fountain in the center. There were people clustered around the fountain, sleeping still, small lumps of brightly colored, geometric fabrics on the ground.

Solas trailed behind her, seeing the sweat soaking the back of her shirt between her shoulder blades, the slump of her shoulders. She seemed more fragile than he had seen her in Thedas, smaller somehow.

There was a sudden keening cry echoing in the stillness and Berta and Solas both jerked their heads towards the noise. Behind them, near the entrance to another wing of the building they had just left, stood Tamba, the healer’s assistant. There were three dark-skinned women with him, dressed in skirts and open sandals, their heads wrapped in flamboyantly colored cloth, one fallen to her knees, wailing, and the other two bent over her, sheltering her with their arms. Berta visibly stiffened and turned away, walking faster, her clogs creating small red clouds in the dirt. She headed towards a two-story building across the square, quickly climbing the three uneven, cracked steps into a dim room and then pushing aside the gauzy material covering the doorway, heading up the stairs inside.

At the top of the stairs, the room was brighter, a series of square windows cut into the walls, overlooking the dirt courtyard, covered with the same netting as the doorway downstairs. There were fabric walls dividing the large room into smaller spaces, the fabric looking like remnants of the blankets that had covered Berta’s dying patient, nailed to the ceiling. Berta stopped at the top of the
stairs. There was a heavy wooden post forming the top of the railing and reaching to hold up the center peak of the roof. Berta grabbed the large hunting knife that was tied to a length of string nailed to the post. She began to carve short hatches into the post, four little vertical lines overlaid with a horizontal slash. She did this twice and then followed it with one more line, rubbing her thumb over her finished handiwork, frowning as she did so. Solas looked carefully at the raw wood beam. It was covered with row upon row of the tiny hatch marks. The healer let the knife drop, swinging from the string and clattering against the wood behind her as she headed down to the last makeshift room on the left.

The tent like room was small, just enough space for a single wood framed bed, a small table at the bed side and a sturdy flat-topped chest along the wall opposite the bed. Solas mused that it was not so different from Berta’s tent in the courtyard. She must feel right at home.

There was a man asleep in the bed, curled up on his side, his bare back to them, his longish curling blond hair hiding his face that was partially mashed into the pillow. Berta sighed quietly as she looked at him, a tired yet fond exhalation. She sat heavily on the chest, slipping off her shoes and pulling off her socks, stretching her toes and twirling her ankles. The man rolled over, stretching, gave a low groan and turned his head toward her, blinking his eyes sleepily. Solas almost thought it was the Commander reclining there before realizing that man’s eyes were blue, and he had no scar on his lip.

The man smiled sleepily at the healer. “Mornin’, sunshine. You look like shit.” He had the same dwarven accent as the healer.

“Gee, thanks, babe,” Berta mumbled facetiously. “I didn’t expect to find you here.”

“I got back yesterday. You were busy.”

“It was bad. I lost eleven.”

He sat up in the bed and shook his head, running a hand through his messy hair. “I don’t know why you do that to yourself. Why don’t you count those you save?” Berta looked at the floor and said nothing, pulling her legs up to her chest and wrapping her arms around her knees. “When did you eat last?”

“Yesterday sometime.”

He swung his bare feet to the floor, the sheet across his lap. “And when did you sleep last?”

The healer looked uncertainly at him. “Day before yesterday.”

“Come here,” he said, moving back on the narrow bed to make room for her and patting the mattress. She shook her head and made a face. “You don’t want to touch me. I’m disgusting.”

“Bullshit.” He sprang quickly from the bed, stark naked and grabbed Berta’s wrist, pulling her towards him, tackling her to the bed and wrapping himself around her, spooning her into submission.

“Jason...”

“Shhhhh.” He tightened his arm around her, not speaking, closing his eyes and pressing his lips to her dirty hair.

Solas looked away towards the window, uninterested in the healer’s romantic dalliance. Through the netting covered window, he could see a high stone wall behind the building, the top of the wall
glinting with multicolored broken glass. There was a flagpole at the corner of the building, a white flag with a blood red scribble flapping in the breeze. There were trees outside the wall, tall bare trunks with fronds clustered at the top. He had seen such trees in his Fade visions of Seheron. There were two cars, boxier than the healer’s car, painted white with the same red symbol on their doors as the flag, lined up along the wall. Beyond the wall were flat roofed buildings no more than two stories at most that looked like they might not survive a strong wind. Further down to the left there was a gate in the wall, and over it he could see a dirt road. A boy with a stick was herding goats down the street.

The healer groaned and Solas looked back at the bed. “I can’t do this anymore,” she whispered her voice breaking.

“How?” Her man looked worried.

“This mission. We’ve had no oxygen in the OR for three days. We’ve been washing and reusing our gloves for dressing changes and vaccinations. We’re out of gentamicin again; there’s never enough.” She rubbed angrily at her eyes, pushing away from him and sitting up in the bed. “And that’s not even the real problem. The real problem is my judgment. There’s a dead girl down there with a wailing mother because I thought she had a surgical abdomen.”

“Would she have died if you hadn’t operated?” He rubbed her back trying to soothe her.

“That’s not the point—”

“No, that is the point.” He sat up beside her. “You can blame yourself all you like but the fact remains that the patients on your daily death tally were dead anyway. There is only so much you can do.”

“But to do something is why I came here,” she said, her voice cracking. “And I can’t do it anymore. I’m not strong enough.” She wiped her eyes. “Look at Nigel. He’s been doing this for nine years. Nothing gets to him that a cigarette and a shot of whiskey can’t fix. Jean is unflappable. He just rolls with everything and then fucks a nurse. There is something wrong with me that I can’t do that.”

“Well, I for one would be very upset if you fucked a nurse.” He chuckled.

“I’m serious, Jason,” she snapped. “You don’t fall to pieces after a hard day of documenting death and dismemberment for your readership. I have failed at this in every way that matters. When this mission is done, I’m done.” She ran her hand over her face and then covered her eyes.

He kissed her shoulder. “Look, you’re tired. Now probably isn’t the best time to make a decision about this.” He shifted and got out of the bed, crossing to grab a pair of pants from a hook on the wall and pulling them on. “We’ve missed the hot water, but I’ll grab us a bucket and we can both wash up. And then I’ll find us some food while you get some sleep.” He pulled shoes from under the bed and slipped them on.

The healer shook her head. “A sponge bath and a packet of instant oatmeal is not going to fix this. I’m done.” Her eyes looked empty.

“Sleep. We can talk about this later.” He slipped a shirt off the hook and slid it on before kissing the top of her head and leaving the room.

Berta watched him go. “Patronizing shit,” she muttered and crashed back into the bed, punching her pillow. In moments, she was asleep.

Solas gestured around the room, sweeping the memory away. He quickly debated letting the healer
slide upwards, out of memories into the realm of actual dreams, which, while more confusing and disjointed, would let him see more of her world than these isolated scenes. He could feel her twist in his grasp, make a lunge for the surface but he wouldn't let her wake yet. One more memory, he thought, wanting the pure vision of her world before he would let in the irrational overlay of her subconscious. He tightened his grip on her, holding her in sleep, keeping her from waking, like holding a swimmer under the surface of the water, even though she desperately fought to gasp for breath. She struggled for a moment and then went limp, giving up and settling back into the dream. He loosened his grip slightly, letting her mind drift to another memory.

The brightness of the small dormitory room began to dim, and shapes began to form again, the walls and bed began to soften and blur, the hard floor turning into a deep soft carpet, walls reforming from thin air, deep and darkly paneled wood, a shadowed hallway, dimly lit by a small unflickering sconce affixed to the wall. There were paintings on the walls, barely visible in the gloom, and an alcove with a tall, patterned vase. The healer was there, small and young, a child, crouching outside the doorway at the end of the hall. She was in a plain white shirt, but her skirt was a crosshatch of grays and red and white and pleats, cut to her knee. She was in her stocking feet and her hair was long, it’s mousy brown pulled together at the back of her head, before hanging limply down her back. She was crying silently, her face a mess of red eyes and running nose.

“Alberta, quit hiding and come in here.” The man’s voice from the room beyond sounded Ferelden. She jumped up, wiping her nose with the back of her hand and hurriedly tucking her shirt into her skirt, holding herself straight as she walked into the room beyond.

The Wolf followed slowly, letting his eyes adjust to the brightness. It was a bedroom, as luxurious as any in Val Royeaux. There was an almost impossibly large bed, covered in lavender silk, and made to look even larger by the tiny wisp of a woman reclining amongst the pillows. She was skeletal in appearance, her eyes sunken, her temples gaunt and her head bald. Her eyes were the healer’s eyes, he saw, blinking slowly in that wasted face. She might have been pretty once, but all that was gone now. The Wolf wrinkled his nose, the thick, cloying smell of perfume covering something else, something that smelled of shit and rot and sickness.

The man standing next to the bed was of middling height and middling build, with the same brown hair as the healer’s cut short and combed precisely. His clothing was unfamiliar but clearly formal, straight cut breeches with a vest and jacket of the same cloth, a dark gray wool with a faint blue stripe, a shirt cut similarly to the girl’s but with a piece of pale blue rich fabric tied tightly at the neck and draping down his chest to disappear beneath the vest. His shoes were black and highly polished. He glanced at the metal bracelet on his wrist, frowning, his brow knitting darkly.

“Come here, ma petite souris...” Solas was surprised the husk of a woman on the bed could even speak let alone speak Orlesian. The girl climbed onto the bed carefully as if afraid to shift the mattress too much for fear of breaking the gaunt woman who gently took her hand. “There now. Don’t cry. We have talked about this. It is time for you to be strong. Je t’aime, ma petite souris. Toujours. N’oublie jamais ça.”

Berta began crying again. “Je t’aime aussi, maman. S’il te plaît, ne pars pas...”

The Wolf turned from the pathetic scene on the bed and looked out the window, this particular tableau of human misery holding little attraction for him. What he saw outside the deathbed chamber took his breath away.

They were high in the air, perhaps hundreds of feet, perched over a deep green forest with a flat blue lake beyond. Beyond that, another stretch of forest and then a perfectly straight line of towers, of differing heights and colors, taller than the spires of most circle towers, their stone facades basking in
the golden light of the late afternoon sun, shining overhead. He walked closer to the window, resting his fingertips on that most perfect, smooth and clear pane of glass, typical of the healer’s world. He peered down to the ground. There were people walking there, looking like tiny parchment weevils, and a straight thoroughfare filled with cars all streaming down the street in the same direction. He looked closer. The cars were many different sizes and colors. There were so many of them. He watched, fascinated as a bright yellow one stopped along the side of the street, a door opening, disgorging two people before they closed the door behind them and it glided on. He saw a horse and carriage beyond between the trees. Across the road, there were children playing, climbing on structures in the sand, running free in the afternoon sun.

“Alberta, it’s time,” the Ferelden accented man said. The Wolf turned back to observe. Berta cried harder, no longer trying to hide her tears. The man reached for a crystal decanter filled with water and poured it into one of the glasses on the tray on the table next to the bed. There was a vase of white flowers on the table and a small painting, rendered so perfectly that it looked real, a picture of the man standing with his hands on the woman’s shoulders and the girl sitting on the woman’s knee, a posed formal portrait from a happier and healthier time, the woman’s face pretty and pure, her rich brunette hair shining as it tumbled down her shoulders.

The man reached for an amber colored bottle on the table and twisted the lid with great effort. “Damn these, fucking things-” he grumbled, not catching himself in time. He finally got the bottle open and poured a handful of small white rounded objects from the bottle into his hand. He set the empty bottle aside and picked up the water glass, stepping towards the woman.

“No!” screamed Berta, lashing out, lunging across the body of the woman, slapping at her father’s hands, water splashing over the coverlet and his shiny black shoes, the little white stones scattering everywhere, skittering across the wood floor, under the bed, under the bedside table.

“No!” the man barked and cuffed her, not hard, but hard enough to shock her. She scrambled backwards over the bed, huddling near the wall, holding onto her face as if he had burned her.

The woman on the bed raised a hand weakly, “Arthur, please, it’s not her fault-”

Arthur said nothing, bending to kneel on the floor and to painstakingly pick up the scattered stones. He poured another glass of water, his face stoic. Berta stayed crumpled on the floor, quiet now, her eyes too large in her little girl’s face, watching her father.

The woman on the bed opened her mouth and the man put some of the small white stones on her tongue. He held the glass of water to her lips to drink. Three times he placed more stones in her mouth and three times helped her gulp them down with water before the woman collapsed completely, swallowing taking more effort than she could sustain. The stones were all gone. Her eyes fluttered closed. The man set the glass aside and picked up the bottle and placed it in his pocket. He stood over the woman, sober and still for a moment before he bent down and kissed her chastely on her chapped lips. “I love you, Jackie.”

Berta pulled herself up off the floor, her face tear streaked, her shirt half untucked. She sniffed and wiped her eyes with both hands. “I hate you,” she said quietly.

Arthur wiped his damp hands on the coverlet. “You’re entitled.”

The girl sobbed and bolted from the room, dragging the consciousness of the Dread Wolf along in her wake, the room swirling behind her like so much colored smoke, the bed and the woman and the man twirling into mist. The Wolf was plunged into blackness for a moment and he lost hold of the healer, the violence of her withdrawal from the room ripping her mind from his grasp. He grabbed
blindly trying to find her mind and subdue her before she could escape, but he was too late. Her mind was lost to him. She was awake.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, if you are at all interested in what Médecins Sans Frontières does, there is an excellent documentary entitled “Living in Emergency” that follows 4 doctors through their experiences in Liberia and the Congo. It streams for free on Vimeo and you can find it on YouTube as well.
They parted at last with mutual civility, and possibly a mutual desire of never meeting again.
-Jane Austen
Musical Accompaniment:
The Parting Glass, The High Kings

"Healer."
Berta struggled against the pain, white hot, searing her chest and eyes, tightening her throat.

_He was engaged to someone else the whole time. He lied to me. She could taste her rage._

_Everyone dies. But sometimes I kill them. She was drowning in overwhelming despair._

_My mother is dead. My mother is dead. And my father killed her. She felt sick with fear and sorrow._

She screamed and cried and lunged into wakefulness, gasping for breath, her face wet with tears.

"Healer!"
Someone was shaking her. Her eyes flew open. Blackwall was kneeling over her, his hands on her shoulders, present and solid, unquestionably real. Berta gasped and grabbed his arms, holding on for dear life, anchoring herself to the physical world, feeling his rough coat and sturdy forearms under her fingers. For a moment, the reality of Thedas was preferable to her own memories.

"Are you alright? You were having a nightmare." The big man peered into her face, his brow knit, and eyes hooded with concern.

Berta breathed deeply, trying to slow her heart. She let go of his arms, embarrassed to have been clutching at him. "I...I'm alright. It was just a dream." But it wasn't. It was real. She had lived it before.

"I couldn't wake you." He hadn't moved, looking at her hard, holding her steady, not trusting her protestations that she was fine.

Berta licked her lips and looked away, not wanting to meet his eyes, her gaze finding the fire over his shoulder. It had burnt low. She must have been asleep for a while. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to trouble you." She made a dismissive gesture, brushing his hands away.

The bearded man made a low noise of disagreement and stood slowly, pulling away reluctantly before returning to his seat. "I'm not troubled. You on the other hand..."

Berta grimaced, feeling weak and vulnerable. She wiped at her cheeks with the cuffs of her sweatshirt, sniffing. She would never let someone see her cry, unless she was asleep, apparently. She grabbed her boots, slipping her feet back into them and stood. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "I should go back to my bed. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"Don't be daft, lass. Sit and gather yourself." He looked askance at her. "Everyone has nightmares now that an ancient darkspawn is on the loose."

Berta shook her head, tugging at her sweat shirt and adjusting her hat. "I won't bother you. I have to
talk to Solas. I'm sure I'll see you tomorrow, Warden Blackwall."

He gave a small nod as if he understood her desire to flee. "Goodnight, my lady."

Berta ducked her head as she walked briskly away, wanting to escape her exposure. Away from the fire she plummeted into the frigid night air, taking pleasure in the raw cold on her face, stealing away the heat of her tears. She took the steps two at a time up to the great hall. The fires were all low and the hall was nearly deserted except for the bed rolls of a few elven servants by the fire near the dais. She turned into the rotunda, wondering if Solas would be there at this time of night, not knowing where he slept in the castle.

He was reclining on the sofa which had been returned to its place along the wall, lying on his back, his hands folded peacefully over his chest, his legs crossed at the ankles, resting on the arm of the sofa, his eyes closed and face relaxed. Berta was tempted to rail at him, abruptly jerking him from sleep as payback, but he opened one eye to behold her almost as soon as she entered the room.

"Sleep well?" He asked, no hint of irony in his voice.

"Not remotely," she said bitterly.

Solas sat up and stood, walking over to his desk, flames flickering from his fingertips to light two candles in addition to the single one that was burning. "I apologize. It was necessary."

Berta shook her head in disbelief. "Why? You said you were going to watch my dreams, not drag me through my nightmares." She ground her teeth together. "You could have warned me."

"Ah, I could have. But then would you have let me view your world?" He gestured magnanimously to the chair at the table for Berta to sit.

She ignored him and remained standing. "Why did you make me see those memories?"

He shook his head. "I didn’t. I pulled you into a deeper place where you would remember your past rather than dream anew. It was your mind that chose those memories. Strong emotions merely give the most focused images for me to see."

She sighed in exasperation. "But why not happy emotions, like my graduation from high school, or the day I got my first choice for my residency training?"

He faintly smiled, looking at her indulgently. "That is for you to answer. It is your mind that chose pain over happiness."

"So, it’s my fault?" She wondered what that said about her that her mind would choose to gravitate to those memories in particular. "Did you at least get what you needed?"

Solas nodded and folded his arms. "A start. Your world has some ingenious inventions. Your car and your sending box are fascinating."

Berta cocked her head at him. "Sending box?"

"The device you used to speak to your friend. I assume she was far away."

"Not too far- New Jersey." Berta gave a small laugh thinking Dorian would be thrilled to hear of another place name that began with ‘new.’ "And it’s called a telephone."

"A telephone?" he repeated, slowly savoring the new word. "How far away does it work?"
“Well, anywhere there are phone lines. Anywhere in the world, really.”

“Truly? And it does this by no magical means?”

Berta shook her head. “No, it’s technology. Wires and electricity and though now it’s more wireless with satellites and...oh, I don’t even know how to explain it.” She sat heavily in the chair, suddenly completely exhausted. “It’s the middle of the night.” She rubbed at her eyes and then looked suspiciously at him. “I’m a little afraid to try to go back to sleep.”

Solas gave an understanding nod. “I will not seek to watch your dreams for the remainder of the night.”

Berta stood. “Thank you. I’m going to try to get some decent sleep. We can talk more in the morning.”

“Until then.” Solas resumed his posture of repose on the sofa.

Berta left, returning to the lower courtyard. She realized that in her rush to speak with Solas she had left her blanket at Blackwall’s fire, so she headed back to the barn. The Warden was nowhere to be seen, presumably retired to his own bed, and his fire was carefully banked. Her blanket had been neatly folded and placed on his chair. She retrieved her blanket and stopped in the supply tent to grab a second one. She hunkered down under both blankets on her cot, still bundled in her scrubs, sweatshirt, scarf, coat and hat and, this time, fell quickly into a dreamless sleep.

*~~~~~*~~~~~*

She awoke early the next morning, feeling bleary from her interrupted sleep from the night before. She peeked out of her tent, her breath fogging in the early morning chill. It was not yet fully light out. She changed into her usual Thedas attire with her scarf draped over her shoulders like a shawl. She gathered parchment from the small table drawer and a pen from her bag. She looked at her meager belongings and decided that there was nothing else she needed for this morning’s meeting. She brought wood over for the fire and quickly perused the contents of the supply tent, trying to think of anything else she could reasonably requisition. After the meeting she’d come up with a game plan with Sue and Fiona. Maybe they could even get Mikel back today.

She wasn’t sure what constituted “half past dawn” but the sky was lightening, and the castle was beginning to wake. She could see the stable boys heading down the row of stalls, doling out grain, and the kitchen girls were busy toting water from the well back to the keep’s hearths. Meena hadn’t yet arrived and Berta was pretty sure barging into the kitchen to scrounge breakfast would either be frowned upon or met with excessive obsequious apologizing for her inconvenience, both of which she’d rather avoid. She’d eat when she got back from meeting with the Commander.

She headed up the two flights of stairs from the lower courtyard, braving the wind on the battlements and coming quickly to the door to the Commander’s office. She knocked on the heavy wooden door and she heard his muted voice beyond.

“Come in.”

The Commander was at his desk, dressed in full armor with his cloak around his shoulders, looking slightly rumpled with circles under his eyes. He looked like he hadn’t slept any better than Berta and she felt a flash of sympathy for the man.

“Good morning, Commander,” she said by way of greeting.

“Yes,” he replied absently, reading the parchment in front on him. “You know Knight-Captain
Berta glanced towards the Knight-Captain, nodding amicably though she felt their last interaction had been less than friendly. The Knight-Captain looked Berta in the eye, bending her arm across her chest in an Inquisition salute, a faint smile gracing the firm line of her mouth. “Good to have you join our cause.”

Berta smiled in return, feeling relieved that the woman had gotten over whatever her suspicions were. “Thank you.”

Another knock came and Mother Giselle and a female dwarf she had not seen before entered. Berta was glad that she was not the last to arrive. The dwarf wore an Inquisition uniform and her hair was drawn back in braids away from her fresh, freckled and open face.

“Good morning, all,” Mother Giselle said, bowing her head slightly to each present, her tall headdress bobbing. “Have you met Scout Harding?” she asked Berta.

Berta shook her head. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Berta Shaw.”

“Likewise. Lace Harding, Lead Scout of the Inquisition.”

Between Varric and this scout, Berta was understanding of why everyone thought she had a dwarven accent. Scout Harding sounded even more American than Varric if such a thing were possible.

“Alright then,” Cullen said gruffly. “Let’s make this quick. I’ve got a busy morning.” He looked around the room at each of them. “As I’m sure do we all.”

“Yes, ser,” they answered more or less in unison. It struck Berta that it was interesting that it was all women with her in the room other than the Commander. She was used to being in a male dominated leadership structure in her hospital at home.

“Harding, report.”

The Scout straightened a little and stood in classic “at-ease” posture with her hands behind her back. “I’ve pulled back the scouts from the Hinterlands and the Mire except for maintaining one scout at the main Inquisition camp and one in reserve at Redcliffe. I sent a full party to Crestwood. I should have a solid lay of the land by the time the Inquisitor arrives. I’ll head out this morning with supplies.”

“And our other interests?” The Commander rested on his fists on his desk.

“Full scouting parties were sent to the Storm Coast and the Western Approach. I haven’t heard anything back yet, but they’re just getting started.” She shrugged. “I would suggest the Inquisitor take a look at the Storm Coast first. Seems like we ought to secure our backs against Ferelden before heading further afield. I’ll also probably have better information for her sooner than in the West.”

The Commander nodded. “Agreed. I’ll keep that in mind when I advise her. Anything else?”

“Nothing beyond my written report. I’ll send a raven with any further updates once I reach Crestwood.”

“Fine. Dismissed; you can get an early start on the road.”

“Thank you, Commander.” The dwarf spun on her heel and left Cullen’s office a slight hop in her
step as she headed out the door, like she was happy to be on her way.

Cullen turned his attention to Briony. “Report.”

The Knight-Captain nodded. “Several updates. First, Tera and Marko will be released today. I would like to extend my thanks to Sister Leliana for taking care of this problem.”

Cullen gave a wry smile. “I’ll pass that along.”

The Knight-Captain looked at Berta. “Am I correct in assuming that you would like Mikel returned to infirmary duty?”

Berta looked cautiously at Briony and Cullen in turn. “If that is possible, yes. He has significant healing skills.”

Briony smiled way too harmlessly for Berta’s comfort. “Then, Commander, I would like to post a templar in the infirmary and with any of the mages Lady Shaw wishes to deploy.”

Berta first instinct was to protest on Fiona’s behalf but remembering the destruction the two rogue mages had wreaked at the gate made her think twice. “If they can be trusted to not interfere with the mages duties and provide protection as well as oversight then I have no problem with that.”

Briony looked surprised but pleased. Cullen’s eyes flashed back and forth between the Knight-Captain and Berta. “I will leave it to the two of you to coordinate then. What else?”

The Knight-Captain went on about training and posting templars to the mage camp and something about lyrium distribution and Berta felt her mind drifting, wishing for her familiar travel mug of black coffee that had seen her through many an early morning department meeting back home. She worried a bit about the ramifications of what she had just agreed to with the Knight-Captain, but it was too late to take it back. She’d discuss it with Fiona as soon as she had the chance.

“Anything else?” the Commander was asking as Berta refocused on the conversation.

“That’s all, Ser. I will give you a copy of the duty roster when I’ve had a chance to confer with Lady Shaw.”

Berta nodded conciliatorily. Hopefully, this would not get interesting.

“Alright,” the Commander said. “Dismissed.”

The Knight-Captain gave an Inquisition salute and left through the door to the battlements.

“Mother Giselle, would you kindly update Lady Shaw and I on the refugee situation?” Berta noted the deferential way he spoke Mother Giselle and it occurred to her that the priestess was obviously not part of the military but was clearly part of the command structure of the Inquisition. The priestess had also said that the Commander was a devout man. Perhaps his deference came from religious fervor?

“As you know, Berta, we were at the village of Haven before we came here. What you may not know is that Haven is holy ground. The Temple of Sacred Ashes was the final resting place of Andraste and every one of the faithful wishes to make a pilgrimage to pray before her ashes. There were many pilgrims at Haven when it fell as well as the people who lived there. There were also all the attendants and entourages of all the enchaners, templars and chantry officials necessary for the conclave. While a few may have left after the disaster, most people were paralyzed after the explosion. We had also since evacuated many of the people displaced by the fighting between the
mages and templars to Haven from the Hinterlands as well as those villagers who fled Redcliffe in the aftermath of the mage occupation.” She paused meaningfully. “All of these people are now in the camp below by the lake.”

Berta nodded slowly. She had seen the camp from the battlements and knew it was large but had prior to this only had a vague idea of how the people had come to be there.

Mother Giselle continued. “We are slowly making an accounting of everyone, but it is tedious work. We estimate there are almost two thousand people in camp, not including the Inquisition military forces.”

Berta gave a low whistle. “That’s a huge responsibility.”

The Commander frowned. “Precisely. So far we’ve managed to provide shelter and food but there continue to be challenges.”

“Of course,” Berta acknowledged. “I’ll do whatever I can to help. I know the Inquisitor placed me in charge of healing, but I have a little experience with refugee management.”

Cullen raised an eyebrow questioningly at her. “Such as?”

“Well, there was a civil war in my world in a place called Ivory Coast. Something like 100,000 people fled the fighting. I was stationed in one of the villages, Bangolo, near the border. There were probably around 5000 refugees there.”

Mother Giselle and Commander Cullen exchanged a look and Mother Giselle smiled broadly. “The Maker sends us who we need.”

Berta shook her head. “I don’t know about that. I didn’t have much to do with feeding or housing the refugees or providing security. I just took care of their health needs.” The look of hope on the priestess’s face contrasted sharply with how much of a failure Berta felt her time in Africa had been. “I just did the best I could,” she added lamely. “My first concern is the water supply.”

“Then you’ll be interested in this,” Cullen said, crossing to the shelves along the wall. He pulled a rolled piece of parchment from a stack and brought it back to the desk. He unrolled it flat, securing the corners with his ink pot, a bottle and the opposite edge with his dagger, pulled from the sheath at his waist beneath his cloak. He gestured for Berta and Mother Giselle to come closer. Berta peered over the unrolled parchment. It was a roughly drawn map of Skyhold, the surrounding mountains and the valley below.

“We are fortunate to reap the benefits of careful planning by the builders of Skyhold, whoever they were.” He pointed to the castle. “Here is the keep. There are at least two separate water supplies coming from beneath the castle. It’s built on top of the springs, protecting the origin of the flow from contamination or sabotage. The first spring exits here,” he pointed to a small waterfall drawn along what Berta thought of as the back of the castle, “it exits the stone directly beneath the great hall and the undercroft and runs into the small valley on the north side of the keep and then down into the lake by the refugee camp.”

“So that needs to be protected at all costs,” Berta observed.

Cullen nodded perfunctorily. “Agreed.”

“Then what’s this one?” Berta pointed to the other waterfall drawn on the map.

“This is from the second source. This supplies at least part of the water from the two wells within the
Berta nodded. “Oh, I wondered why the water from the well was so warm.”

“It may be why Skyhold itself is always warm. This spring flows beneath the keep, heating the ground and the stone.” The Commander then drew his finger down from the waterfall towards a small lake on the map. “The water flows out from under the dungeons and into this small lake on the south side of the keep. From there, it flows southward between these two peaks away from the refugees’ lake. From everything we can tell, it doesn’t contribute to the larger lake at all.”

Berta grinned. “That’s perfect.”

Mother Giselle agreed. “It’s better than we could have hoped.”

“The south lake is accessible relatively easily from the south side of the keep, through the dungeons. With the outer wall collapsed, I instructed Gatsi to create a defensible gate from that side with a path to the lake.”

Berta pursed her lips in thought. “What about waste water?”

Cullen drew his finger down the from just to the west of the hot springs fall beneath the dungeons. “There will be a drainage site here that’s connected to a stone lined trench that will reach the far side of the south basin.”

“But why not just dump it at the waterfall? Wouldn’t that be a lot less work?” Berta thought the trench idea sounded like a huge project.

“Yes,” Cullen agreed. “But then the water for the baths would be dirty.”

Berta looked at him sharply. “Did you say ‘baths’?”

Cullen chuckled at her tone. “Yes, healer. Baths.”

Berta could hardly contain herself. “Oh my god, I could kiss you,” she blurted.

“That won’t be necessary,” Cullen sputtered and turned red to the tips of his ears.

Berta looked away, staring intently at the map. She had to be tired to say something so stupid. She risked a glance at Mother Giselle, who was studiously examining the map with an amused smile on her face.

“So, the runners can dump the waste water from the infirmary there,” Berta observed, recovering her composure.

“Well, they won’t have to go that far,” the Commander countered. “The Inquisitor has instructed that a more permanent infirmary be constructed outside the quartermaster’s offices along the wall, here. The Maker’s blessed us with good weather so far but once winter really sets in you may not want to be treating patients out of doors.”

“May I meet with whoever is constructing the infirmary? I have some requests.”

Cullen gave her a look that said, ‘of course you do.’ “I can arrange for you to discuss plans with Gatsi.”

“Who is Gatsi?” Berta asked.
“He’s a dwarven master stonemason we’ve brought on to oversee design and repairs to Skyhold. He would ordinarily be here at the morning meeting, but he was close to finishing the final shoring up of the path from the valley to the gatehouse, so I gave him dispensation to stay in the lakeside camp until work is finished.”

Berta nodded in understanding, wondering how much space had been allocated for the new treatment area. “Yes, I’d like to have a talk with him.”

Cullen removed the ink and bottle and sheathed his dagger before rolling up the map and returning it to the shelf. “I expect you will need a few days to organize your operation,” he said to Berta. “A small logistical question. What do you want your order of healers to be called? It would help to have an insignia as well to identify your people separate from the soldiers and refugees.”

Berta smiled. It wasn’t hard to pick something even though she hadn’t given it any thought. What else would she choose but the international sign for a hospital? “Call us the Red Cross.”

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Berta left the Commander’s office with Mother Giselle almost a half hour later after a collaborative discussion about staffing and supplies and requisitioning items from the quartermaster. Berta felt better than she had since she arrived, feeling a sense of purpose, even if the whispered hopes in the back of her mind about going home were unanswered. Mother Giselle left to find Elan and then head to the lakeside refugee camp to begin recruiting anyone with healing skills or apothecary knowledge for the new Order of the Red Cross.

Berta reached the bottom of the steps by the Herald’s Rest and found her eyes drawn to the cluster of soldiers in the middle of the upper courtyard. At first, she thought it was the usual recruits training but quickly realized that it must be something different if Leliana and Cassandra were in attendance, watching from outside the Herald’s Rest. Berta cautiously wandered over to the two women. Both stood with their arms crossed, their attention focused on the men at arms before them.

“Good morning,” Berta greeted them both. “Observing training?”

Leliana gave a small laugh. “More like schooling. The Inquisitor is putting Cullen’s finest through their paces.”

Berta looked to where the two women were gazing and realized that the Inquisitor was in the center of the sparing configuration. She was dressed in her scale armor with her helm covering most of her face. She was outfitted with two long wooden sparing daggers. Four soldiers were surrounding her, already looking battered. One had a sword and shield, another a two-handed sword, the third a long pike and the fourth double daggers of their own. The Inquisitor clapped her daggers together twice and the round began. It may have been 4 on 1 but Berta quickly realized the odds were heavily stacked in the Inquisitor’s favor. She was graceful and powerful at the same time, using the daggers like they were extensions of her own body, moving lightning fast and deadly, blocking and dodging, anticipating the soldiers with ease. She used her whole body too, jumping off the ground to kick a booted foot into the belly of the dagger wielder and pushing off to spin through the air and land a solid blow with her elbow against the pikeman’s head before he could swing the length of his weapon around to impale her. It was over in less than a minute, all four of the soldiers lying on the ground around her while the Inquisitor looked hardly even out of breath. Berta felt like she was watching a superhero in action. The Inquisitor said something inaudible to the soldiers and gave them each a hand rising from the ground.

Cassandra shook her head. “I would be embarrassed for our men if I had not sparred against them myself. Those four are some of our best.”
“And yet Avyanna handles them easily.” Leliana looked almost disappointed.

“We will have to find a better way for her to train. Bull and I are both still nursing our bruises from the last session.”

Berta tried to imagine the wiry elf besting both the giant Qunari and the athletic Seeker but couldn’t picture it, even with the talent she had just seen on display. “Where did she learn to fight like that?”

“The Dalish are renowned for their hunting prowess,” Leliana observed noncommittally.

Berta raised her eyebrow at the Sister. “Unless she was hunting human soldiers, I don’t think that’s it.”

There was a long awkward silence and Berta thought perhaps she had hit the nail a little too on the head as neither of the women said anything in response. She hadn’t yet covered much about the Dalish in Brother Genitivi’s book and didn’t know if Dalish elves killing humans was a common occurrence.

Cassandra cleared her throat. “Well, regardless of how she acquired her skills, we need a challenge for her now.”

Leliana had a smile twisting the corner of her mouth. “I may know someone who can help us…”

“Oh, Lady Shaw, there you are!” Meena came trotting up the stairs, looking harried. “The Grand Enchanter needs you in the infirmary right away.”

Berta excused herself from the Leliana and Cassandra and followed the elven maid down the stairs to the infirmary. The area around the gate was crowded with men and women at arms donning armor, securing weapons and spilling over into the infirmary. Berta danced around two of Harritt’s armory boys who almost knocked her over as they hauled gear over their shoulders. There were three of the kitchen girls distributing packs of rations to the men. There were several mages among the fighting men and she recognized the red headed female mage who had been part of the attack on the gate, standing apart from the others, looking bereft. Dennet, the Master of Horse, was talking intently with Bull, stroking the neck a gigantic war horse who looked like he just might be able to carry Iron Bull’s mass without collapsing. Krem and the other Chargers were there, milling about, securing packs and getting final adjustments to their armor from Harritt and his apprentices.

Berta looked around for a moment and then spied Fiona sitting by the fire, worry on her elfin face. She stood quickly as Berta approached.

“What’s wrong?”

Fiona gave a thin-lipped frown. “Sue is leaving us.”

“What?” Berta looked around for the surgeon, thinking to grab her and shake some sense into her. “When?”

Fiona shook her head. “Today. Apparently, the Commander told her last night that you would be taking charge of healing for the Inquisition and she decided to leave.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Berta spat. She needed every warm body she could get with any healing knowledge, no matter how rudimentary. “Where is she?”

Fiona inclined her staff past the scaffolding in the lower courtyard. “She said she’s signed on with one of the mercenary groups.”
Berta swallowed her irritation and marched in the direction of the scaffolding, finding Sue kneeling next to a pack, securing her surgeon’s kit with leather ties. She glanced up as Berta approached but said nothing.

Berta stood over her, hands on her hips, trying to think of what to say that wouldn’t betray how angry she really was. “So, where do you think you’re going?” was the best she could do.

"Off to rid some backwater of its bandits in the name of the Inquisition." Sue didn’t look up, frowning at her pack and continuing to busy herself with the ties. “I figure you don’t need me.”

“Oh, Sue, cut the crap.” Berta sighed. “Why wouldn’t I need you? I know next to nothing about herbal healing here, only what you’ve taught me and I-”

“Maybe the Inquisitor should have thought about that before she put you in charge.”

“I did not ask for this.” Berta was tempted to grab the pack away from her so she would quit fussing with it and look her in the eye. “Is this really what you want to do?”

The surgeon stood and folded her arms across her chest. “Every merc company needs a good surgeon. Sutherland here is starting up a new band. He needs all the help he can get.” Berta glanced toward the man Sue had indicated, seeing a young ruffian with barely enough hair for a mustache doing his best to look in charge of the small group of misfits around him.

“I guess I should be flattered that you don’t think I need the help, but it’s not me you’re abandoning-it’s the patients-the soldiers and the refugees. You should be thinking about them. Not your wounded pride.”

Sue scuffed her boot in the dirt before she looked up at Berta. “I know it’s not your doing. But that doesn’t change anything for me. Sutherland’s a good lad. He needs a good surgeon to do his stitching for his band. I can do more good out there than I can here.”

Berta grit her teeth. “I really need you. You wouldn’t be pushed aside.”

“You’ve already pushed me aside,” she grumbled. “Listen, I’m mad as a broody wyvern on the nest. Don’t push me any further.”

Berta sighed again, disgusted. She did not need to add soothing bruised egos to her list of everything else on her plate today. “Do what you need to do then. If you come back, there’s a place for you. I promise.” She turned to walk away.

“Healer,” Sue called to her, her face hard but not angry. “Good luck. May Andraste guide us both.”

“Yeah,” Berta mumbled, walking back towards Fiona, discouraged.

She threaded her way through the Chargers listening to their collegial insults and preparations. Berta saw the red headed teenage mage girl standing awkwardly near a woman wearing an elaborate head wrap with an arched metal decoration attached to the front. The older woman had elaborate robes and bronze armor on her arms with multilayered red overskirts over her leather breeches and boots. She was clearly a mage with a burnished sculpted dragon twisting around the end of her staff.

Leliana had appeared and was speaking quietly and earnestly to the two mages. Berta overheard the Sister giving instructions.

"Tera, watch Sidony. She is experienced, and you can learn much from her." And then to the older woman, "Send a raven as soon as you reach Nevarra."
“Yes, Nightingale.”

Berta walked past to return to Fiona, who looked at her hopefully.

Berta grimaced and shook her head. “She’s mad about being pushed aside. I can’t say I blame her, I just hoped...”

“Lady Shaw, good morning.”

Berta switched gears quickly, putting a smile on her face, seeing Josephine approaching. "Good morning, Josephine. Please, Berta is fine."

Josephine smiled disarmingly. "Of course. May I offer my congratulations on your promotion. I think the Inquisitor is quite wise in her choice."

"Thank you," Berta replied. "I hope her confidence is not misplaced."

"I am sure it is not," she said assuredly and turned to the young man with her. "This is Connor, Arl Teagan's nephew."

Berta looked at the young man shifting uncertainly over Josephine's shoulder. He was young, probably not even twenty, with the rust colored hair of his uncle and the same hazel eyes. He wore a simple blue tunic and green breeches, less elaborate than the robes of the mages Berta had met thus far and she wondered at the difference, making a mental note to ask Fiona about it later. He looked terrified.

"Welcome, Connor." Berta spoke warmly and tried to give him a reassuring smile. "I hope you have an interest in healing magic."

"Yes, my uncle thought...well, I should try to do something with my...um, abilities." He shrugged and kept his eyes on the ground.

Berta was about to say something encouraging when the red headed mage cried, “Marko!” Berta looked in the direction of the shout to see the teenage mage throw herself into the arms of the other dark-haired young man from the mage attack on the gate. He dropped his staff to hold her tightly and they kissed as if they were the only people in the courtyard. Berta looked away, embarrassed on the young lovers' behalf as a few of the Chargers made cat calls at the couple. Berta did her best to ignore the more colorful comments and addressed Josephine. "Thank you for bringing Connor to us. Will you let his uncle know that he is in good hands?"

Josephine was looking doe eyed at the two embracing mages. "Ah, young love," she sighed. Berta swore she could almost see the ambassador's heart melting into a syrupy pool. "Yes, I'll keep his uncle informed. Now if you'll excuse me, I have so much to do!" She gave an abbreviated bow and headed back towards the great hall.

Leliana was addressing the young mage, Marko, as Tera hovered, holding his hand. There was a short, stocky female dwarf standing just behind Marko, and she lifted a hand to clap heartily on the mages shoulder. Her head was covered in a cowl and Berta could see little of her face except for the serious set of her mouth. "C'mon, little man," she growled, with a smoker's rasp. "Let's go mage hunting."

Marko's eyes flashed angrily. "Don't forget templar hunting, too."

"Quiet, both of you." Leliana folded her hands before her. "Marko, listen to Walker. She is an
exceptional ranger. Use your anger to fuel your desire find them. Do not let it overcome you." She looked back at the hooded dwarf. "Reach out to my agents in Val Fermin as soon as you pick up their trail."

Berta turned away, not listening to the rest of the Nightingale's conversation, returning her attention to Connor and Fiona. "Connor, why don't you have a seat over there," she indicated one of the stools by the supply tent, "and let me talk with Fiona a moment and then we'll get you settled."

He shuffled away, and Berta looked at Fiona, pitching her voice low to make sure he couldn't overhear them. "I didn't know we were going to be saddled with him today."

Fiona looked over at Connor who sat heavily, looking out of place and miserable by the tent. "I can take him in hand. You have a lot to do today."

"Chargers, horns up!" Krem shouted, drowning out the rest of the conversation in the lower courtyard and leaving Berta feeling ready to scream at everyone to get the hell out of her infirmary. There was a mighty shout in response as the Chargers formed up behind Bull, hooting and echoing the horns up battle cry. They headed out through the gate, with something less than military precision but in rough lines of three until they were all out on the causeway and considerably quieter.

"Sutherland's Company, form up!" the young man yelled over by the scaffolding, drawing his sword and enthusiastically thrusting it skyward. His companions, all four of them, including Sue, picked up their packs and began following him toward the gate as he awkwardly sheathed his sword. Sutherland's company's precision, much like the respective leaders of their companies, was a might less impressive than the Chargers. Berta watched them head across the causeway, sorry to see Sue leave but understanding how the surgeon felt. The pair of mages and Leliana's agents followed the mercenaries, taking the last of the lower courtyard chaos with them, off to whatever errands the Nightingale had assigned, the Sister herself nodding to Berta and Fiona on her way back to the great hall. The kitchen girls were scuttling back toward their hearth, the rations distributed, and Master Dennet led the large war horse back toward the stables. Harritt shooed his boys back to the forge, pretending to be headed off with their own mercenary company towards certain glory. Berta breathed a sigh of relief at the quiet that descended on the infirmary.

"Now," she said to Fiona, "I've got a favor to ask you. Mother Giselle has headed to the refugee camp. She's going to find anyone who has any healing or apothecary ability and recruit them, if possible. I was going to ask you to talk to the mages and gather up anyone who wants to help us. Unfortunately, with Sue abandoning us, I can't send you off as I need you here. I can't leave the infirmary unattended."

Fiona looked concerned. "Where are you going?"

"Down to the lakeside camp. The rest of the soldiers from the Fallow Mire should be arriving today and I want to inspect the clinic that Mother Giselle has cobbled together." She glanced back over her shoulder at Connor and dropped her voice again. "I can't ask you to see patients and try to train the boy. Teaching takes a lot of focus and you may be busy."

"Healer."

Berta spun towards the speaker, ready to bite the head off anyone interrupting her again but she was greeted by Knight-Captain Briony with a chagrined Mikel and two templars in tow.

Berta looked at Mikel carefully. She was still angry at him for paralyzing her, but she needed him and could ill afford to let her emotions run away with her. "It's good to have you back," she said
cautiously.

Mikel looked at the ground and she thought he might cry. "I'm so sorry, Berta. I shouldn't have - I didn't... I mean -"

"Don't trouble yourself, Mikel," she said kindly, hoping she sounded sincere. "You don't have to explain. The Inquisition needs your healing skills."

He took a deep, grateful breath. "Thank you."

"This is Belinda," said Briony, gesturing to chestnut haired but otherwise plain woman to her left dressed in templar armor. "And you may remember Lysette."

Berta immediately recognized Lysette as the brunette templar who had halted the mage attack. "Yes. We haven't met. I'm Doctor Shaw."

The Knight-Captain nodded to her two templars. "They will be stationed here in the infirmary."

Berta felt a stab of irritation at Briony breaking this news to Fiona instead of letting Berta do it herself. Fiona glanced at her, clearly questioning if Berta had agreed to this. "I think one templar here would be more than adequate," Berta said. "At the moment, we only have three mages -"

"Two mages and an apprentice," the Knight-Captain corrected crisply. "Those who have not yet been harrowed are doubly dangerous."

Berta looked to Fiona for help. She really didn't know enough to argue with Briony, even if she was inclined to defend the mages against default templar suspicion.

Fiona stepped forward spreading her hands. "I will be here in the infirmary. Lysette can protect me and Mikel both, I'm sure. Lady Shaw will be going down to see to the returning soldiers and refugees, and Connor will be going with her." Fiona glanced at Berta to affirm that this was agreeable, and Berta nodded. "Belinda can accompany them."

The Knight-Captain looked poised to disagree on general principle but couldn't seem to think of a reason to object.

"Perhaps we could dine together this evening and discuss plans further?" Berta asked the templar captain. "I will be drawing up additional staffing plans once I know how many people I have to work with and you'll need to know my roster if you're going to protect all my mages."

The Knight-Captain nodded. "Tonight then, healer. Report in to me when you return," she said to Belinda and marched up the steps toward the upper courtyard.

"Yes, captain," Belinda said. Both templar women squared off on either side of the infirmary, ready to leap into action if needed, which Berta certainly hoped they wouldn't be.

Meena stepped forward from her place out of the way, hovering near the entrance to Berta's tent. "May I bring breakfast for you, m'lady?" She gestured to Fiona, Mikel and Connor as well, including them in her offer.

"Have you eaten?" Berta asked the templars who looked surprised that she would think of their comfort.

"Yes, serah," Lysette replied. "We breakfasted with our brothers and sisters early this morning."
"Alright then," Berta replied. "Just us four, Meena. And a large cup of tea for me, please."

"Yes, m'lady." Meena scurried off towards the kitchen.

Berta looked at Fiona, Mikel and Connor as she walked over to her makeshift desk. "Everyone pull up a seat. I want to bring you up to speed on my plans for the Order of the Red Cross. We've a lot of work to do."
Someone needs to fight, someone needs to sacrifice, someone needs to inspire, someone needs to be a hero.
-Amit Kalantri
Musical Accompaniment:
Holding Out for a Hero - Nothing But Thieves

Of course, the day Sue left, the infirmary was swamped. It was like a call had gone out to every soldier with even the mildest physical complaint that today was the day to be seen. Berta spent far less time strategizing with Fiona than she did trying to stem the tide of sick and injured soldiers. After an hour had gone by, she realized that she had no choice but to leave Mikel with Fiona to handle the volume and head down to Mother's Giselle's clinic in the camp if she had any hope of getting there and being prepared before the soldiers from the Mire arrived. She quickly explained her intentions to Fiona, who, as always, seemed fine to roll with what Berta had planned. She went into her tent and rummaged through the chest. She could wear her coat, but she'd garner less attention if she wore something more appropriate to Thedas. In the bottom of the trunk there was a densely woven wool poncho with fur around the neck that looked warm. She mentally thanked Josephine for thinking of everything and chastised herself for not finding it to don last night when she was so cold, she couldn't sleep. She grabbed her bag, packing her refurbished surgeon's kit inside and carting her healer's box. She exited her tent, motioning to Connor to follow.

"Come on, grasshopper, you're with me."

Connor looked questioningly at Fiona, but she was too busy to pay attention to her apprentice, focused instead on the broken arm of one of the work men. "But I'm not allowed to..." He trailed off.

"To what?" Berta asked.

He shook his head at himself and gave a small derisive laugh. "I was going to say, 'leave the tower,' but I know I'm not there anymore. It's hard to be outside. Everything is so...well, it's just different." He shivered and looked towards the gate. "It's all so strange."

You have no idea, Berta thought, but aloud she said, "You'll be fine. I'm sure Belinda will keep an eye on us."

The templar looked imposing in her full armor with her sword at her belt but she managed a friendly smile. "I'm here to protect you, Connor."

Connor looked dubious. Berta shared his hesitancy but thought that allowing the templars to do the helpful part of their jobs might keep the peace. She turned toward the gate to head out but stopped short, seeing Warden Blackwall walking that way, accompanied by two of Cullen's soldiers. He was wearing his full armor and had a huge sword strapped across his back. He either didn't see or notice
her, for which Berta was glad. She felt a twinge of embarrassment again at sobbing in his arms in the middle of the night like some damsel in distress. She hovered next to the infirmary fire, giving him a chance to walk on so she wouldn't have to face him. He strode with purpose out the keep gate, not sparing her a glance.

"Are you ready to go?" Belinda looked confused at Berta's delay.

"Um, yes, let's go." She trusted that the Warden had other things on his mind than her temporary emotional frailty. "Lead the way."

Belinda gestured for Connor to go ahead and the two of them set out through the gate, Berta trailing behind. The wind was fierce across the causeway, blasting them as they crossed to the gate house. Inside, the four guards saluted Belinda and unlocked the outer gate, ushering Berta and her two companions onto the steep switchbacks heading down into the valley. Berta glanced down the trail thinking to see if the Warden was far enough ahead of them not to notice her, but her eyes found the valley floor, nearly straight below them and her head swam with vertigo. She took a deep breath and leaned away from the edge, focusing her gaze on the stone path immediately in front of her feet and keeping one hand on the cliff face. She followed behind Belinda and Connor, distracting herself by counting the number of corners on the way down, 21 in all. The last three corners were crowded with workmen, human and dwarven both, packing the path with ground stone and finishing the raised rough stone curb along the outer edge of the trail. There was a foreman clearly in charge at a work table at the base, a large parchment plan unrolled before him. He was a stocky dwarf with a full black beard shot with grey and the blocky dark tattoos that she had seen on some dwarven faces.

“Let’s keep it up!” He shouted at the workmen. “The Commander wants this done by noon today!” He grabbed a trowel and walked back toward the half-finished stone work, tutting at the dwarves there to hurry up but to “do the stone proud.”

Berta assumed that this must be Gatsi, the builder that Cullen had mentioned. She didn’t have time to talk to him now and doubted he had time to chat with her either, but she could introduce herself. Connor and Belinda stopped on the path as she turned to the dwarf.

“Gatsi?” She asked.

“Stone met,” he replied, which Berta took for yes as he gave her a nod. “Can I help you? Don’t have much time to talk.”

“I won’t take up your time now. I’m Berta Shaw, the healer. Commander Cullen said you were building the new infirmary and I hoped to talk to you about your plans this evening.” This would probably be a more pleasant discussion than she expected her meeting with Briony to be.

He squinted up at her considering. “We should finish up here by midday and then we’ve got another project in the keep to start this afternoon,” Berta assumed this was the fallen wall in the dungeons. “We probably won’t get to the infirmary for a few days.”

“That’s perfect,” she said. “I just wanted to know what you had planned and maybe make a few requests.”

“That’s fair,” he said. “I’ll be in the great hall for supper. And I’ve carved out a little workspace in the corner near the doors. You can find me there if I’m not out here working.”

Berta smiled. “Great. Tonight then.”

The dwarf nodded and waved her off, returning to the project at hand. Berta headed down the path.
to catch up with Connor and Belinda who were waiting for her just ahead.

The camp had a few changes since her last walk through when she had been under guard. No one stared this time and there had been a large amount of crushed stone added to the muddy path that cut through the camp, giving her better footing, which she assumed was Gatsi’s doing. To their right, there were tightly packed tents, forming a walled compound of sorts with a single entrance guarded over by two men with flaming swords on their breastplates, who nodded to Belinda as she passed, waving casually.

"Is that the mages' camp?" Berta asked Connor, indicating the two armor clad men at the entrance.

The boy nodded. "Yes, most of the mages are there. There are a few with the Grand Enchanter in Skyhold."

Following the mages' camp was an open training ground, demarcated by barrels and rough tables of sparring equipment. The recruits were lined up, two by two, attacking each other with sword and shield. Berta saw Cassandra supervising, the recruits straightening to attention and flinching every time she approached to adjust a grip or critique a block. Cassandra glanced toward Berta as they walked past, nodding in greeting before returning her attention to her pupils. Berta was looking over the troops with mild interest wondering how long it took for them to become proficient. She saw Warden Blackwall at the end of the last row, showing a blocking maneuver with a wooden shield, bashing the sword of his attacker aside and bringing his sparring sword in his other hand quickly toward his now exposed opponent. He moved smoothly, his motions clearly controlled and practiced, even if slowed substantially for the benefit of the recruits. He handed the sword and shield back to the soldier and looked up, right into Berta's eyes. She quickly looked away, but he had seen her and there was nowhere to hide. He said something inaudible to the soldiers and left them, walking towards her.

Berta met his gaze with a tight smile, coming to a halt and causing Belinda and Connor to pull up short to wait for her again. Shit, she cursed to herself as the Warden steadily approached.

"My lady." He gave the same small bow he had the night before. "How are you this morning?" It struck Berta as more than a casual question.

"Fine, thank you." She stood there awkwardly for a moment, feeling raw and embarrassed as he looked at her like she was made of broken glass. She couldn't think of a damn thing to say.

"So...you're helping train the troops?"

To his credit he ignored the obviousness of her question. "We've had recruits coming from all over as word of the Inquisition has spread." He glanced back at the soldiers executing his exercise and gave a shrug with one shoulder. "Some know how to fight."

"You seem to know your way around a sword," she observed.

"Prefer a broadsword myself, but sword and shield are best for beginners."

"I saw the Inquisitor fight this morning. She was incredible." Berta shook her head, thinking of the speed and fluidity of the Inquisitor’s Dalish daggers.

"Aye, that she is."

His reverent tone caused Berta to raise an eyebrow. Was that simple admiration in his voice or something more? "Well, don't let me keep you. We've got to get on to the clinic."

He bowed again, inclining his head, his face inscrutable behind his beard. "Good day, my lady."
turned back to the sparing soldiers and Berta gave a small sigh of relief.

Berta hustled over to Belinda and Connor, hoping they could make it to the clinic quickly without further interruption. Belinda lead them through the camp, the graveled path paralleling the lake.

“The refugees are all on this side of the lake,” Belinda explained to Berta, gesturing to the clustered tents with cook fires and people scattered between them, largely elves and humans with the odd dwarf amongst them. “The Inquisition army is all on the other.” Berta looked across the lake to the other side, noting that it looked a bit more orderly with the tents in rows and the fires less frequent. As they reached the far end of the encampment, she saw the improved clinic Mother Giselle had created. The ground sloped upward away from the rest of the encampment and an old tower was built at the top of the hill, likely a guard tower from once upon a time if the crenellations and slit windows near the top were any indication. Mother Giselle had coopted it and strung two large overlapping tarps from the second-floor windows, stretching across a wide area around the base of the tower, creating a large covered work space. There were three large fires around the edges of the open tent and Berta could see the runners fetching water and mages in the shadows of the tent, treating patients on cots and, in one corner, three girls stripping leaves from a green plant into a basket, separating the stems and roots into a second and third. Belinda planted herself with her back to the tower where she could see the entire tent and join the other male templar who had already been posted there, keeping watch.

Mother Giselle came bustling out of the tent, her hands reaching out to Berta. "Healer, come see our little clinic. I want to show you what we've done so far and then you can tell us how to improve."

Berta smiled at the priestess's earnestness and followed her around the tent on the guided tour. There were 10 cots along one side, each with a bucket for handwashing. There were two private curtained examination and treatment areas and all the dressings and apothecary supplies were inside on the first floor of the tower. Berta was a bit surprised. It was very much as how she would have set it up if it had been up to her.

"Everything is very well organized," she commented to the Mother.

Mother Giselle ducked her head modestly. "Well, I asked for the same things that you had requested for the infirmary in the keep. This really is your doing."

Placating supervisory egos was clearly not unique to Berta’s world but if this was the result, she was up to tolerating a small dose of obsequiousness. She was truly pleased. This would get things off to a better start than she had dared hope. Mother Giselle took her to each of the healers and mages working in the tent, introducing them and giving a brief explanation of their background and knowledge. Berta did her best to focus to try and learn everyone's names but before too long her attention was waning and she knew she'd have to ask Mother Giselle for a written list. Connor hung behind them, looking uncertain with what to do with himself, until one of the mages, Talwyn, volunteered to take him under his wing.

"Oh, and before I forget!" Mother Giselle interjected as Talwyn led Connor away towards the treatment enclosure, "the Inquisitor sent two tents to make a separate treatment area for the soldiers from the Fallow Mire. I've had them erected on the other side of the tower. The soldiers have not arrived yet but Finn and Seria will care for them when they do."

"Excellent. You've a done a wonderful job, Mother." Berta smiled genuinely, and the priestess beamed back at her. "What about new volunteers to the Red Cross?"

Mother Giselle nodded. "I sent four criers to go through the camp, carrying word that the Order is looking for anyone with healing knowledge or a desire to learn to come here to the clinic. I will have
"Great." Berta looked around the tent, her hands on her hips. "You haven't left much here for me to do."

Mother Giselle gave a small laugh. "Except heal the sick and wounded. For that, I have no skill."

Berta sighed. "Then I guess I should quit standing around and get to work."

The morning passed quickly, Berta working alongside the other mages and healers Mother Giselle had collected. They were a motley bunch, human and elves both, no dwarves or Qunari, mainly Circle mages but two apostates and several healers, none of whom had the audacity to call themselves surgeons or had the luck or misfortune to be trained in Denerim. Berta immediately saw similarities to Sue's use of plants and herbs but other techniques as well. There were different names for diseases than at home, but she could tease out what they were. "Frost cough" seemed to be the Thedosian pneumonia and "hunger shivers" were related to malnutrition but she wasn't yet sure what "bone sickness" was. As much as Sue had sometimes grated on her nerves, and as often as she fell back on bloodletting as a treatment, Berta had to admit the Denerim surgeon's skill was not any worse than most of the healers Mother Giselle had assembled. As Berta worked, she began to formulate a larger plan for the Red Cross. Education of its healers and mages would be vital. She’d need to make sure every one of her healers could read and she’d have to set up a schedule for lectures, which would mean a classroom space, in addition to teaching at the bedside. Maybe she could talk to Dorian about finding any books about healing in the library. And then she’d need to have some practical sessions as well for suturing and...slow down, she told herself. You can't do it all at once.

Just before midday, the soldiers from the Fallow Mire arrived, seven in total, two borne on stretchers, thankfully due to injury rather than illness, carried by their colleagues at arms. They were shepherded into the tents provided by the Inquisitor with no small amount of grumbling. After they were settled, Berta addressed them about the need for the quarantine. There was much protesting of the isolation as stupid and bothersome, which Berta was sure was largely due to at least two of the men complaining that they had sweethearts to return to. After much whining, Berta finally opened up her surgeon's wrath in all its glory.

"I am the Chief Healer of the Order of the Red Cross, appointed by the Inquisitor, the Herald of Andraste, to keep your sorry asses alive and in good health and you will do as I say." The grumbling quieted down quickly after that and the staff in the clinic within ear shot seemed to step a bit more smartly as well. Berta gave each of the returning soldiers an examination and, finding nothing worrisome for the plague Iron Bull had described, turned their care over to Finn, a mage, and Seria, an elven healer from Redcliffe, with instructions to keep them isolated for an additional day.

Connor seemed to be slowly adjusting. He paid attention to Talwyn but appeared terrified of touching the patients and just as afraid of his own shadow. It would take a while to teach him anything useful given his lack of confidence, but Berta was pleased to see the older mage using a light touch with him.

They broke for a simple lunch of dried fruit and cheese with watered wine not long after midday, Berta sitting with Finn and Seria on one of the rock outcroppings near the healing tent. The sun had come out and despite the snow on the peaks, it was warm on the stone in the sunshine.

Berta looked at Finn. She figured him to be in his mid-thirties with the common reddish-brown hair of most Fereldans and wide brown eyes. He had a pressured way of speaking, as if he worried that he might not be able to get all the words out quickly enough. He wore immaculate mage's robes and his staff was two twisted silver dragons with an amber stone set between them.
Berta nibbled on some cheese with a slice of dried apple as she regarded him. "Where are you from, Finn? Are you a Circle mage?"

Finn smiled. "Not in a long time. I was at Kinloch Hold when I was younger. But," he paused dramatically, "I left the Circle after having a bit of adventure. I don't really like to talk about it because most people don’t believe me anyway."

Berta gently laughed. "I dropped through a rift from another world. Try me."

Finn looked at her cautiously. "Well, the Hero of Fereldan needed my help."

Seria guffawed. "Yeah, and Andraste herself gave you her knickers for good luck."

Finn grimaced. "See, I told you."

Berta blinked innocently. "I'm not laughing at you," she said sincerely.

Finn sighed and continued. "She was looking for clues regarding a book in the Circle library and there I was. I helped her decipher some ancient Tevene and I ended up accompanying her. That's how I met my wife. She was a Dalish warrior traveling with the Hero, but she left her clan and I left the tower and we've been together ever since. I always thought I'd go to Amaranthine to see the Warden Commander again but now it's too late."

"Too late?" Berta wasn't sure what he meant.

"Well now that all the Wardens are missing. I heard tell that Vigil's Keep is as empty as the grave."

Berta wasn't sure if he meant silent as the grave but given the tendency of the dead to rise again in Thedas, perhaps Finn was using the correct Thedosian idiom. The story might be untrue as well since there was a Grey Warden here in their midst in the person of Warden Blackwall, but she filed that bit of rumor away in case it ever came up again. "What was she like, the Hero?"

Finn shrugged. "I didn’t know who she was at first. I just thought maybe she was a visiting scholar. She was quiet, reserved, a little sad. An amazing shot with a bow and fast with a sword and dagger once we were on the road. I don’t how she learned all that in the alienage."

Berta was a little surprised. "She was an elf?"

Seria nodded. "I’ve heard that she grew up in the alienage in Denerim. And then she joined the wardens and then she saved all of Ferelden from the Blight. The stories say she killed the Archdemon single handedly."

Finn scoffed. "That’s not true. She had help. King Alistair was there, too. They were good friends. And her mabari and a witch."

Berta wondered what, in a world of mages, constituted a witch but she asked about the unfamiliar term first. "What’s a mabari?"

"A war dog. Usually only nobility can afford them, but the Ferelden wardens had been breeding them to fight darkspawn. Assan was so smart he could understand human speech. You could talk to him just like I’m talking to you now." Finn popped another bit of cheese into his mouth.

Berta bit her tongue, thinking that was, perhaps, a bit of an exaggeration but Finn continued. "You think I’m kidding but I’m not. I saw him myself."
Berta made a noncommittal sound and changed the subject. "And how did you come to serve the Inquisition? Were you at Haven?"

Finn shook his head. "No. Ariane, my wife, and I were at my parents’ in West Hill. We heard that an Inquisition had been declared and when Ariane heard that the Inquisitor was Dalish she said she had to see it for herself. So here we are. And now that the Inquisitor has defended the mages against the templars we don't have to hide anymore. Serving the Inquisition is the least I can do in return."

"And what about you, Seria?"

"The Inquisitor herself recruited me. I was taking care of people the best I could in Redcliffle and she asked me if there was anything she could do to help." She brushed crumbs from her apron and continued. "She brought me all kinds of herbs that I needed and after that, I couldn't refuse her when she asked me to go to the Crossroads to help the refugees. She told me that I could help change things for the elves by helping others. It stuck with me." She took another bite of fruit and chewed thoughtfully before she washed it down with a sip of wine. "I met Mother Giselle there and followed the refugees to Haven and then here after the red templars attacked. If it weren't for the Inquisitor, none of us would have made it out of Haven alive."

"Either that or you had Andraste’s knickers for good luck," Finn teased and Seria made a face at him.

They finished their lunch and returned to work. Berta stepped back from caring for patients herself and instead spent the rest of the afternoon observing each of the mages and healers, learning more about each them and their knowledge and area of expertise. She studied the supplies on the first floor of the tower, looking to see if there was anything else she wanted to add or things that she didn’t have up in the keep. She asked Mother Giselle to make a full list of all the supplies in addition to the personnel and an estimation of how many patients they were seeing a day and the most common diagnoses. A few new healers trickled in, the fruits of the criers’ labors, including the Dalish woman and her son that Berta had cared for that first day she had been thrown into the Thedas. The boy’s wound on his leg was nearly healed and he seemed less shell shocked, giggling when Berta tickled his belly and hiding behind his mother’s legs. His mother, Idria, had been apprenticed to a healer with her clan and seemed eager to repay Berta for caring for her son. Berta talked with each of the new recruits to the Red Cross and began to form a staffing plan around their skills. She had four pools of people at her disposal: the apothecaries, the non-magical healers, the mages and the non-healer support staff. She mentally added a fifth, the templars, but noted that they were not answerable to her and served at Knight-Captain Briony’s whim. With all this in mind, she began to virtually sketch out how the Order would work. Tonight, after she spoke with Gatsi and Briony, she’d put pen to parchment and make out a schedule.

The sun’s rays were still shining on the keep but the valley was already in shadow by the time Mother Giselle declared the clinic closed for the day. Belinda asked to walk the mages from the clinic back to their encampment with the other templar, Hugh, if Berta wasn't yet done with the priestess. Berta told her to go ahead and escort the mages back to their camp. As they walked away Berta saw Belinda laughing at something the male Templar said, elbowing him in friendly fashion. Connor stayed behind with Berta, helping her and the priestess close up the clinic for the evening while Berta went over her requests and assignments with Mother Giselle. The priestess left to attend a naming ceremony for a baby boy and to give the Maker’s blessing to the child and his parents, waving goodnight to Berta and Connor. Berta thought they could make it back to the great hall for dinner if they hurried.

“Let’s head back to the keep,” she said to the young mage.
“Shouldn’t we wait for the Templar?” He asked nervously.

“We’ll probably run into her on way back. And I don’t want to miss dinner. I’m starving.” Berta slung her bag over her shoulder and handed her healer’s kit to Connor to carry. “Let’s go.”

They headed back along the track. Most of the tents were tied closed against the cold and a few hardy souls were still out around their fires as people settled down to their supper and then their beds. The main thoroughfare back to the keep was empty.

They were halfway back to the training ground and mages’ camp when four men came along the track towards them. The shortest shuffled slightly, his arm thrown around the shoulders of one of his companions as they ambled along, chatting amongst themselves. They wore neither armor nor robes and Berta assumed they were refugees rather than men of the Inquisition.

She nodded in greeting as they came closer. “Good evening.”

One of the men, tall and rangy, peered at Connor and grabbed his arm as he went by. “Say, don’t I know you?” His Ferelden accent was heavy and slightly slurred, as if he had been drinking.

Connor flinched away and looked at the ground. “I don’t think so, Ser.”

The short stocky one with a paunch snorted. “Ser, I think not. ‘Ser’ is too good for you, Tavish.”

“Yeah, I do know you,” interrupted the third man, a greasy looking fellow with lank black hair and missing a few teeth. “You’re the Arl’s nephew.”

The fourth man, not much more than a boy, reached for Tavish’s arm and made to pull him along. “Let’s go, Tav.”

Tav threw him off and squinted menacingly at Connor. “You killed my father.”

Berta glanced quickly around, putting an arm around Connor’s shoulders, making to usher him away from the men who had come to a stop around them. “I’m sure there has been some kind of mistake—”

“No mistake, dearie,” Paunch replied. “Every soul in Redcliffe had friend or family killed by this mageling. Justice ain’t never been done.”

“They shoulda killed you,” Toothless sneered, clenching his fists. “Put you out of your misery.”

“Let’s all calm down,” Berta began, putting a hand out to stop Tavish’s advance and smiling, she hoped, disarmingly. Beside her, she felt Connor’s shoulders shake.

“Yeah, that’s right, shed a tear now, boy.” Paunch circled closer, snarling. “You and your Orlesian cunt of a mother, hiding you in the Circle.”

“Hold him,” Tavish barked, and Paunch and Toothless grabbed Connor by the arms, roughly pushing Berta aside. Connor lost his grip on the apothecary box as he struggled against the men, the latch springing aside as the box hit the ground, glass bottles shattering on the gravel and herbs spilling across the path.

“Stop it! Leave him alone,” she yelled, grabbing Tavish’s arm before he could take a swing.

Tavish turned on her, teeth bared, and backhanded her hard across the mouth. Berta spun with the blow and she stumbled, stunned, falling heavily to her hands and knees, the rough stones scraping her palms and the wet mud soaking her skirt. Tavish wound up and turned back to Connor, swinging
his fist hard into his stomach. The mage yelped in pain and would have fallen if not for the men holding him tightly. Tavish cracked his knuckles, licking his lips as he looked at Connor. “I’m gonna gut you like a fish, boy.”

Berta slowly pulled herself to standing, wiping her hands on her apron, her head fuzzy from the blow. “Help,” she called out, weakly at first, looking along the path for anyone who would defend them. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Help!”

“Shut up, bitch,” snarled Tavish. He shoved her hard, knocking her down again onto her back.

Tavish advanced towards her. Berta scrambled back, trying get up but slipping in the mud. She could taste blood in her mouth and it pissed her off. “Don’t touch me again or so help me God, I’ll castrate you with a dull knife,” she spat.

Tavish laughed darkly. “You hear that boys? This mage-lover cunt’s gonna castrate me. Wonder how she’s gonna manage that if she’s dead.”

“Tav, c’mon, you’ve had your fun...let’s go.” The younger man reached to grab his sleeve, tugging him away.

“Shove off, Toph,” Tavish growled, ripping his arm from the younger man’s grasp. “I ain’t done yet.” He lunged at Berta, grabbing her by her hair. Berta screamed in pain and grabbed at his hand, trying to escape from his grip.

“I said, shut up!” he yelled and slammed his fist against her cheek, once and then two times more in quick succession. Berta moaned as her vision darkened around the edges and she collapsed onto the ground, dizzy with pain. He kicked her in the stomach and then in the ribs as she tried to roll away. Her lungs seized, the wind knocked out of her as she ineffectually kicked her feet at her attacker.

“Hold there. Step away from the lady.”

Berta looked toward the voice, dizzy with relief, seeing Blackwall standing there, his hands loose at his sides, his chest plate shining in the dim light. His face was dark and menacing. She wouldn’t have had to be asked twice. Toph gave a cry of fear and backed away before turning to run off between the tents.

Everyone else froze, staring at Blackwall.

“He’s a Warden...” Berta heard Paunch hiss. His whisper sounded like fear.

Tavish straightened slowly, chuckling as if this was all some amusing misunderstanding, backing away from Berta towards his remaining friends, holding his hands out where Blackwall could see them. “Warden or no...I’ve waited a long time for this.” Faster than Berta thought possible for an inebriated refugee, Tavish unsheathed a dagger from his belt and sprang toward Connor to finish the job. Blackwall covered the distance in two strides, pulling the broadsword from his back and swinging it in a lethal arc, the blade’s tip just grazing its target, slashing across Tavish’s back. The refugee screeched in pain and fell to his knees, his shirt torn open along his back, blood spilling from the wound.

He turned on Blackwall, screaming like a wounded animal and rushed the Grey Warden, brandishing his dagger as he sought to stab beneath the power and length of the Warden’s broadsword. Blackwall was faster, though, recovering easily from his first swing to bring his sword back around again, slamming his opponent with the flat of the blade, knocking him sideways. Tav slid in the mud at the edge of the path but kept his feet and foolishly came at the Warden again,
spitting with rage. Berta thought she saw the barest shake of Blackwall’s head at the other man’s attack as this time he hit him hard against the side of his head with the pommel, knocking him to the ground with a thud, unconscious.

“Down you go,” Blackwall muttered looking at Tavish’s figure splayed in the mud.

Paunch and Toothless had seen enough. They broke and ran, following in Toph’s footsteps, releasing Connor, who collapsed to his knees in tears.

“You alright?” The Warden asked Connor and the mage nodded weakly covering his face with his hands.

Berta tried to say something, but her mouth didn’t seem to want to cooperate. Her vision was blurry and when she reached up to rub her eyes with the back of her hand, it came away covered in blood. She started shaking and felt like she might never stop.

“Here, my lady.” Blackwall returned his sword to its sheath and bent on his knee beside her, helping her to sit. Berta winced at the pain in her belly and ribs and immediately regretted moving her face as it throbbed. A wave of nausea hit her at the same time as she realized she could not see out of her left eye.

Belinda and two other Templars came running up the path from the mage’s camp, swords drawn. “What happened?”

“A couple of Redcliffe roughs. Drinking too much wood ale and looking for a fight,” Blackwall informed them. “The other three ran off that way.” He gestured off between the tents. “If they had weapons, they didn’t draw them.”

“Hugh, stay here and look after Connor and this one,” she nudged the unconscious Tavish with the toe of her boot. “Doesn’t look like he’ll give you any trouble.”

Hugh grabbed the dagger from Tavish’s reach and thrust it through his belt. “Yes, ser.”

Berta saw Belinda blanch as she looked at her face. The templar swallowed hard and dropped her eyes. “Brennan, with me,” Belinda said and the two of them headed off between the tents in the direction Blackwall had indicated, swords drawn.

Blackwall watched them go and turned back to Berta. “I’ll get her to the keep,” he said to Hugh.

Berta wanted to protest that there was no way she could walk all the way back to the castle, but before she could get her mouth working to say anything, the big man was scooping her up and cradling her against his chest. Berta wanted to insist that he put her down, that she was too heavy to carry all the way back to Skyhold, that she’d get mud all over him, but she was so tired, and her face was throbbing, and she thought she might be sick. Blackwall set off through the camp, carrying her like it was nothing. The breast plate he wore was hard against her injured side but the rough wool of his jacket against her cheek was comfortable to rest her head against. She wanted to murmur a thank you, but she couldn’t speak, her tongue leaden in her mouth.

She faded in and out up the climb to the guard tower, almost losing consciousness and then suddenly awakening to a spinning sensation, feeling like she was falling, and she tightened her grip the back of his neck, her fingers sliding into his hair, holding on for dear life.

“I’ve gotcha,” he said, holding her gently but tightly, his arms solid and his footing sure. His breathing was steady but hard and his steps an even cadence that rocked her as he carried her back to the castle. Her head lolled onto his shoulder and she hoped she wasn’t bleeding, or worse drooling.
all over his coat, unable to close her mouth and unable to breathe through her nose.

She thought she could tell when they reached the causeway, his breathing easing a bit and his strides becoming smoother. “Almost there, my lady,” he said.

She moaned weakly in reply, giving up on trying to say anything. She licked her lips, suddenly incredibly thirsty. She tried to swallow and the movement in her jaw sent pain lancing through her face like lightning.

She could see the arch of the outer wall over them as Blackwall carried her through the gate, firelight flickering from the torches against the stone.

“Maker’s breath, what happened?” Berta could hear Fiona’s voice. “Berta, what—”

“She was attacked by some Redcliffe refugees.” He set Berta down carefully on a bed roll near the infirmary fire. “I think her jaw’s broken.”

And my eye? Berta thought. How bad is my eye? She clutched at Blackwall’s neck, afraid to let go. He gently peeled her hand away and crouched by her, not letting go of her hand.

“Oh, my lady!” Meena was there too, just out of Berta’s peripheral vision. “What can I do?” She asked Fiona.

“Bring me some more water and then go find Mikel and Solas. This will take more energy than I have alone.”

Berta quailed at Fiona’s request, thinking how bad her face must be to make her friend think she needed help from not one but two other mages. Berta tried to slow her breathing, afraid that if she began to cry on top of her injuries, she wouldn’t be able to breathe at all.

Fiona disappeared for a moment and then returned, holding a small bottle. “Nettle syrup, Berta. This will hurt.”

Berta hesitated a moment, not wanting anything that would sedate her if she had a significant intracranial injury but realizing that it didn’t matter either way. No neurosurgeon was coming to fix her if Fiona couldn’t. Blackwall slid his arm under her shoulders, helping her to sit up slightly. Berta managed to slightly open her mouth, tears streaming from the corners of her eyes at the pain. Fiona poured the sticky sweet syrup down her throat slowly, letting her swallow the entire bottle. Blackwall lowered her gently back on the bed roll. She would have to trust Fiona to heal her.

“Let me clean you off so I can see what I’m dealing with here.” Berta heard water dripping and a soft cool, wet cloth touched her face. Fiona was gentle, and the water felt good, cold against her skin. When she was done, she passed the cloth and water back to Meena. “Bring some more water and wash her hands and get her boots off.”

“Yes, Enchanter,” Meena murmured and headed back to the well.

“I’m going to heal you.” Fiona explained to Berta. “Your face is...it will be painful. Try to hold still.” Berta could only blink her right eye in reply, feeling her mind already beginning to blur around the edges from the nettle syrup.

Fiona’s hand covered Berta’s forehead and her eyes. “Close your eyes,” she instructed. Berta did as she asked and immediately felt a heaviness press over her face and then a prickling like tiny needles all around her left eye, moving over her forehead and her cheeks like a thousand stinging insects. Her face began to throb, the pain pulsing into the roots of her teeth and then a ripping sensation around
her left eye, like her skin was tissue paper being torn away. At that she gasped and moaned again, flinching.

“Hold her.” Fiona’s voice came, and Berta felt two hands press down on her shoulders with a strength that had to be Blackwall’s.

Fiona’s fingers probed her jaw, and Berta felt the bone shift in her face along the left side of her mandible. The nettle syrup was beginning to do its work though, and while it hurt, she somehow cared less than before.

“Steady her.” Berta wanted to ask, what for? But then immediately she knew as she heard and felt the bone crackling and twisting together in her face. She arched against the hands holding her down. She involuntarily clenched her teeth, causing herself yet more pain. She screamed through her tightening jaw, every muscle in her body tensing, the nausea hitting her again, until suddenly, thankfully, she toppled over into blackness and felt the pain no more.
Reserved people often really need the frank discussion of their sentiments and griefs more than the expansive.
-Charlotte Brontë

Musical Accompaniment:
“Nature Boy” - AURORA
“You Want It Darker” - Leonard Cohen

Berta faded in and out of sleep. Her dreams were confused and surreal. She was a patient in the trauma bay, Santiago standing over her calling for the ultrasound machine and STAT trauma series. Fiona stood at the ready next to him, sagely pronouncing that Berta would die without a mage. There was a giant grey-black wolf with multiple red eyes skulking around the edge of the room, as Santiago cried out “We’re losing her.” In the dream she was eerily calm. Dying seemed merely a minor inconvenience.

At some point during the night, Meena was there, putting a cool cloth on her head and tipping a cup of water to her lips. Berta thought she heard a French song, but she wasn’t sure if she was remembering something her mother used to sing or if maybe Mother Giselle was singing to her. Later, Fiona was at her side, pouring another dose of nettle syrup into her mouth. She slept hard after that.

When next she woke, it was still dark. She was on her cot in her tent, the flaps were tied back. Berta’s hand flew to her face, quickly feeling around her left eye and then covering her right. She could see the infirmary fire burning brightly and Meena asleep on a bed roll by the fire. She breathed a sigh of relief that her vision was intact. It was still hard to breathe through her nose and her mouth felt full of cotton. She sat up slowly, blinking in the fire light, swinging her feet out from under the blankets to the floor, griting her teeth at the pain in her ribs, her muscles sore all across her chest and belly. She ran both hands tentatively over her face, her fingertips fluttering along her jaw. It was tender and swollen but felt like everything had been put back where it belonged. She experimentally slowly opened and closed her mouth, her jaw popping and cracking but functional. Berta was not given to vanity, after all, she’d made it through more than a week in Thedas without missing a mirror, but she longed for one now, so she could examine herself.

She was dressed only in her small clothes and chemise, the edge of which was streaked with mud. She stood slowly, feeling stiff and sore all over and shuffled over to the desk and lit the candle there. She went to the tent flaps to close them quietly so as not to disturb her maid’s slumber and turned back to the chest to look for her clean scrubs to change into before going back to bed. She startled, and almost screamed at the sudden appearance of Cole, sitting perched on the chest.

“Jesus, Cole, you can’t do that!” She sighed in irritation. “Please, just get out,” she ordered, thinking of Vivienne’s characterization of him as a demon.
He looked up at her with puppy dog eyes. “So much pain,” he observed softly.

“I’m a little sore but I’m feeling much better, thank you,” Berta replied crisply. “Now, please-”

“No. Here.” He stood and placed his hand on the center of Berta’s chest.

Berta reflexively stepped back, slapping his hand away. “No, I don’t need-”

“Black clouds and rain and thickening thunder. I can help.” He looked away over her shoulder, his gaze unfocused. “A little gray mouse, curling up in the lavender lady’s lap, warm and winsome, soft and simple. That was the last time you felt safe.”

Berta stared at him, feeling like she’d been kicked in the gut again, his words triggering a memory she’d forgotten she had: her mother, smelling clean like lavender, gathering Berta into her lap, snuggling her close and talking to her about her day at school or plans for that weekend or nothing at all, just holding her and letting her know she was loved. Ma petite souris, she had called her, always, my little mouse.

Berta felt her eyes begin to water. “How could you know that?”

Cole said nothing but reached shyly for Berta’s hand, holding it front of him in both of his, his earnest gaze focused on her eyes. “I want to help.”

Berta blinked her tears away. “I don’t know if you can.” She brushed past him and sat heavily on her cot, pinching the bridge of her nose to hold back the tears before letting her hands drop uselessly into her lap.

“I want to try.”

Berta took a deep breath and studied her hands in her lap, the dirt under her fingernails and the scrapes on her palms. She had been ripped from her world, attacked by demons, imprisoned, paralyzed by magic and now assaulted, but these were superficial onslaughts, exhausting and disorienting but not things that would cut to her core. She had faith in herself that she could be resilient enough to handle anything Thedas could throw at her. But her life before Thedas, before she cut her father out, before her mother died, before so many things, before she was...how did her father put it? Hardened...that’s what he said she needed to be. She needed to be as hard as steel, but not brittle. Who would she be if she wasn’t hardened? Was she brave enough to let a little bit of that small gray mouse creep back in? What was she afraid to lose? She kept staring at her hands, unable to bring herself to look at Cole. “Alright. You can try.”

Cole knelt on the carpeted floor in front of Berta, his hands covering hers. “I will help.” He reached out a hand and Berta fought the urge to flinch away, letting him stroke her hair like a mother soothing a child. “It will all be alright.”

When next Berta woke, daylight was filtering through the canvas of the tent. She blinked slowly and stretched, breathing deeply through the soreness. Cole was gone. She knew he had been there and remembered agreeing to his “help” but everything after that was faint and distant. It was disconcerting, but she thought maybe it was an after effect of the nettle syrup. It might be like administering sedation for a procedure; afterward, the details of the procedure were usually fuzzy, difficult to remember, and that was normal.

She rolled over and lay there for a moment, listening. It was too quiet. The normal sounds of the castle were absent. There were no voices in the infirmary, no clanging of swords carrying from the
upper training yard, no calling of the guards at the gate. She frowned. Something was wrong.

She got up quickly, grimacing at the residual stiffness she felt everywhere, looking around for her clothes. She was still dressed in her dirty chemise, but her skirt and bodice were nowhere to be found. She changed quickly into her scrub pants and sweat shirt, sliding into her boots before leaving the tent.

The lower courtyard was deserted except for Dorian who was sitting on a stool by the infirmary fire, a book open in his hand, his other hand knuckled under his chin in thought. There were no patients or mages. She looked toward the barn and saw no one in the makeshift market that had sprouted up under the scaffolding and no one near the stalls for the horses.

“Where is everyone?”

Dorian started, looking up sharply from his book, a wry smile gracing his face as soon as he laid eyes on her. “My, my, don’t you look terrible.”

“You really know how to make a girl feel good about herself.”

Dorian stood and left his book on the stool, crossing over to her, his expression serious. “Honestly, how do you feel? Fiona told me everything.”

“Honestly? I’ve felt better.” She looked around again wondering where everyone was. “I need to find Cullen and apologize for missing his morning meeting.”

“I think he’ll make allowances for being beaten within an inch of your life.” He tsked as he looked at her. “Especially once he sees you.”

“It can’t be that bad.” Her hands self-consciously went to her face again, thinking she felt only a little puffy.

“Dearest, purple is not your color.” He chuckled at himself and returned to his seat, crossing his legs at the ankle. “Celadon green would be more becoming on you. I dare say, those bruises will be there in a couple of days.” He patted an adjacent upturned log near the fire. “Sit and join me. You won’t be able to find the Commander until the execution is over.”

That brought Berta up short. “Execution?”

“Where did you think everyone was? The Templars caught the four thugs who did this to you and the Inquisitor passed judgement this morning.” He opened his book again and made to resume reading. “That sort of ‘entertainment’ is not my cup of tea, so I volunteered to stay here to-”

“Did you say ‘four?’”

“Yes, but what does-”

“Where?” Berta demanded.

“On the battlements by the corner tower- Berta, wait!”

Berta took off sprinting as fast as she could manage with her ribs making her breath catch, up the steps from the infirmary to the upper courtyard near the tavern, pulling herself around the corner, her chest protesting, and up the second set of steps that led to the battlements. She turned and ran as close to full speed as she could manage to the first tower, throwing the door open and almost tripping over the scattered planks and fallen furniture inside in her haste. She struggled to open the other door, the
handle rusty and creaking on its hinges.

“Fuck,” she swore, slamming her hand against the door jam and yanking on the latch again, finally getting it open. She ran through, stopping short at the huge crowd assembled on the steps that rose to the upper battlements ahead of her. Their backs were all turned towards her, their attention focused on the balcony nestled between the two arms of the battlements that reached out from the corner tower.

She threaded her way quickly up through the crowd on the stairs, trying not to push but desperate to get to the front to see what was going on. When she reached the top of the upper battlements, she saw that all of Skyhold seemed to be assembled. The Templars were lined up along the outer crenellations ahead of Berta, their backs to the valley below, each of them standing stiffly at attention. Clustered in front of them and spilling onto the stairs to the balcony and along the battlements extending from the other side of the tower were the rest of Skyhold’s denizens: kitchen workers, Master Dennet and the stable boys, soldiers, Cabot and the tavern girls. She saw Varric leaning against the far wall of the tower, his hands clasped in front of him, Marian just behind his shoulder. Meena was standing with the other elven servants and Sera was perched on an inner parapet, seemingly unconcerned with the precipitous drop to the upper courtyard below her. Mother Giselle stood on the steps flanked by the Chantry sisters, her hand held out to the prisoners as if giving them a final blessing. All told, there were at least a hundred people crammed onto the corner of the battlements like a macabre theater. It was oddly silent.

On the plaza-like balcony before the corner tower, the four prisoners were lined up on their knees, heads bent, facing the crowd, a chain connecting them together behind their backs at their shackled wrists. A soldier stood behind each of them, holding their wrists to force their bodies forward, necks extended and vulnerable. Knight-Captain Briony stood to the side with two Templars flanking her and at the other end of the row of prisoners, Cullen, Cassandra, Leliana and Josephine stood clustered together. Cullen and Cassandra were the perfect pictures of military stoicism. Leliana’s face was partially shadowed by her hood but her expression was one of restrained approval, a hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth. Josephine looked slightly ill.

The Inquisitor stood before her advisors at one end of the row of prisoners, an impossibly huge sword in her hand, held point down against the stone, her face a hardened mask as she looked down at Paunch, kneeling directly before her.

Berta breathed a sigh of relief. She had made it before any of the men had been put to death. She began to slowly work her way to the edge of the stairs down to the balcony, waiting to see what the Inquisitor would say, hoping there would be a moment to raise her objection, to get close enough to intervene.

But then the Inquisitor moved. She swung the sword faster than Berta thought possible given its size, bringing it round in a deadly arc, Paunch’s head falling from his body in a spray of bright red arterial blood, a dull, wet thunk carrying over the battlements as his body collapsed onto the bloody stone. Toothless, next in line, flinched at the pull of the falling corpse on the chains at his wrist. There was a small, quiet gasp from the crowd, as if they knew the Inquisitor would not approve of any other response.

“No!” Berta screamed, her hand flying up to cover her mouth in horror. Every head turned to look at her, most of their eyes blank, not understanding what she was protesting. The confusion in the faces hit her harder than anything she had seen in this new world so far, more than horned Qunari, more than magic. It was the confusion of people who didn’t see this as brutal or barbaric. This was Thedas. This was the Inquisition.
Berta was shaking. “This isn’t justice. This isn’t a punishment to fit the crime.” Her words echoed over the crowd in the deadly stillness. “They made a mistake...” Her voice faltered. “Have mercy.”

“We are the Inquisition!” thundered Avyanna, her yellow eyes narrowed, and her teeth bared. “When you attack one of us, you attack all of us.” She stalked to the front of the line, the bloody sword clenched in her fist, raised as if she would attack Berta herself if she were close enough. “I am the law and the law is not merciful.”

“You can’t-” Berta began, lurching forward.

“Do not presume to tell me what I cannot do.” The Inquisitor stared her down. "Templars," she ordered. Two broke their line to grab Berta’s arms, pulling her back away from the balcony. The crowd around her edged away, as if her heresy were infectious.

“Wait! Please, the boy- he tried to help-” Berta struggled against the Templars. “He tried to get them to stop!”

The Inquisitor held a hand up to the Templars and they quit pulling Berta away, holding her tightly in place. Avyanna turned to look at Briony, who paled under her glare and Cullen, who met his Inquisitor’s gaze steadily. She looked at Toph, chained at the end of the row. He was on his knees, the soldier behind him holding him by his wrists, snot and tears running down the young man’s face, a telltale stain of fluid down the front of his breeches.

The Inquisitor stepped toward him and looked down, towering over him. “Does the healer speak the truth?”

Toph sniffed and sputtered, his voice barely audible. “Yes, Maker, yes...” He sobbed, his entire body trembling.

Avyanna’s yellow eyes looked down on the prisoner and then back to Berta. “Unchain him.”

Briony stepped back, her face pale, her hand shaking as she gestured to the Templar beside her who rushed to the boy, the keys jangling in the stillness, as the shackles were removed. Toph stayed on his knees, afraid to move, not believing his reprieve. The two Templars who accompanied Briony grasped him by the arms and practically lifted him from the stone. The Inquisitor said something inaudible to them and jerked her head toward Berta. The crowd parted as the Templars carried the young man bodily forward, bringing him to Berta, dropping him at her feet. Toph collapsed before her, leaning forward, his hand trembling to touch his lips and then her boots, whispering hoarsely over and over, “Thank you, thank you, Maker, thank you...”

Berta looked down at the young man, tears coming to her eyes. She reached down and took his hands to help him stand.

“Healer,” Avyanna spoke, her voice echoing over battlements. “His life is yours. But know this: any crime he commits is your crime. His punishments will be yours. Go.”

Berta could taste the bile in her mouth. She looked at the Inquisitor who was already turning away, having dismissed her. Cullen met Berta’s eyes and he gave a subtle shake of his head, a warning. Don’t, his look said.

Berta clenched her jaw and ignored him. “What of the others?” Her words hung in the air as the crowd waited for the Inquisitor’s response.

The Inquisitor turned slowly and fixed Berta with a glare that would have wilted most people on the spot. Berta's breath came faster, but she returned the Inquisitor's stare, trying not to shake.
“Is it your wish to offer succor to all enemies of the Inquisition?” Avyanna’s voice was frighteningly calm, her tone dark with threatening. “To oppose the Inquisition is punishable by death.” The Inquisitor let her words hang in the air as she gestured to the spot where Toph had been chained, the shackles dropped on the stone. “We have an opening.”

Berta licked her lips, unable to trust her voice to reply, her heart pounding out of her chest.

“Templars, please escort Lady Shaw and her new acquisition to the infirmary so we may return to our execution of justice.”

The Templars who had brought Toph to Berta now grabbed them both, pushing them toward the stairs. The last thing Berta saw as she was pulled from the battlements was Tavish on his knees looking up at her and Toph, his last hope being led away, his eyes hollow and his mouth open as if he wanted to say something.

The Templars marched them through the tower. Berta tried to rip her arm from the Templar’s grasp but his gloved hand on her arm was biting into her flesh and would not be removed.

“I know the way,” she said angrily, seething at them as she and Toph were forcibly led down both flights of stairs back to the infirmary. Dorian was still in the infirmary, pacing. He brightened as soon as he saw Berta but frowned again at the presence of the Templars and Toph. Having deposited their charges, the Templars turned and headed back up the stairs.

Berta helped Toph to the stool by the fire. “Sit for a moment and then we’ll get you cleaned up.”

Toph nodded mutely, wrapping his arms tightly around himself, closing his eyes. Berta thought he might be in shock.

Dorian looked at Toph and raised an eyebrow at Berta. “Project?”

Berta scowled. “Not now, Dorian.”

He looked from the young man to Berta. “What did you do?”

“Pissed off the Inquisitor.” She laughed shakily, the audacity of her actions hitting her and making her giddy.

“Are you insane?”

She laughed again and bent over at her waist, resting her hands on her knees. “Yes, certifiably.”

“What were you thinking? Do you want her to take your head off too?” Dorian grabbed her by her elbows, straightening her to face him. “This is serious, Berta. I don’t know what things are like where you come from but in Thedas, actions have consequences.”

“Indeed, they do,” she said. “Those consequences usually seem to involve someone dying. But I don’t want anyone killed on my behalf.”

Dorian shook his head. “Please be careful. Avyanna is...”

“Hardened,” Berta observed ruefully. “She doesn’t have to be. You can be strong without being cruel.”

“Keep your voice down.” He paused, glancing around to see if anyone was in earshot. “You don’t understand. She’s lost her entire clan. She’s Dalish and on her own in a world of humans and
dwarves who think to be an elf is to be a criminal. She’s—"

“I don’t have any family either, Dorian, but you don’t see me going around looking for excuses to behead people.”

Dorian pressed his lips together and looked over at Toph. “This is one of them?”

“No. He was with them but tried to stop them. The Inquisitor would have...” She trailed off. “She ‘gave’ him to me.”

Dorian raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Whatever are you going to do with him?”

She considered. He was filthy and had soiled himself. She wasn’t inclined to let him change in her tent and she had nothing for him to change into. Maybe she could send Meena when she returned to find something for him to wear or...the beauty of scrubs was that one size fit most. She sized the boy up. Her scrubs would probably fit him just fine.

“Toph?” The young man raised her eyes to stare blankly up at her. “That’s right isn’t it? Toph is your name?”

“It’s for short for Topherian,” he said softly.

Not what I was expecting, Berta thought. “Toph, stay here with Master Pavus a moment and I’ll be right back.”

Dorian looked at Berta with a look that said, don’t ask me to be responsible for him. Toph stayed put on the stool and looked up at Berta. “She’s killing him right now, isn’t she?”

“I would assume so, yes,” Berta said, gently.

Toph shook his head and began to cry. “He’s always been a bully, and mean and- oh, poor Mum, what she would say...” He sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

“I’ll be right back,” Berta said and slipped into her tent. She quickly changed back into her dirty chemise and pulled her sweatshirt over it, thinking that would make it look less like she was walking around Skyhold in her nightgown. She folded her scrub pants and grabbed her scrub top from the chest for Toph. She tied the tent flaps back on her way out.

“Tutoring later?” She asked Dorian, letting him know he needn’t hang about on her account.

He gave her a concerned look. “Berta, a day of rest might not be a bad idea.”

“You’re right; it wouldn’t be a bad idea, it would be a terrible idea. I will not wallow in self-pity when there is work to do.” She patted Dorian’s arm dismissively, willing herself to put the last day behind her. “I’ll see you this afternoon.”

The mage reluctantly withdrew, watching her and the boy as he headed back to the library. Berta turned her attention to the young man.

“Toph, come with me and we’ll get you cleaned up and then we can talk.” She gestured toward the barn.

She grabbed a rag and a bucket, stopping at the well to fill it with Skyhold’s naturally luke-warm water. She accompanied him to the barn. The fire was going, as always, and Blackwall was sitting there, whittling.
Berta drew up short. “Oh, I didn’t know you were here. I thought everyone was at the execution.”

Blackwall set his whittling aside, brushing the wood shavings off his trousers and coat. “I try to avoid executions.”

Good man, Berta thought, smiling. “This is Toph. Could he use your hayloft to get cleaned up? There’s not really anywhere else for him to have some privacy.”

“It’s not my barn but go ahead.”

Berta gave the bucket and rag to Toph. “Go ahead. Come back to the infirmary when you’re done.”

The boy nodded dumbly and took the proffered items and headed up the stairs to the loft.

She stood for a moment, watching him go, chewing her lip and considering what she was going to do with him. Was he her slave, her servant? Would she be expected to feed and clothe him herself or was he to be paid? She knew nothing about him and had no idea if he could read or write, or what sort of person he was, but he looked like a strong enough young man that she could probably set him to chopping wood or filling water buckets or something else unskilled if she couldn’t find another role for him. She would have to wait and see.

Blackwall was standing there, expectantly watching her while her gears spun. Berta came back to the moment and realized he was studying her.

“Oh, I...I should be thanking you. I haven’t seen you to say thank you.” She glanced at the ground, ashamed at the recklessness of her actions that lead to her need for rescue at his hands. “You probably saved my life.”

“That’s what Wardens do.”

She cocked her head at him. “Dorian said Wardens just kill darkspawn.”

“‘Just’ kill darkspawn? He would say that,” he grumbled and sat back down on his stool. “To be a Warden is to make a pledge to protect. In a Blight, Wardens protect against the darkspawn, better at it than anybody else. But, Blight’s over, the rest of the world wants to forget. They think they don’t need Wardens anymore...” He shrugged. “But I made a pledge to protect against evil in all its forms. That’s why I’m here.”

“Is that why you didn’t kill those men who were attacking Connor and me?” Berta moved to sit on the hay bale across the fire from him.

“I could have, if I’d wanted.” There was no boastfulness in his words. “To be a Warden is to make a pledge to protect. In a Blight, Wardens protect against the darkspawn, better at it than anybody else. But, Blight’s over, the rest of the world wants to forget. They think they don’t need Wardens anymore...” He shrugged. “But I made a pledge to protect against evil in all its forms. That’s why I’m here.”

“It is her place.” He crossed his arms and looked searchingly at her. “You don’t approve.”

“No,” she said dryly. “I don’t approve.” She sighed and glanced at him, seeing that he didn’t entirely understand. “I would not have a man’s life taken on my behalf. People do horrible things all the time, but I guess I believe each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. People do awful things usually because awful things have been done to them.”

“So, you’re saying it’s not their fault?” He seemed dubious.
Berta shook her head. “No. Everyone can make their own choices. But, also, everyone makes mistakes.”

“You believe in second chances.” His blue eyes scanned her face intently, as if looking for the truth of her words, as if her answer mattered.

“I guess I do.” She laughed to herself, thinking of her father. “But third and fourth chances, not so much.”

Blackwall gave her a grim smile. “So warned,” he said and glanced toward the loft. “You’ve given the boy a second chance?”

Berta shook her head. “No, he doesn’t need one. He ran off when he saw you but before that he was trying to get them to stop.” She shook her head ruefully. “I guess it was my turn to rescue someone.”

She gave Blackwall a small smile.

The corner of Blackwall’s mouth twisted up. “Well, don’t make a habit of it. I’ll be out of a job.”

Berta looked down at her lap and realized she was still holding the scrubs. “Could I ask a favor? Would you take these up to him? He might not appreciate me barging in.”

“You’re a healer.” He cracked a smile. “Haven’t you seen it all before?”

“Then I don’t need to see it again,” Berta chuckled. “I don’t want to embarrass him. He’s been through enough for one day.”

Blackwall acquiesced, taking the scrubs from Berta, his hands brushing against hers as he took the clothing, his fingertips calloused and coarse. Berta pulled her hands quickly away, slightly startled at herself for the image that flashed through his mind of those hands holding her firmly against his chest as he carried her, keeping her safe. He nodded and turned to head up to the hayloft.

“Thank you, Warden...uh, Blackwall.” She cleared her throat. “Thank you for everything.”

He gave her a quiet smile behind his beard that reached the crinkles around his eyes and he headed up the stairs.

Berta stood and headed back to the infirmary. People were trickling back to their places around the castle. She saw Master Dennet hollering at the stable boys to get back to work. Fiona was back by the fire with Mikel and Connor and Lysette had resumed her post near the supply tent.

Connor looked miserable. He had physically fared better than Berta from the attack but if his appearance was any indication, he was gutted all the same. His eyes were red, and his entire bearing looked like he had been crushed, his shoulders slumped and his eyes downcast.

Berta looked questioningly at Fiona, pulling her aside. “Is he alright?”

Fiona pursed her lips. “I told him to stay in the tower during the execution but he knew it was happening.” She looked at him with pity. “He is carrying a great weight. This is not the first time this has happened.”

“What? He’s been attacked before?”

Fiona shook her head sadly. “When we occupied Redcliffe. Several townspeople discovered that Connor was amongst our number. The mob assembled outside the cabin where he was quartered and threatened to burn it to the ground, killing the mages in there with him unless we turned him over.
Connor and the other mages were secured but it did not end well.”

Berta was confused. “But I thought...Connor couldn’t have killed anybody.” She looked over at the timid young man, unable to imagine him hurting anyone.

“Not intentionally, no. But when he was a child, he was possessed by a demon that killed almost half of Redcliffe’s people, both in the castle and the village. It took years to recover.”

Berta felt ill all over again, understanding now that the executed men had been trying to avenge their families. “Does he...remember?”

Fiona shook her head. “No. He has no memory of his possession. But he knows what happened. If he didn’t when he was at Kinloch Hold, he knows from his time in Redcliffe.”

Berta looked over at Connor, seeing him in a new light. He was listening to Mikel as they bent over the swollen knee of a soldier. Mikel showing the apprentice how to heal the injury. Berta wasn’t sure Connor was absorbing the lesson, his face drawn and empty.

“That was a very brave thing you did,” Fiona said quietly.

“And maybe pretty rash, too.” She swallowed hard. “If the Inquisitor decides I’m more trouble than I’m worth...well, I don’t have anywhere to go. I don’t have a chance of getting home without help.”

She scuffed her boot against the cobblestones of the courtyard and sighed.

Fiona gave a small smile. “Then I shall have to help you prove that she should keep you around.”

Berta smiled and gave Fiona’s hand a squeeze. “Thank you.”

They were interrupted by one of the guards limping into the infirmary, leaning on his comrade. Patients began trickling in, the morning’s excitement over and things resuming their usual routine. Toph returned shortly from the barn his hair dripping, wearing Berta’s scrubs, the pants too short for him and the top a bit tight through the shoulders but preferable to his dirty clothes. Berta found his appearance in clothing from her world jarring, somehow making her feel even more alone in Thedas than before. Toph and Connor saw each other and then carefully avoided making eye contact again and Berta, not having anticipated how to handle this, set Toph to chopping wood to keep him busy and away from Connor. The refugee seemed relieved to have a task to perform that kept him away from the mage.

Elan stopped by with a large basket of dried herbs for the infirmary and headed out the gate to deliver more to the lakeside clinic. Berta brought her healer’s kit from her tent and brought it to the makeshift desk, sorting through the herbs for ones she recognized. Two of the jars had been smashed and she dusted the bits of glass and dried herbs from the velvet, wondering where she might find new bottles.

“Connor, why don’t you help me with this.” She gestured to the box and beckoned him over.

“Oh, I don’t know anything about herbal healing...” He looked uncertainly at the neat bundles of dried herbs.

“Well, I didn’t know much when I came here either. So, let me show you what little I do know.” She began sorting through the piles that were familiar to her, pointing out the identifying menthol smell of elfroot and the slightly sticky feel of the never quite dry spindleweed, among others in the stash. She realized that she knew easily half the herbs before her. Not bad for a week and a half of training, she thought.
“So, which one is which?” she asked, holding up garden variety elfroot and its bitter counterpart.

“I’m sorry, what?” He looked at her somewhat glassy eyed.

Berta sighed apologetically. “I’m sorry. You’re not really absorbing any of this, are you?”

“Well, I’m a mage,” he mumbled. “Herbal healing is sort of—”

“No,” Berta interrupted. “I mean today really isn’t a day to expect you to learn new things at all.”

She had learned that not everyone coped with adversity by making themselves so busy they could barely think, let alone feel.

Connor shook his head slowly but wouldn’t meet her eyes. He glanced over toward Toph and swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, Lady Shaw. This is all my fault.”

“No, Connor—” Berta began.

“No, don’t patronize me.” He held up a hand to stop her from interrupting him again. “I saw you and the Grand Enchanter talking. You know what I did. All those people I killed. Everyone wants to tell me it’s not my fault. But it is my fault. Everyone in Redcliffe has lost someone because of me.” He folded his arms across his chest, hugging himself and looking thoroughly miserable. “Everyone is so quick to excuse me, ‘you were a child, Connor,’ ‘you didn’t know what you were doing, Connor.’ Well now I know. I was going to ask to be made tranquil when it came time for my harrowing. I should never be tempted by a demon again.” His voice rose, more angry than sad now, his eyes watering with self-hatred. “Mages are monsters,” he spat. “It would have been better if I’d never been born.”

He shook his head angrily and bolted up the stairs, his fists clenched at his sides. Berta started to follow him, but Fiona grabbed her arm. “No, let me talk to him.” The Enchanter hurried up the stairs after him.

Berta watched her go, feeling guilty. She wished she had taken the time to know more about Connor, wished she hadn’t taken him to the camp, wished she hadn’t let Belinda go ahead of them. She’d made an error in judgement, let herself be lulled into the trust she felt for Mother Giselle and Fiona and she had carelessly forgotten that she was in an unknown world with unknown dangers. It wasn’t even that much of a stretch to realize that a refugee camp might be unsafe; she should have known that from her own past experiences in Africa. She’d been very foolish, and three men had paid the price with their lives and Connor was paying the price with his self-loathing. She had to be more careful.

Meena brought food for lunch, along with Berta’s clean clothes and a fresh chemise. By the time she had changed, Fiona was back, without Connor. She agreed to leave him alone in the mage quarters and told him she’d fetch him when it was time for supper. Berta tasked Meena with finding some proper clothes for Toph while taking his soiled things to be washed. She worked in tandem with Mikel and Fiona, once she returned, sorting through the injured and infirm soldiers. By the time a note arrived from the Commander, carried to her by Jim, summoning her to her office, she had almost managed to convince herself that Cullen had better things to do than deal with her.

“So how mad is he?” Berta asked Jim.

“Yelling mad, not quiet mad.” He shuddered. “I hate quiet mad.”

Berta nodded grimly and left immediately for the Commander’s office, as there was nothing to be gained by delaying the inevitable.
When she arrived, the door was open, and Cullen was conferring with four captains regarding military affairs so Berta loitered outside on the battlements for a few moments until they left. She knocked on the open door and peeked her head inside.

“You wanted to see me, Commander?”

He looked up from his desk as he stood behind it. “Lady Shaw, come in. Close the door behind you.”

Berta cringed inwardly, taking the closed door as a sign that this was not going to be pleasant. She closed it and turned to the desk, standing across from him, mentally bracing herself. He finished scribbling something on the paper in front of him while Berta studied him. He raised a hand to rub the back of his neck, and it suddenly struck her that he looked so much like Jason that it was uncanny. She wondered at herself why she had not thought so before. He lacked Jason’s devil-may-care attitude and sometimes infuriating swagger, and she had never seen Jason’s half-smirk smile that had once made her chest flutter cross the Commander’s face. Cullen’s hair was less wild, and his entire bearing showed the weight he carried. Berta thought other than their appearance the two men could not have been more different. She mentally adjusted her outlook on the Commander. She would not let the memory of some asshole she’d once loved color her interactions with Cullen.

Cullen took a deep breath and scowled at her. “I know that you are not familiar with Thedas, that you do not know our ways, but you must understand how things are here. You can’t go dismissing Templars that are there for your benefit, you can’t just wander off unaccompanied, you can’t come charging into things and make demands.” His voice rose as he continued. “You serve at the pleasure of the Inquisitor and you are dangerously close to making her reconsider that decision.”

Berta pressed her lips together. Her instinct was to fight back when threatened, to use a logical argument to make her case, but she held her tongue. She had a flash of memory from her talk with Cole last night. She could almost feel Cole’s hand on her back, his gentle urging to “let the embers die.” She nodded slowly to the Commander. Survival was preferable to being right.

He looked at her sharply, as if wondering what had been done with Headstrong Berta. “You may be nobility, but you need to leave that behind here. Or perhaps you would understand this better: the Inquisitor is our liege lord and the Inquisition is her sword. Do not cross her.”

Berta nodded again, swallowing slowly. “May I speak, Commander?”

“Briefly.”

She took a deep breath and considered her words. “I am sorry about...everything that transpired in the camp. I made a grave error in judgement and it won’t happen again.” She raised her eyes to look into his. “But I cannot apologize for saving an innocent man’s life. I could not let him be killed, not if I could stop it.”

Cullen stared at her hard, his desire for justice warring across his features with his loyalty to the Inquisitor. He nodded slowly. “I understand. You had no other course available to you. I will endeavor to explain that to the Inquisitor.”

“Thank you.”

There was a long pause while Berta wondered how successful Cullen would be in making the Inquisitor understand. Would the Dalish woman care? Cullen tapped his fingers on his desk. “I am glad that you were not more grievously injured.”
“Fiona did an excellent job of patching me up.” She shifted awkwardly. “If there is nothing else, Commander?”

Cullen nodded. “If you need to take more time to heal...”

“No.” She shook her head dismissively. “My injuries will not interfere with my duties.”

Worry flashed across his face for a moment but respect for her work ethic seemed to win out over concern for her health. “Very well. I’ll expect an organization update tomorrow morning. Dismissed.”

“Yes, Ser.” Berta breathed a sigh of relief and left the Commander’s tower, musing that things could have gone worse.

She stayed in the infirmary until late afternoon, chatting about various organizational ideas with Fiona between patients. The former Grand Enchanter had beaten the bushes, finding every mage that was remotely interested in healing or had some skill, providing Berta a list longer than she had anticipated. Fiona had surmised that it would only be a matter of time before the Inquisitor began training the mages for combat and that perhaps volunteering for the Order of the Red Cross would be the easiest and most honorable way to escape serving on the front lines. Mother Giselle came to look in on Berta as well and brought her lists of supplies, healers, those who wished to learn to be healers and the lists of diagnoses and the estimates of the patients they had seen daily in the clinic. Berta was not entirely surprised to learn that midwifery was a completely separate realm from healing, but that Mother Giselle had thought ahead and brought a list of the known midwives in the camp as well. Toph, it turned out, could read and write both and Fiona was using him as a scribe to record diagnoses and supplies used. Toph looked attentive and Berta was struck by how much he looked like a third-year medical student in the ill-fitting scrubs.

When the shadows grew long, and the patients thinned out, Berta gathered all the lists Fiona and Mother Giselle had compiled and her pen and extra parchment and headed to the library. She found Dorian in his usual alcove.

“I thought you might not appear.” He looked her over bemusedly. “I don’t see any further injury. The Commander must have been kind.” He arched a perfectly groomed eyebrow. “Or perhaps he is developing a soft spot for you.”

Berta scoffed. “I somehow doubt that.”

“Stranger things have been known to happen.” He closed his book crisply and stood from his chair. “What should I teach you today?”

“Nothing, I’m afraid. I’m just here to find a well-lit table in a quiet place so I can get some work done. Cullen expects an update in the morning.”

“Well, then I’ll keep you company,” he suggested brightly. “Where shall we sit?”

Berta found a place at the next table over from his alcove, a torch-lit sconce on the wall providing enough light to see. She pulled up a chair, laid out the lists and a fresh sheet of parchment and started by writing the categories of workers she had at her disposal and writing the names all on one page in two columns, one for current practitioners and one for trainees. Dorian sat across from her, opening his book and beginning reading again as Berta transcribed the names.

“You know,” Dorian interrupted, “if you did want to catch the Commander’s eye, I could help.”

Berta frowned at him. “Seriously? There are so many reasons why that’s a bad idea.” She shook her
head and went back to work. She considered the areas that needed to be staffed. The clinic in the lake side camp was the largest, and rightly so given the number of refugees and then the infirmary in the castle. There probably should be another site set up on the military side of the lake and once the permanent infirmary was finished in the keep, she’d need to think about that too. She wasn’t sure if it would supplant the current infirmary or if she’d need to keep both open.

“You do have considerable assets,” Dorian mused, gesturing vaguely to her chest. “But this needs something.” He waved his hand around his face. “Your lips and eyes need work, I mean beyond the bruises. Something to wake things up a bit.”

Berta looked darkly at him, flaring her nostrils in annoyance. “Dorian, I’m trying to work.”

“You do want to be attractive, don’t you?” Dorian patted her hand. “I’m only trying to help.”

Berta bit down a caustic retort. “My face is just fine the way it is. Not all of us can be as pretty as you.”

“Alas, you are right.” He gazed off into the distance. “It wouldn’t hurt to try a bit, though.”

Berta returned to her parchment. “I’m not listening to this.” She started in on another piece of parchment, looking at the sites and her numbers and thinking of how best to distribute her “troops.” She decided that first thing in the mornings, after Cullen’s morning meeting, she would hold an hour lecture and discussion one day a week. While she thought that she could easily fill hours a day with teaching, that wasn’t reasonable to try to prepare for if she needed to continue to work in a direct care capacity as well.

“And your hair is a bit dull. I’ve heard that Antivan courtesans squeeze lemons into their hair to brighten it and really make it shine.”

Berta slammed her pen down. “Oh my god, Dorian, shut up.”

He looked taken aback. “Really, that’s rude.”

“What’s rude is your constant interruptions and suggestions,” she hissed, grabbing her pen and returning to her parchment. “I’m trying to work.”

“And I’m merely looking out for your welfare.”

Berta set her pen down. “My welfare?”

Dorian huffed. “Yes, is it so outrageous to think that I might be acting in your best interests?”

Berta narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Dorian...what’s going on?”

Dorian looked about conspiratorially, which Berta thought was pointless as almost everything could be heard up and down in the rotunda. She frowned and scooched toward him, resigning herself to hearing him out.

“I overheard Leliana speaking with Josephine.”

“By overheard, you mean you were eavesdropping.”

He ignored her. “Avyanna is furious with you. Josephine was afraid that she would get rid of you after you opposed her at the execution and Leliana was fearful for you too.”

Berta shook her head. “Tell me something I don’t know. What does this have to do with making me
attractive?"

“Well...they went on to discuss various nobles who have sent word that they’re going to make pilgrimages to the Inquisition.”

Berta was beginning to get exasperated. “And that’s a thing that should concern me because...?”

“If Avyanna decides to banish you from the Inquisition, you will need somewhere to go.” He flipped through the pages of his book, trying to be casual. “I thought that...well, the Prince of Starkhaven is coming as is the King of Ferelden. There are several minor nobles from Orlais planning on making appearances as well.”

Berta blinked at him. “And you thought to tart me up, so I could be foisted upon one of them? Good lord, Dorian, have you looked at me? If I’m going to have to rely on having a patron it will be due to my surgical skills, not my face.” She softened her tone, seeing the hurt look on his face. “And not for my ‘considerable assets.’”

“It couldn’t hurt to get the Commander interested in you, too. With a bit of encouragement, I’m sure you could count on him to defend you vociferously.”

Berta blinked at him, nonplussed. “We are not having this conversation.” She returned to her parchment, staring at it, now unable to concentrate. “If my situation is that dire, then I’m a lost cause.” She sighed and began packing up her papers. She clearly was not going to get anything accomplished sharing a table with Dorian.

“Wait, where are you going? I thought you had work to do?”

Berta rolled her eyes at him. “Yes, I do. But I’m conceding defeat. Come on, it’s nearly dinner time anyway.”

They made their way to their table in the great hall. People were shuffling in, making their way to the segregated tables. Berta stopped by the table of workmen and asked Gatsi if he would join her. He looked surprised but went ahead with Dorian to their table near the dais. She looked about and did not see Briony or any of the other templars yet. She made her way through the dining hall, gathering Fiona and Mother Giselle. If each little fiefdom of the Inquisition could have a table then she would have a table of the Red Cross and she would take over the nobles table to do it if she had to.

“Where’s Connor?” Berta asked Fiona as they headed to their table.

“He wished to remain in our quarters for the evening.” Fiona shrugged helplessly. “One of Cullen’s men is keeping an eye on him. I asked our Knight-Captain to leave him alone.”

“And she acquiesced?” Berta was surprised.

“For now.”

They reached the table and Berta settled down at the head facing towards the doors of the great hall. She gestured for Gatsi to sit at her right, Fiona and then Dorian falling in next to him and Mother Giselle across.

“So, tell me of the infirmary plans,” she began.

Gatsi frowned slightly. “We can do this another time, Lady Shaw. There’s no need.”

Berta shook her head firmly. “Don’t trouble yourself. I’m fine. If I needed rest, I would.” Seeing his
uncertain expression, she continued, “Really, I’m fine.”

“Alright,” he said uncertainly. He reached for the roll of parchment that he had placed on the table, unrolling it and letting Berta hold the corners closest to her. “The infirmary will be built along the wall next to the quartermasters offices and the keep barracks...”

Dorian tapped his fingers on the tabletop and inclined his head toward the opposite end of the table once he had Berta’s attention. “Somebody’s in trouble...”

Berta followed his gaze down the row of tables to see Knight-Captain Briony headed towards them with a very cowed looking Belinda in tow. They came to a stop next to Berta at the head of the table and the Knight-Captain looked sternly at her subordinate.

“Go ahead,” Briony said to Belinda.

Much to Berta’s chagrin, Belinda bodily threw herself at Berta’s feet, landing on one knee beside her, her hands clasped together before her as if in prayer. “I beseech you to forgive me, my lady. I failed in my sacred duty to protect you and Connor and I have brought dishonor on the Templar Order.”

Berta looked slowly up at Briony, trying to gauge what would be the appropriate response, but Belinda wasn’t done yet.

“I throw myself on your mercy. I will accept whatever punishment you shall meet out to me.” She stayed with her head bowed.

Berta looked back at Briony again, considering. She was angrier at herself for being so stupid as to wander through the refugee camp without an escort than she was at Belinda for leaving her and Connor alone. As far as Berta knew, the Templar had expected them to stay where they were until she returned. Berta didn’t want the responsibility of determining a punishment, but she feared the harshness of what might be done to Belinda if she let someone else, mainly the Inquisitor, make the decision.

“Knight-Captain,” she said, looking up at Briony stony glare. “What punishment would you give if it were up to you?” she asked, thinking that perhaps deferring to the Knight-Captain’s opinion might gain her some favor with the woman.

“Twenty lashes in the courtyard in front of her brethren,” Briony answered without hesitation.

Berta didn’t care what Thedosian standards were, she would not be ordering corporal punishment for anyone. “I would not see more blood spilled on my behalf,” she said slowly, looking at Briony’s face for a clue as to how inappropriate that attitude that might be.

The Knight-Captain nodded thoughtfully but remained frowning. “Withhold not correction from the errant knight; for if thou beatest her with the lash, thou shalt deliver her soul from the Void,” she said, clearly quoting.

“Please, my lady.” Belinda spoke, her head kept bowed. “I would suffer to be separated from my comrades and sent into the wilderness to do the Inquisition’s bidding. I would exile myself and my dishonor from my brothers and sisters.”

Berta shifted uncomfortably and looked back at Briony who faintly nodded. “Very well, then,” Berta said somewhat stiffly. “Um, do that.”

Belinda bowed her head further. “Thank you, my lady.”
Knight-Captain Briony gestured for her subordinate to stand. “Join your brothers and sisters for one last night. The Inquisitor will set your task before you when next I speak with her.”

Belinda withdrew quickly, returning to the Templars’ table on the far side of the hall. Berta gestured to the seat beside her. “We have saved you a seat.” She smiled more welcomingly than she felt.

“Thank you,” said the Knight-Captain, sitting beside Berta, remaining very upright in her chair, looking uncomfortable.

Before Briony could settle into her seat, she was almost immediately on her feet again, giving an Inquisition salute towards the dais. Berta looked over her shoulder to see the Inquisitor entering the hall through the door to the side of the dais. The conversation dropped to a murmur around the room and the sound of scrapping chairs echoed off the walls as all present came to their feet at the Inquisitor’s presence.

Avyanna paused for just a moment, looking over everyone assembled, before heading to her table. Berta felt ill at ease in the Inquisitor’s presence and was thankful that the elf did not acknowledge her. The Commander was seated beside the Inquisitor and caught Berta’s eye, nodding curtly before turning to speak to Avyanna. Berta looked away quickly, feeling like Cullen would be able to somehow read her previous conversation with Dorian in her gaze, thinking that the man would never look at her with anything but exasperated tolerance if she were lucky. She glanced at Dorian who had seen her looking towards the Commander, and raised his eyebrows as if to say, why not? Berta shook her head at him and turned to Gatsi as everyone took their seats again.

Gatsi unrolled his parchment and began his explanation again. Berta listened respectfully and asked a few questions and made a few requests. In the end, it seemed possible that the infirmary would have something of a running water supply with a direct channel from the spring, courtesy of the infirmary being downhill from the well in the gardens, and a direct outflow to the waste water trough. There would be windows for ventilation and an enclosed wooden stove that would keep the infirmary warm without smoking. Berta insisted on stone flooring and left it to Gatsi to decide how best to fill her request for anchors on the walls on which curtains could be affixed to make moveable dividers between the cots.

That settled, Gatsi returned to his supper with his fellow builders at the far end of the hall, and Berta turned to Briony.

“My lady, before we begin, I must offer my apology.” The Knight-Captain looked pained. “The Templars failed you and Connor. While it was Belinda who was not at her post, I failed you no less as her Captain.” She swallowed, and Berta made to interrupt but Briony held up her hand. “No, let me finish. I have no doubt that you have heard tales of brutal Templars,” here she glanced toward Fiona, who remained stoically listening across the table. “Know that I will not tolerate the abuse of mages at Templar hands. We exist in the Inquisition to protect mages, sometimes even to protect them from themselves, but protect nonetheless.” She dropped her gaze to her plate, not meeting Berta’s eyes. “And then I failed you a second time. Once your attackers were brought to me, I let my shame overtake me. I did not question them as I should have and if it had not been for you, an innocent man would have been put to death.” She breathed slowly and raised her gaze to Berta’s face. “I have asked Commander Cullen to select another to lead the Templars of the Inquisition in my place.”

Berta didn’t know what to say. “Briony, I...” She licked her lips. “Thank you for your apology.”

“I will step down as soon as the Commander names my replacement.” She nodded sincerely. “I would see our templars assigned as you see fit before I need to step aside.”
Berta could not help but feel a little sorry for Briony. She hoped that whoever Cullen named would be at least as reasonable as the current Knight-Captain, but in the meantime, Berta breathed an unexpected sigh of relief. This gave her more control over the deployment of the Templars than she could have hoped. “Very well,” she said. “Let’s make a plan.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Berta, Briony, Fiona and Mother Giselle lingered around the table after supper, Dorian excusing himself to search for some more of ‘that awful Ferelden ale.’ The elven servants cleaned and swept around them while they planned, Berta’s parchment with Mother Giselle’s reports spread out in front of them. Berta took the opportunity to question Fiona and the revered Mother about each of the people they had listed, mage, healer or midwife. Briony agreed to assign Templar protection as Berta requested and they concluded their meeting by agreeing to bring all the members of the Red Cross together in the mage’s camp at noon the next day.

Berta returned to the infirmary. Toph and two patients were bedded down around the infirmary fire for the night and Meena was preparing her bath. Berta thanked her, glad to scrub herself down thoroughly. She cleaned carefully under her nails and changed into a clean chemise after bathing, finger-combing her hair. She pulled her fur lined shawl over her shoulders and slipped into the leather slippers, giving her feet a break from her boots, and sat down to make a few notes for her remarks that she would make tomorrow to all the gathered members of the Red Cross. The candle was low, with little wick remaining and looking in the chest, there were no other candles to be found. Berta looked outside her tent, but Meena was gone, likely turned in for the night, and the infirmary fire had been banked. Berta saw the familiar orange glow of the fire going in the barn again but wasn’t sure she should bother Blackwall again in as many days. She hovered at the entrance of the tent indecisively, but her mind was made up by at that moment the candle snuffing itself out.

She gathered up her pen and parchment and headed toward the barn. She knocked tentatively at the door frame at the entrance. Blackwall was standing in front of a table next to the stairs up to the hayloft, looking over several pieces of wood that were laid out in front of him, planning some sort of project. He smiled at her appearance on his threshold, setting aside his wood and tools.

“My lady, what can I do for you?”

“Let me share your fire again? I’m out of candles and I need a place to work with a little light.”

He gestured to the chair at the end of the table. “Make yourself comfortable.” He picked up a piece of wood and hefted it in his hands. “So long as my chiseling doesn’t bother you.”

“It can’t be any more distracting than Dorian’s constant conversation,” she observed, settling into the chair. She laid out her paper and pen. “This should do nicely.”

Blackwall made an assenting grunt and returned to work, drawing the sharp edge of a wood cutting knife along the large block of wood in an arc. She watched him for a moment, his hands swift and sure as they turned the wood over, drawing a mirror image arc along the other side of the block and then turned it up on end, finger tips tracing the line down either side, his fingers grazing over the grain as he frowned seriously at it. Those hands holding her tight came to mind again and she felt herself flush.

He glanced at her side long. “I thought you had work to do.”

Berta laughed a little at herself, hoping her bruises covered her blush. “I’m just wondering what you’re making.”
He picked up his chisel and started tapping it along the edge of the block of wood, shaving off small chips along the corner. “Just something to keep the hands busy.”

“Hmm, idle hands do the devil’s work,” she mused.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “The devil?”

“Nothing,” she said and turned back to her parchment.

Blackwall, it turned out, was excellent at not talking and Berta finally found her stride, sketching out an outline for her introduction the next day and then moving on to reviewing Mother Giselle’s report on the most common diagnoses that had been encountered in the clinic. Berta could feel her reading pace creeping slower and slower as fatigue from the day and her injuries set in, making it difficult to translate the runes in her head. She sighed and rubbed her eyes, wincing slightly at the remaining tenderness around her left eye.

“You alright, my lady?”

“Oh, yes, just tired. I need to finish reading but my eyes are crossing. Your letters here are different than my language and it takes a lot of concentration.”

He nodded, setting the chisel aside. “Would you have me read it to you?”

Berta was surprised, and started to stammer a refusal, but Blackwall reached out and plucked the parchment from in front of her. He turned and settled on the edge of the table, his knee bent and his other foot on the floor. “What’s this now,” he mumbled to himself. He cleared his throat. “Tuesday. Frost cough, 9 patients. Burns, 6 patients. Foot rot, 7 patients.” He chuckled. “I have to say, Healer, this is gripping. Could give Varric a run for his money.”

“Stop then. I’ll read the rest tomorrow.” She reached for the report to take it away from him.

He laughed and held the paper out of her reach. “Dropsy, 2 patients. Quinsy, 1 patient. Wednesday. Scrophula, 1 patient. Blood poisoning, 2 patients. Mortification, 1 patient.”

Berta conceded and closed her eyes, listening to the report. She quickly lost the meaning of the words, only hearing the gravelly tone, deep and soothing. She felt her breathing slowing as she listened, her head propped up on her hands.

“My lady?”

Berta felt a gentle hand on her shoulder and she opened her eyes. “Oh, I’m sorry, I must have fallen asleep.”

He chuckled, standing next to her, the fire banked behind him and her parchment stacked neatly in front of her with her pen atop it. “You’re sleeping sitting up.”

Berta stretched and yawned, standing and gathering up her papers and pen. He was standing close to her, looking down at her with an expression that she couldn’t quite interpret, a soft look. She swallowed hard and looked away.

“I’d better get to bed. Tomorrow is another day.”

He chuckled at that. “Indeed. It always is.”

“Well, goodnight, Blackwall. Thank you for everything today...and yesterday...I...I can’t thank you
enough.”

He stepped back and gave a formal bow. “My pleasure, my lady.”

She turned away slowly, heading back toward her tent in the infirmary. She glanced back at him as she left the barn. He hadn’t moved, watching her go. She smiled again and hustled back to her tent through the cold night air, slipping out of her shoes, climbing under the covers on her cot. She lay awake a long time, staring up into the darkness, thinking, unbidden, of rough hands and gentle blue eyes.
We never see other people anyway, only the monsters we make of them.

-Colson Whitehead

Musical Accompaniment:

“Man or a Monster” – Sam Tinnesz, Zayde Wolf

“Pie Jesu” – Requiem – Andrew Lloyd Webber

It’s the twelfth day of Christmas, Berta mused as she gazed out the window of Commander Cullen’s office into the spitting snow and clouds that hung low over the keep, completely obscuring the valley and camp below. At home she would be taking down her tree and finishing writing thank you notes and probably making a deal with herself to go to gym more often but still using the last of the eggnog to make one final holiday latte. Instead, she was listening to Briony self-flagellate in front of Cullen while he denied her request to resign as the Knight-Captain of the Templars.

“Enough,” Cullen said brusquely. “Your objections have been duly noted and as your Commander, I order you to faithfully execute your duty.”

Briony clamped her jaw shut, her lips tightening into a frown, but she said nothing else.

Cullen growled quietly and turned his attention to Berta. “Update?”

Berta briskly placed the first page of her plan for the Order of the Red Cross on the desk before him.

“First, our four sites of operations: The Clinic is the site in the refugee camp that Mother Giselle has set up.” She glanced to the priestess who inclined her head in return. “Second, we will establish another site on the military side of the valley, to be designated Sick Bay. This will be set up near the base of the road to the keep, convenient to the training grounds. Third, Gatsi is constructing the permanent building in the keep, the Hospital. I’ve spoken with him about requirements for this site,” she said in answer to Cullen’s questioning look. “This site will be primarily used for patients who need to be closely monitored and kept overnight and will also have an enclosed treatment area. The Infirmary will remain and will continue to be used to care for the health needs of the everyone in the keep. When the weather is inclement, we can temporarily move operations to the Hospital, but I think there will be enough need to justify keeping the two sites separate.”

Cullen nodded thoughtfully as she continued. “In the garden cloister, we’re setting up the Pharmacy and Dispensary to be close to the medicinal plants that are being cultivated there and also to act as a processing station for any herbs harvested and brought back to Skyhold. Once the still arrives from Denerim, we’ll have a secondary work area for the apothecaries in the Herald’s Rest.”

“Grumpy old Cabot agreed to that, did he?” Cullen smirked, somewhat surprised.

Berta shrugged sheepishly thinking of how the bartender had relented early that morning when she finally lost her patience and called him a sudoriferous marplot. “I didn’t give him much of a choice.”
Cullen gave her a look that said that he was not surprised. “And your personnel?”

Berta gave him the second sheet of parchment from her stack. “We have a meeting today of all the personnel in the Order in the mages’ camp at noon. We have five personnel classes amongst the Order: the mages, the healers and midwives, the orderlies, the apothecaries and alchemists, and the protectors.”

Cullen raised his eyebrows at the last category. Berta glanced at Briony, who nodded at her to continue. “While most of the protectors will be Templars, I wish to make it clear that when they are working with the Order of the Red Cross, their role is to protect, and they do not answer to the Chantry, but to the Inquisition. And I don’t want the mages put at risk by inducing them to attempt to avoid Templar supervision. ‘Protectors’ are more neutral.” Berta, Fiona, Mother Giselle and Briony had gone over this at length at dinner the night before, arguing back and forth about mage oversight and Templar zealotry before coming to a compromise. Berta just hoped that Fiona and Briony would be on speaking terms again by supper tonight.

Cullen frowned pensively, his eyes flashing from Mother Giselle to Briony and back. “I’ll allow it,” he said decisively, asserting his control over military matters.

“Thank you,” she said as graciously as possible and continued. “There will be trainees in the first four divisions as well. Each division will have a head that reports to me. Enchanter Fiona will head the mages, Seria of Redcliffe will head the Healers and Midwives, Elan Ve’mal the Apothecaries and Alchemists and Mother Giselle will oversee the Orderlies. The staff will be organized in teams. Each team will consist of a mage, a healer or midwife and a protector. The apothecaries and orderlies will be assigned by site.” She took a deep breath. “I could go over the rotations and lecture plans but I’m assuming I don’t need to burden you with every detail.”

“Quite,” Cullen replied. “You appear to have made an excellent start. To work, then,” he ordered to all three women. He made to hand Berta’s papers back to her.

“Those are for you,” Berta explained. “I made copies.”

“Oh, thank you.” Cullen seemed disarmed and placed the pages in one of the stacks on his desk.

“You’re welcome.” Berta inclined her head and withdrew from Cullen’s office, stopping to wrap her wool shawl more tightly around her shoulders against the snow.

Briony stood next to her and frowned up at the low clouds. “I’ll see you both at the mages’ camp at noon.” She headed off along the battlements towards the Templar barracks.

Mother Giselle folded her hands up into her sleeves in front of her like a muff, squinting into the snow. “You two seem to be getting along better.”

Berta shrugged. “Well, I trust Fiona’s motives more than Briony’s but-”

“No, I mean the Commander.” The priestess had a slight smile on her face.

“Well, he’s being more reasonable. If he’s not being pigheaded, why shouldn’t we get along?”

Mother Giselle nodded sagely. “Hmm, that must be it. I will see you later.” She headed off down the stairs.

Berta lingered for a moment on the battlements, looking down over the valley, the valley floor lost in the swirling haze of snowflakes. She closed her eyes, letting the cold air bathe her still swollen face, feeling the pricks of snowflakes landing on her cheeks. No one she had run into seemed alarmed at
her appearance so maybe she looked better, but maybe everyone she had seen had just remembered her yesterday when it was worse. She hoped the bruises would fade quickly.

“Berta!”

Berta opened her eyes to see Mikel hustling towards her along the battlements, his robes flapping around his legs in his haste, his brow pinched with worry. “Enchanter Fiona needs you in the mages’ tower right away.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Just come quickly.” Mikel beckoned. “Quickly.”

Berta followed Mikel along the wall, through the next dilapidated tower and up the steps to the upper battlements. She glanced at the balcony, noting that the blood had been scrubbed away and imagining the elven servants whose job it was to clean up after the Inquisitor’s kills. She averted her eyes, trying not to think about the death she had witnessed there the day before.

“Hurry,” Mikel said, leading her through the corner tower and onto the other arm of the battlements where Berta had not been before. Mikel hustled ahead of her, the light snow swirling around his feet as he hurried along the stones. Berta almost ran to keep up, his stride longer than hers, as the mage led her up another flight of steps to the last tower. He opened the door calling, “I found her, Enchanter!”

Berta stepped through the door, temporarily blinded by the darkness of the tower against the snow outside. Fiona grabbed her hand, pulling her to a table in the center of the room, Berta’s eyes slowly adjusting to the dim interior.

“Can you breathe life back into him, like you did for Alia?” Fiona pleaded. The stone at the top of her staff began to glow and cast a cold white light over all assembled.

Around the periphery of the room were Templars and mages, standing in twos and threes, everyone quiet. Connor lay supine on the table, motionless, his face swollen and purple, the rope loosened but still hanging around his neck, the end of it trailing off the table to the floor. Berta reached for his wrist, knowing there was no hope even before she found him pulseless and ice cold, his fingers rigid. She dropped her hand uselessly.

“It’s too late,” she said quietly. “There’s nothing I can do.” She could hear Fiona’s breathing at her shoulder and someone in the room started to cry. “Who found him?”

Fiona took a deep breath. “Petra.”

The Enchanter turned to look at a thin faced, red headed, pretty, female mage who was trying not to look at the body. “I woke up early and was going to read where I could get some light. He was hanging from the top of the ladder to the roof.”

“How could this happen?” barked Briony. She grabbed the hilt of her sword as if she thought there was something in the room she could fight.

Fiona’s lip curled back. “How could this happen?” she hissed. “You ask me that? You who preach about protection, you-”

“You cannot blame me for this, mage.” The Templars pulled their ranks behind their Knight-Captain.

“Can’t I?” Fiona grabbed her staff tightly, pointing the glowing stone towards the Templar captain.
“Every mage death is on your head, Templar.”

Briony growled. “He would be alive if you let us patrol the tower. You’re the one who banished us to the first floor.”

Mikel stepped behind his Grand Enchanter, lightning crackling around his fist as he gripped his staff. Lysette threw her hand out toward the mages, her other hand on the hilt of her sword, ready to attack or defend at a moment’s notice.

Berta stepped between them. “Stop it, all of you.” She held her hands out to keep the peace. “Mikel, please lead the mages upstairs.” Mikel glanced at his Grand Enchanter for confirmation and, seeing Fiona’s slight nod, beckoned to the other mages in attendance to head upstairs. They filed slowly upwards, their feet scraping on the wood in the quiet.

Berta looked over the Templars, honing in on a familiar face she thought she could count on to follow her orders. ‘Belinda, please find Mother Giselle and let her know that she is needed in the mages’ tower right away.” Belinda looked to her captain. Briony jerked her chin toward the door and Belinda hustled out, her armor clanking in the silence.

Berta turned to the Knight-Captain. “Now, I think it would be best if the Templars vacated the tower for the time being. And if you would please report this tragedy to Commander Cullen.”

The Knight-Captain glowered and did not move. “The Templars have a right to investigate what happened here.”

Berta took a step toward the other woman, leaning down to say softly, “I don’t want anyone saying that the Templars did this.”

Briony looked from Berta to Fiona and back, weighing her words. “Is that a threat?”

“More of a justified concern.” Berta watched Briony process her words. “Please leave. I want no violence here.”

Briony licked her lips, looking unhappy. “Very well. Brothers and sisters, with me.” The Templars left the tower quickly letting the door slam behind them.

As soon as they had gone, Berta rounded on Fiona, speaking in a whisper so the mages upstairs wouldn’t hear. “What the hell happened, Fiona? Was no one watching him?” And then even more quietly, “The Templars didn’t do this, did they?”

Fiona shook her head. “No. The Knight-Captain and her Templars sleep down here. The mages sleep upstairs. I sleep across the top of the stairs and place a barrier spell at night to discourage anyone from going down or coming up. The third floor we keep for study and above that is the roof. Petra awoke all of us this morning with screaming when she found him.”

“When did he do this?”

Fiona frowned. “He did not come to dinner last night, but Captain Rylen stayed with him. He was very quiet and withdrawn when we returned from the great hall. He went to bed at the same time as the rest of us. He must have awoken later and...” She trailed off and looked back at the young man’s body. “It’s such a waste.”

Berta looked around and grabbed a blanket off one of the bed rolls and covered Connor with it, pulling it up over his swollen features. She thought of the Arl. “Someone will need to let his uncle know.”
“I will find Josephine and—”

“No, I’ll tell her. Would you go upstairs and reassure everyone? I’m sure they’re shaken up.” Berta found a stool and sat down heavily. “I’ll wait for Mother Giselle.”

Fiona nodded somberly and headed up the stairs. Berta could hear quiet voices from above and someone crying. Mother Giselle arrived soon after, presumably informed by Belinda what had taken place because she brought two Inquisition soldiers and two robed chantry sisters with her, one an older woman, her hair shot with gray, but the other a young woman with short brown hair and light eyes who looked shocked at Connor’s body and began shaking as she helped replace the rough woolen blanket with a light linen cloth. She dropped the cloth and turned away from the table, her hands flying over her face as she began to cry.

“I can’t, Mother Giselle, I just can’t!”

Mother Giselle touched the girl’s back lightly. “Flissa, we must care for all the Maker’s children, even in death. Don’t cry. He is with the Maker now.”

The girl sniffled and turned back to her duty, trying to be brave. She looked at Berta and said, “Oh!”

Berta looked uncertainly at the sister, unsure at the source of her surprise.

The girl shook her head. “I’m sorry, my lady. I...I’m glad that...well, my clothes look well on you.” She dropped an awkward curtsy and helped the older sister cover the body with the cloth and struggling with the soldiers to bear the body away, taking it out of the tower and into the snow. Berta watched them go, wondering at how she ended up with Flissa’s clothes. Perhaps she would ask Josephine later.

Mother Giselle lingered behind. “This is most unfortunate.”

“That’s an understatement. What happens now? Is there a funeral or...?”

“Flissa and Marguerite will prepare the body. We have been burning funeral pyres below the lake in the valley. There were many immediately after Haven.” She made to head toward the door. “We will set his pyre this morning before your meeting with the Order. His ashes will be sent to his uncle in Redcliffe.”

Berta nodded soberly. “Isn’t that a little fast? Isn’t there some kind of mourning period...”

“A funeral pyre must be lit before dark. ‘The soul shall follow the light of Andraste to the Maker’s side,’” she quoted.

Berta looked at the priestess. “You will have to explain about Andraste to me some time.”

Mother Giselle smiled her calm and soothing smile. “It would be my honor to bring knowledge of our holy lady to you.”

Berta grimaced internally, more interested in understanding the nuts and bolts of the religion than opening herself up to the priestess’s full-blown efforts at conversion. “Well, I need to find Lady Montilyet and get to the Infirmary,” she said, feeling callous even as she said it. Life moved on quickly, leaving the dead behind in its wake.

“I will speak to his compatriots and give what comfort I can.”

“They’re all upstairs,” Berta indicated. Mother Giselle headed up the stairs as Berta left to return to
the infirmary.

On exiting the tower, Berta saw another set of stairs that she had not been down before, but it appeared to be a faster route than backtracking along the battlements and crossing to the great hall to find Lady Montilyet. She hoped Josephine was in her office. The stairs led down into the cloister surrounding the garden and Berta cut across, waving to Elan and Adan who were setting up the Pharmacy in the cloister. Clemence and Owain were with them, the first tranquil that Berta had met, their eerie calm and dispassion unsettling when one thought of what they used to be. Berta felt guilty utilizing any of the tranquil at all, feeling that treating them as beasts of burden or human encyclopedias was disrespectful but no one else had any such hesitation, and the tranquil themselves would hardly protest. Their presence made many of the mages understandably uneasy, but Elan and Adan were happy to accept their assistance.

Berta walked over to them, surveying the state of things. “Good morning.”

“Morning, healer,” Adan greeted her gruffly. “Come to check up on us?”

“I happened to be walking by,” Berta replied placidly.

“Thank you for all the supplies,” Elan said happily. She was laying out baskets along the tables pushed back against the wall of the cloister. Clemence and Owain were stringing thin rope across the alcove and Berta could see various herbs already hung to dry along the first line.

“The supplies were needed, yes,” murmured Owain, his smooth flat voice giving Berta the chills.

Adan scratched at his beard. “We could use some more quills, ink and parchment. I lost all my books in the fire at Haven and I’m having Clemence write out all the recipes I can remember. His handwriting is neater than mine.”

“Your handwriting is unacceptable for published works,” Clemence observed flatly.

“Where are your other herbalists?” Berta asked, suppressing a chuckle, before Adan could light into Clemence.

Elan brushed her hands off on her skirt and stood surveying the wooden crates of supplies stacked along the wall. “Henley went down to the camp to see if he can find anyone with any glass blowing skill. We’re going to need bottles a plenty. And Solivitis is in the barracks training the scouts to identify rashvine nettle and spindlewed. Pray to the Maker that the scouts have enough sense to already know elfroot when they see it.”

Berta nodded. “I’ll leave you to it then. Let me know if you need anything else and I’ll let the quartermaster know about the writing materials.”

Elan and Adan murmured distracted goodbyes as they kept at their work. Berta headed off toward the great hall and nearly collided with Josephine as she was coming into the cloister.

“Oh, Lady Shaw. I was hoping to speak with you.” The ambassador indicated one of the stone benches in the cloister. “If you have a moment.”

Berta nodded and sat beside the ambassador. “I have sad news, Lady Montilyet, Connor-”

“Yes, most unfortunate.” Josephine frowned delicately. Seeing the confusion on Berta’s face, she continued. “Mother Giselle sent Belinda to inform me.” She sighed and shook her head sadly. “Not only is the loss of a young man in his prime tragic, but his uncle’s displeasure will no doubt cause problems for the Inquisition in Ferelden as well.”
Berta’s mouth twisted in distaste. Of course, there would be a diplomatic angle to consider regarding Connor’s death. “I’m guessing there will be hell to pay.”

Josephine cocked her head. “I’m not sure I know what that means, but yes, the Arl will be angry and will likely blame the Inquisition. The Inquisitor will write to him immediately but a word from you would be helpful.”

“Me? I hardly knew Connor.”

“Yes, but you are the leader of the Order of the Red Cross. He was one of your mages. And you had a certain rapport with the Arl when he was here.” She looked at Berta hopefully.

Berta sighed. “I can write something. You need to proofread it for me. I don’t want to make any mistakes with your written language.”

“Thank you.” She paused and folded her hands in her lap. “And there is one other item...you should be prepared to say a few words at Connor’s funeral.”

Berta looked sharply at the ambassador. “Again, I hardly knew Connor best. Perhaps Fiona-”

Josephine pressed her lips together. “The former Grand Enchanter may have things to say that are a bit too...inflammatory. You are more neutral.” She smiled, looking to Berta to understand her meaning.

Berta nodded slowly. She thought she could trust Fiona to not fan the flames, but the woman was a revolutionary after all and the temptation of a public platform coupled with her raw emotions might be too much to pass up. Maybe it was better this way. “Alright. I’ll prepare something. When do you need my letter to the Arl?”

“As soon as you can. I will...the Inquisitor’s letter will be ready shortly. She and her companions are leaving for Crestwood after the funeral.”

“The Inquisitor will be there?” Berta was surprised the leader of the Inquisition would attend the funeral of an apprentice.

“Connor may not have been able to inherit his father’s title, but he was still a member of one of Ferelden’s most important noble families. His aunt was Queen before she died and his father, Eamon, placed the current king on the throne.”

"Is there anyone else I should write to?"

Josephine shook her head. "His father lives in Denerim now but is quite old and infirm. I understand from the Arl that Eamon is often confused and may not even remember his son. Connor's mother, Lady Isolde, passed away several years ago giving birth to Connor's sister, Rowan. She is being raised in Redcliffe by the Arl. The girl has never met her brother. I'm sure Teagan will tell her about him in time."

"Alright," Berta said, standing. "I'll need to get to it."

Josephine stood as well. "If you have some time this evening, after dinner I am playing cards with Leliana and Vivienne. We could use a fourth."

Berta was inclined to decline as she generally detested table top games and felt similarly about the Court Enchanter but advancing a friendship with Josephine was probably advantageous. She tried to look pleased. "I'd love to," she lied.
Josephine smiled brightly. "Come to my study after dinner. Vivienne has even promised to produce an Orlesian digestif for us to enjoy."

"Sounds lovely." Berta smiled again and the two of them headed back into the great hall before going their separate ways, Josephine back to her office and Berta to the infirmary.

Toph and Meena were there, Toph adding more wood to the fire, getting the embers going and Meena rolling up the bedrolls and placing them in the supply tent to keep them dry. She picked up the stools and stashed them under the makeshift desk, out of the flurries. Meena then left for the kitchens and laundry, returning quickly with breakfast and tea and Toph’s clean clothing. Berta told the young man he could change in her tent. She tasked Meena with taking a note to the quartermaster to dispense more parchment, ink and quills to the Pharmacy. When Toph poked his head out, Berta brought the breakfast into the tent, setting it on the small table and asking him to join her. She grabbed one of the stools and bade him sit across from her after she lit a candle. She left the flaps to her tent tied wide open so there would be no confusion as to her intentions, candlelit breakfast or no.

Berta took a deep breath and looked at the young man sitting somewhat awkwardly on the too-low stool for the table. She handed him the jam and a knife, indicating that half of the bread on the tray was his. “So... I don’t really know what the Inquisitor’s intention is regarding you,” she began.

Toph looked at her carefully. “I guess to just be rid of me and make me your problem, m’lady.” Berta smiled ruefully, thinking that the young man had a better read of the Inquisitor than most. “But I won’t be a problem,” he added quickly. “I don’t want to make any trouble for anyone, least of all for myself or you- you saved my life.” He rubbed his hands on his pants nervously. “And don’t be worrying about me committing any ‘crimes,’ m’lady. That was my brother, not me. I’ll do whatever you set me to.”

Berta was a bit surprised at his rush of verbiage, having heard him speak just a few words before this. She was glad he seemed to be finding his voice. “Well, thank you for your reassurances. Though in truth, I wasn’t worried.”

Toph took a deep breath, seeming to be relieved that Berta wasn’t distrustful of him. “Thank you, m’lady.”

“So what skills do you have, Toph?”

“Skills, m’lady?”

“Well, you can read and write, yes?”

“Yes, m’lady. My father ran the chandlery in Redcliffe for all the fishermen on the wharf. He made sure that Tav and I both knew our letters.” He frowned, perhaps at the memory of his father or his brother. “Tav took it over after Da died but he wasn’t as good with numbers and after two years we had to sell it. Mum took in washing and mending, so I helped with that. But I’m smart and strong, m’lady. I can do whatever you want me to do.”

Berta looked at him closely, taking in his tousled blond hair and earnest blue eyes before he looked away to studiously examine his hands in his lap. His life sounded hard, but maybe no better or worse than most Fereldens’. “If you had a choice, what would you like to do?”

He looked up at her with surprise. “What would I like to do?”

Berta nodded, amused at his shock. “Yes, what would you prefer to do? I can’t promise anything if you want to join the Inquisition’s army, but I could ask the Commander. If there’s something in our
new order of healers—"

“I’d like to be an apothecary,” he said with certainty. “I’m no good at fighting.”

“What makes you say that? About wanting to be an apothecary, I mean.”

He took a bit of bread and toyed with it, smearing it with jam. “The apothecary in Redcliffe. He had so many books and little bottles and it was all orderly. He could almost make magic in his bottles, he could. It was...it was my favorite place. I always volunteered to go any time mum had an errand to run there.”

Berta took the knife and covered her own bread with the berry jam and took a bite, chewing thoughtfully. “Well, that I can do. After breakfast, you’ll go work with Elan Ve’mal, the head of the Apothecaries and Herbalists. You’ll be their first trainee.”

He brightened at this considerably and tucked into his breakfast so happily that Berta felt bad about giving him the next news. “Toph, I do need to let you know that Connor, the mage your brother attacked, died this morning. He took his own life.”

Toph stopped chewing and swallowed but reacted less strongly than Berta thought he might. He shrugged. “That happens sometimes, m’lady. Used to see that from time to time in Redcliffe. Mage doesn’t want to take the boat to the tower after being caught. They wait until they’re far enough out from shore and jump over the side. And those Templars in their heavy armor aren’t jumping in after them. I guess it’s pretty bad in the towers to be worse than drowning.”

Berta felt a wave of pity, thinking of mages who would rather die than let themselves be locked up for the rest of their lives. “I see. I thought you should know.”

Toph nodded. “I’ll make myself scarce, m’lady. I won’t cause any more trouble, I swear.”

Berta gave him an encouraging smile. “Thank you, Toph, but I don’t think you were the one causing any trouble to begin with. Let me write a note to Mistress Ve’mal for you and then you can be on your way.”

The snow seemed to have a suppressing effect on the flow of patients to the infirmary and Berta found herself with plenty of time to write a note to Elan and send Toph to report to her, and, after Fiona and Mikel arrived, both looking somber, sketch out a few notes for herself for what to say at the funeral. She didn’t know how Andrastianism looked on suicide but the fact that there was to be a funeral that followed usual custom as well as Mother Giselle’s words to Flissa left Berta under the impression that there was no taboo surrounding suicide as there was in Christianity. To be on the safe side, she decided not to mention his mode of death. She began work on her letter to the Arl as well.

Arl Teagan,

I hardly know what to write. I’m sure the Inquisitor has conveyed the Inquisition’s sorrow over your nephew’s loss. I can only add my personal regret at the loss of a man so young and with so much potential. He was just beginning his work with us in the corps of healers and magi and I had high hopes for him. I understand from Lady Montilyet that Connor’s mother has passed away and his father is in ill health in Denerim but that his sister is in your care. I hope when she is older, she may know that her brother sought to use his talents for the betterment of all.

Sincerely,
Berta reread the letter several times before taking a fresh piece of parchment and painstakingly transcribing the letter into Thedosian runes. She rolled the parchment up and gave it to Meena with instructions to take it to Lady Montilyet and to wait for corrections if the letter was found to be lacking in any way. There still were no patients needing tending but four of Cullen’s soldiers arrived with the tarps that Berta had requisitioned after observing the set up at the lake side clinic and the infirmary became a mess of ladders and axes and rope and anchors as they cut down the trees and anchored the tarps to the high stone wall behind the infirmary area to create a larger covered space. Gatsi’s surveyors were busy in the courtyard examining the stones to improve the drainage and another crew of workmen came to clear away all the lumber by the stairs up to the great hall. Things were still in the messier-before-they-get-better stage when Mother Giselle arrived with several Chantry sisters bearing the litter with Connor’s draped body. There was a line of mages and Templars behind them, all the residents of the mage tower in the keep, Berta assumed.

Mother Giselle came up to Berta. “It’s time.”

Berta nodded, gathering all her notes from her tent and putting them in her bag before lifting the strap over her head and wrapping herself in her wool cloak. “Is there anyone else we’re waiting for?”

Mother Giselle looked to the top of the stairs and Berta turned to follow her gaze to see Josephine, Leliana, Vivienne and Dorian coming down to join them. The mages were adorned in high collared fur wraps, Vivienne in frosted gray and Dorian in a tawny brown spotted with black. Both mages had their staves. Josephine was bundled in a fine navy cloak drawn up to her shoulder with an elaborate gold brooch and navy gloves. Leliana was in her usual hooded cloak.

Mother Giselle led the way out of the keep and across the causeway. The outer gate was unlocked, and the entire procession began its snaking progress down the switchbacks to the camp. The remaining mages from the mages’ camp fell in with them and were joined by another two companies of Templars. The training soldiers stopped their exercises as the procession passed and Berta was struck at the stark reality of their grave faces, men and women, most of whom were not much older than Connor had been. Cassandra bowed her head and gave an Inquisition salute as they passed, and the soldiers followed her lead, a hundred heads bowed in unison, their fists thudding against their breastplates. The procession made its way through the refugee camp, many of the refugees stopping to watch their progress. Several children seemed to think it might be some sort of parade before their parents grabbed them and shushed them. The healers and orderlies from the Clinic joined the procession as they passed. The line progressed beyond the end of the camp, following the path beyond the Clinic. The valley dropped steeply downward beyond the guard tower and lake side camp, the road becoming more of a rough path.

A hundred yards beyond the guard tower there was a large clearing to the right of the path, just above a steep drop off where the creek leading from the lake cascaded over the rocks and disappeared into the forest of evergreens beyond. In the center of the clearing a pyre was built of crossed logs and beyond, on the far side of the clearing a tent was erected with the Inquisition banner flying from a post beside it. In front of the tent, the Inquisitor stood, conferring with Blackwall, Varric and Solas. Marian was there as well, an impossibly huge broadsword strapped across her back and a dark look on her face, her arms folded across her chest as she watched the progress of the funeral procession. Cullen had also already arrived, his cloak drawn up around his
neck against the snow, standing slightly behind the Inquisitor’s group. An Inquisition soldier stood beyond the tent, holding the reins on five horses, saddled and bridled with packs on their flanks. The edge of the clearing was littered with blackened logs and cinders, the remains of numerous other pyres.

Mother Giselle moved to stand along one side and gestured for the chantry sisters to lay the litter in place. The Inquisitor came to stand at the head of the pyre, her companions fanning out behind and beside her like an honor guard, flanking her as if she needed protection. She was dressed in her full armor, the silver scales covering the jet black of her padded jacket beneath and her helm under her arm. Her face was as stern and stoic as Berta had ever seen it. Leliana moved to stand beside Cullen, whispering something to him that Berta couldn’t hear. Cullen nodded and glanced toward Berta, his face uncertain.

Josephine lightly steered Berta by the elbow to the side of pyre, bringing her to the front of the encircling crowd, directly across from Mother Giselle, before leaving her with an encouraging smile, heading to the side of the Inquisitor. Vivienne followed the ambassador, but Dorian remained at Berta’s right shoulder, giving her a brief, but encouraging nod. The mages, healers and Templars formed a circle around the pyre, but gave the Inquisitor and her companions space, an invisible barrier between the rank and file and Inquisition’s leadership. Mother Giselle looked around the circle and raised her hands to the sky. Everyone quieted.

“In the name of Andraste, we pray,” Mother Giselle’s intoned. “Andraste, guide us.”

“Andraste, guide us,” the assembled replied.

“Andraste, bless me.”

“Andraste, bless me,” the gathering responded. Berta glanced at the Inquisitor and saw that she spoke the words as well.

“‘For as the Maker made us from earth and the fire of creation, so shall we be purified by flame and return to ashes. As the sun leaves the sky, the soul leaves the body. The soul shall follow the light of Andraste to the Maker’s side.’ Andraste, guide him.”

“Andraste, guide him,” the crowd murmured.

Mother Giselle folded her hands before her and nodded to Berta.

Berta took a step forward and unfolded the parchment in her hand and cleared her throat. She felt a frisson of fear, thinking she should have spent more time asking Josephine questions about what was expected and making sure she wasn’t breaking any rules, unspoken or otherwise. Well, it was too late now. She took a deep breath, fingering the parchment with her notes.

“I didn’t know Connor Guerrin well. I had only known him a short time, but I know his story. I know he was mage, I know he was possessed by a demon as a child, I know he spent the rest of his life in a Circle tower, I know he blamed himself for the deaths of many in Redcliffe, I know that he thought that he was a monster. Those were his last words to me: mages are monsters. But I will tell you that is not true.”

She paused and looked up from her paper, her eyes meeting Fiona’s across the pyre, standing behind Mother Giselle, her face pale and pained.

Berta took a shaky breath and continued. “Mages are not monsters. Mages are people. And like any people they may do evil or they may do good, they are capable of kindness and capable of cruelty. In
this they are no different than other humans, elves, dwarves or Qunari. They are no different than templars or warriors or herbalists or healers.”

Berta glanced toward the Inquisitor. She was looking at Berta intently, listening, her face losing some of its hardness. Cullen was faintly frowning behind her shoulder. She found Blackwall’s eyes and she could swear she saw a glimmer of admiration there. She looked away quickly, back to her parchment.

“In my world, we don’t have mages, and there is still plenty of evil. We don’t have magic, but we have found even more ridiculous reasons for prejudice. In this Inquisition, there are mages and Templars, elves and Qunari, dwarves and humans, Fereldans, Orlesians, Dalish and Nevarrans. I count among us men and women of all descriptions.” She looked at Connor’s shrouded face. “Some are scarred by their pasts, but here we can stand as equals before our Inquisitor.

“In this new Order of the Red Cross, we have a chance to prove this. We have a chance to prove that we are better than our baser instincts, better than the fear of others who are different from us.” She looked around the circle of mourners, the faces looking at her with curiosity. “That is what I would ask of you. I ask you to look at the people around you and see them as they are: simply people. Don’t see a mage or an elf or a Templar. See a person. I wish I could have shown Connor that before he left this world. Mages are not monsters, no more than any of us are. Let us remember that and go forward, showing that people can heal and that our people can come together.”

Berta moved back to stand by Dorian. She risked a glance at the mage’s face. His mouth was twisted into a smile, but he looked like he was trying to hide it. Mother Giselle came forward and began to sing. Her voice was clear and pleasant as it rang across the clearing, her face turned up to the heavens as the scattered snowflakes swirled around her like motes of light.

“*My Maker, know my heart:*

*Take from me a life of sorrow.*

*Lift me from a world of pain.*

*Judge me worthy of Your endless pride.*


*My Creator, judge me whole:*

*Find me well within Your grace.*

*Touch me with fire that I be cleansed.*

*Tell me I have sung to Your approval.***

Two soldiers came forward, one holding a torch, while the other fumbled with a flint to light it. Fiona stepped forward next to them, resting her hand on the soldier’s shoulder who held the torch. He looked at her uncertainly. Fiona brushed past him, closing her eyes and holding her hand out to the pyre. Flames began to flicker from the wood before her, licking up the logs of the pyre, sparking the tinder packed loosely between the timbers. Mikel stepped forward to join his Enchanter, his hand extended, spreading the flames further. From all around the circle, mages came forward, adding their
fire to the flames consuming the pyre and their fallen comrade. Mother Giselle's voice faltered but then she recovered and kept singing.

“O Maker, hear my cry:
Seat me by Your side in death.
Make me one within Your glory.
And let the world once more see Your favor.
For You are the fire at the heart of the world,
And comfort is only Yours to give.”

Mother Giselle fell silent. One of the sisters came forward with a bouquet of gray-brown twigs and began to break sprigs from the stems, passing a bit to each person around the circle. Berta accepted the bit of herb, fingerprinting the stiff, papery stem, wondering at the significance. Dorian gave Berta's shoulder a nudge as he slipped past her to toss his twig into the flames.

“Felandaris,” he said quietly. “For remembrance.”

Mother Giselle and the sisters threw their sprigs into the fire and left the clearing heading back toward the lake side camp and the keep. The mourners around the fire began to toss in their sprigs of Felandaris before dispersing. The herb burned, sending dark gray threads of smoke up to mingle among the snowflakes dancing high above the clearing. The herb released a strong perfume as it burned, something like frankincense and rosemary. Berta tossed her twig onto the fire and backed away, the flames growing hot. She kept her gaze on her feet, not wanting to see the fire consuming Connor's remains.

The mages and Templars began to head back toward the lake side camp, an uneasy truce permeating their ranks. Berta saw Lysette extend a hand to Mikel. He looked at her hand and then her face, open and free of judgement. Mikel placed his hand in hers, giving it a squeeze before letting go to walk beside her up the path.

Berta lingered uncertainly at the edge of the clearing not sure of the post-funeral protocol. She slowly walked away, until she reached the path back towards Skyhold. Dorian caught up with her.

“So, what happens now?” Berta asked.

Dorian glanced back toward the two Inquisition soldiers who remained on either side of the pyre. “The soldiers will keep watch until the body is burned and then gather the ashes to be delivered to Redcliffe.” He tightened his furs around his neck, shivering. “That was well said. Though, referencing the Canticle of Shartan might have been laying it on a bit thick for our Inquisitor.” He smirked at her.

"The Canticle of what?"

"Shartan. Don't tell me you didn't do that on purpose." He arched an eyebrow questioningly. "Was it Mother Hen's suggestion?"
Before Berta could ask for clarification, Josephine came up to them, taking Berta's hand and smiling softly. "Well spoken, my lady. If I may, I will have one of the tranquil transcribe your words and include them with your letter to the Arl. I think it may bring him some comfort."

"Whatever you think is best, of course."

“This evening then,” she said, excusing herself to speak with the Inquisitor. Cullen came up beside them as the ambassador left and took Berta's hand and offered her a shallow bow. "Well spoken, Lady Shaw." He looked pensive. "You have given me much to think on." His golden eyes bore a softness in them when he looked at her than she had never seen before. Berta was left temporarily speechless, shifting uncomfortably under his gaze.

“I believe the Inquisitor was pleased,” Dorian remarked to Cullen. “Especially at Lady Shaw’s reference to the dissonant verses.”

Cullen nodded seriously. “And Shartan saw that they counted men and women of all descriptions among them.” He looked about at the retreating mages and templars. “Many bore the scars of escaped slaves, and some had come west from the coastlands, and they stood as equals beside the wild giant men of the South.”

Dorian chuckled suggestively. “Yes, you wild giant men of the South.”

Cullen cleared his throat, blushing slightly at Dorian’s ribbing. “I believe the verse references the ancient Alamari tribes.”

Berta ignored the Commander’s vague embarrassment. “What is that from?”

Dorian sighed in exasperation. “The Canticle of Shartan.” Seeing Berta’s blank look, he continued. “The portion of the Chant of Light that tells the story of Shartan, the elf who stood with Andraste against the evils of Imperial Tevinter. ‘All souls who take up the sword against Tevinter are welcome here.’”

Before Berta could clarify she had yet to tackle reading any of the Chant, Solas came to stand by them. “And perhaps, all souls who take up the sword against Corypheus are welcome here.”

Berta looked beyond their little group at the Inquisitor who stood flanked by Blackwall and Varric, in discussion with Leliana and Josephine. Blackwall met and held her gaze, bowing his head to her. Leliana beckoned to Cullen to join them.

“Excuse me,” Cullen murmured, leaving them to join the Inquisitor’s group.

Varric sauntered over towards Dorian, glancing back over his shoulder at the Inquisitor. “You ready to go, Sparkler?”

“Where are you going?” Berta looked sharply at the mage, feeling a slight panic at the idea of his departure.

“The Inquisitor has informed me that I am to accompany her on her next little adventure. Apparently, Crestwood is infested with shades of the dead and the resident necromancer is required.” Dorian sighed. “I am simply thrilled to be touring the soggy backwaters of Ferelden.” He looked sidelong at Berta. “I apologize for not assigning you homework in my absence.”

Berta felt dejected at the idea of being without Dorian for who knew how long. “What about your letters to Minrathous? When do you think-”
Dorian stroked Berta’s shoulder soothingly. “I have asked Lady Vivienne to review any correspondence from the capital in my absence. If there is anything that can help get you home, she will know about it immediately.” Seeing Berta’s worried look he continued. “Trust me, I would rather be here with you, working on your conundrum, than traipsing about the countryside rusticating.”

“You have no cause for complaint,” Varric grumbled. “You’re not the one who has to share a tent with the Great Bearded Snoring Black Bear.”

“Thank goodness for small favors,” Dorian snickered before dropping his voice. “Though Lady Avyanna is hardly cuddly.”

“Yeah, I don’t think Lavellans do cuddly.” He looked up at Berta raising his eyebrows at her in warning. “So, take care while we’re gone. Try not to get into too much trouble. Oh, and a parting gift from me: I’ve finally decided on your nickname.”

“Oh, really? Do tell.” Berta folded her arm across her chest, bracing herself.

“Well, after your stunt on the battlements, I thought about just calling you Stupid, but that seemed a little mean.”

“Thanks, very charitable of you,” Berta grimaced.

Varric chuckled. “No problem, Lucky.”

She almost laughed. “Lucky? I’m assuming that’s ironic.”

“Nope. Completely serious.”

Berta shook her head. “Because I’m lucky that I got thrown through a rift and ended up here?”

“And luckily Curly and Chuckles came upon you almost immediately.”

“And luckily I got beaten up by refugees...”

“And Hero was right there to rescue you. Luckily.” Varric rested his hands on his belt buckle, looking very pleased with himself. “I mean, I could have called you Damsel...”

Berta waved her hand as if fending off a foul odor. “Fine, fine, Lucky it is.”

Varric grinned at her acquiescence. “Well, alright then.” He nodded to her and headed back towards the Inquisitor. “Let’s go, Sparkler.”

Dorian rolled his eyes. He took Berta’s hand and gave it a dramatic kiss. “Take care while I’m gone. And ask Mother Giselle about the Canticles. Especially Shartan. There, I’ve given you homework.”

Berta sighed as he left. “Be safe and hurry back.”

The Inquisitor, Marian, Blackwall and Dorian mounted their horses. Cullen patted the snowy white neck of the Inquisitor’s horse and handed her the reins. Dorian reached down and extended an arm to Varric, pulling the dwarf up behind him, the dwarf sitting with his eyes practically between the mage’s shoulder blades.

“Don’t get any ideas back there,” Dorian warned. “And keep your hands to yourself.”

“I gotta hold on to something,” Varric muttered, adjusting his crossbow across his back before
bringing his hands to rest on Dorian’s waist. “Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle.”

“Ah, it’s just like the old days in Kirkwall,” Marian laughed heartily.

“Let’s ride,” the Inquisitor barked sourly and headed her charger down the steep path beyond the funeral clearing. Marian followed on her roan and Dorian and Varric on their dappled gray horse. Blackwall brought up the rear on a large bay with a flowing black mane. He stopped at the crest of the path and looked back at Berta, giving her a brief wave. Berta smiled at the man, silhouetted on horseback in front of the low clouds, snow flurries caught in his hair and his beard. She raised her hand to say farewell before watching him disappear down the path out of the valley. She turned to Solas who was still standing slightly apart, his arms folded across his chest in a gesture that Berta felt could only be interpreted as judgement.

“So perhaps in the Inquisitor’s absence, you can focus on getting me home?” Berta said, trying to keep the hint of desperation out of her voice.

“Alas, I too shall be traveling.” He gazed after the departing party. “I have a task that I must complete on the Exalted Plains.” Seeing her worried look, he continued. “Through the Fade, I can search for answers no matter where I am. I will look for echoes of your world every time I am asleep. And anywhere I go I can convene with spirits who may know more.”

Berta nodded uncertainly, trying to quash the creeping fear in her gut that told her she would not be going home any time soon. “Thank you for doing what you can.”

Solas bowed his head earnestly. “When next we meet, perhaps I will have news.” He turned and strode off down the path after the Inquisitor, barefoot in the snow, using his staff as a walking stick.

Berta fell in with Leliana, Cullen, Josephine and Vivienne as they headed back toward the keep. She bade them farewell until that evening when they reached the Clinic. The healers were diving back into work, tending to the refugees who had been waiting while they were at the funeral. Berta found Mother Giselle sitting by the fire, a small leather-bound book in her hands, looking contemplative.

“What are you reading?”

“The Canticle of Trials. It is my favorite. I can always find solace in its hymns.” She closed the book and it disappeared into her robes.

Berta pulled up a stool and sat beside the priestess. “Dorian said I should ask you about Shartan.”

Mother Giselle smiled. “I suspect you already know, do you not?”

Berta frowned. “Commander Cullen quoted some of it to me. I didn’t know it existed before today.”

Mother Giselle looked at her kindly. “You did not read it before today?”

“I’ve never read it. And why would it please the Inquisitor?” Berta knew she was missing something important.

“The Canticle of Shartan, the tale of the elf who would become Andraste’s champion, was struck from the Chant of Light by Divine Renata I at the time of the Exalted March on the elves of the Dales.”

“What’s an Exalted March?”

“A holy war. Waged against the elves of the Dales, stripping from them their ancestral home. Most
of the surviving elves relocated to human cities. Those who did not became the wandering clans of the Dalish, the forebears of our Inquisitor.”

Berta sat silently for a moment, the all-too-common story of Thedas’s elves echoing the struggles of people in her own world. “But why would the Inquisitor care about the Chantry? I thought that the Dalish have their own religion and worship elven gods.”

“As to why, you would have to ask Lady Avyanna herself, but when I met her in the Hinterlands, after she received the Anchor and was fighting to bring the mage-Templar war to an end, she asked for instruction in the beliefs of the Chantry. She wishes to know the Maker. The people have called her the Herald of Andraste. Some believe that Andraste herself saved our Inquisitor from the fires of destruction at the Temple of Sacred Ashes.”

Berta hunched her shoulders against the cold and looked searchingly at the priestess. “And what do you believe?”

Mother Giselle smiled kindly. “I believe that the Maker shapes our lives in ways that we cannot always understand and cannot always see. I believe that He brings us what we need in our darkest hours and places us on the right path, if only we choose to follow it. He has touched our Inquisitor, just as He has touched you. You may not have read the Canticle of Shartan but the Maker let you hear the words and speak them again to His followers today. I believe that the Maker has a plan for you.”

Berta tried to keep her face inoffensively neutral while swallowing the urge to call bullshit.

Mother Giselle chuckled. “You do not believe. No, do not protest,” she cut Berta off before she could jump in. “You don’t have to believe. The Maker will work through you as He will.”

Berta didn’t try too hard to hide her skepticism as the priestess had already called her out. “Well, then I guess I should get busy getting ready for my second inspirational speech of the day. I don’t know how moving I’ll be talking about work rotations and hand washing.”

“The Maker does not call on any of us to always be holy. Not even Andraste used a golden chamber pot.” Berta laughed at the priestess who smiled broadly in return. “There. Laughter is the best treatment, no?” The priestess stood and clasped her hands before her. “I will see you at the mages’ compound soon. Fiona has arranged for tables and food for a meal in Connor’s honor before the meeting. Will you join us?”

Berta looked at the priestess’s outstretched hand, taking it and standing. “Of course, I will join you.”

Before they could have lunch, Berta stayed and helped with the backlog from the morning in the Clinic, a small throng of patients and their family members loitering about one side of the tarps, waiting their turn.

Finn came forward from behind the cots. “Who’s next?” He asked, clapping his hands together.

“I am, serah,” a human woman said, holding her son’s hand. The boy looked to be about five or six and had a hacking cough.

Finn blanched and turned to Berta. “Would you mind?” He wiped his hands on his robes distastefully as if they were sweaty.

“You alright?” Berta asked.

Finn shook his head. “Um, well, children carry disease,” he said under his breath, backing away
from the woman and her coughing child.

Berta smirked. “Oh, just wash your hands,” she said to Finn and then, “Come with me,” she said to the woman.

For the next hour Berta took care of the boy, who she thought had bronchitis, a child with a probable ear infection, who asked Berta to treat her small cloth doll too, Berta obliging her by pretending to drip oil infused with elfroot in the doll’s ear, and a dwarven infant who had an impressive outbreak of impetigo on his pudgy fist that he would not stop sucking. She gave the infant a thorough exam, more than a little curious about dwarven anatomy and physiology but he seemed like any normal healthy infant if a little heavier for his size and somewhat shorter limbed, but definitely not with any of the physical traits of a human with achondroplastic dwarfism. Berta wondered if dwarves were a completely separate species or if there were any human-dwarf or elf-dwarf or even Qunari-dwarf children, but she didn’t want to ask as that was unnecessary to the boy’s care. One of the many things she wanted to chat about with Fiona.

A little before noon, the clouds lifted, and the snow stopped, leaving a light sugar dusting over everything in the camp. Berta, Mother Giselle, Finn and the other healers headed to the mages’ camp. When they entered, they found Fiona organizing everyone around long tables that appeared to have been pilfered from the equipment area of the training yard and arranged around a large fire pit in the center of the tents. Meena and a group of other elven servants were lugging trays of food to the tables and stoking the bonfire. Inside the encircled tents, just beside the entrance two mages were busy erecting a sign post, one creating a small tornado of wind that was drilling into the ground about three feet away from another thick post which Berta assumed had been placed by the same method. They lifted the second heavy post into the hole, the second mage holding it upright as the first mage used the same whirlwind effect to bring the displaced soil back, securing the post two feet into the ground. They raised the sign placard to the posts and hammered nails in to keep it in place, Berta feeling grateful that there was no whirlwind blowing nails around to fly into the wood at speed. She was fascinated by the use of magic for such a mundane task but at the same time, understood how the average superstitious peasant might have been afraid.

Fiona beckoned to Berta and gave her a seat on the outside of the circle between the Grand Enchanter herself and Mother Giselle. The mages began taking their seats and Berta saw the apothecaries enter the camp, Elan, Adan, the two tranquil and Toph behind them and two men with them who she assumed must be Henley and Solivitis whom she had yet to meet. Seria came up and sat next to Mother Giselle inclining her head to Berta. The healers and midwives were filing in as well, most of whom Berta could attach names to faces. She saw Idria, but Tadaan was not with her and Berta hoped she hadn’t had too much trouble finding someone to watch him. She pulled her notes out of her bag and placed them on the table before her, taking out a pen and turning to the blank back of a page, entitling it “Tasks.” Beneath it she wrote “Child care.” While none of the mages and templars seemed to have children, she thought it was likely that others among the healers or midwives did and it wasn’t reasonable to ask them to work for the Inquisition if they had no one to watch their little ones.

Meena and the other servants and members of the Orderlies, placed the large platters of food on the tables, sliced bread and cheese and small hard sausages and dried apples. Most of those present had their cups full already, but Berta was given one by Meena. It looked like a hollowed-out horn, and it was filled with a pale, yellow drink that tasted a bit like mead. There was nothing hot served but Berta couldn’t blame the kitchens for not whipping up a funeral feast for a hundred at a moment’s notice.

There was a low murmur that went around the tables and Berta looked up from her drink to see Briony entering the camp, alone. She came to Fiona, the Grand Enchanter coming to her feet. Berta
held her breath for a moment, uncertain if she should intervene. Briony moved first, bowing her head respectfully and giving an Inquisition salute. Fiona returned the greeting and gestured to the chair beside her saying loudly, “Welcome to our camp, Knight-Captain. All Protectors are welcome here.”

Berta glanced between them and then at Mother Giselle, who had her usual gentle smile on her face, giving no inclination of what she really thought. Briony took her seat and Fiona turned to face the rest of the gathering, holding her hand up to quiet the conversations around the tables. Berta glanced around at all the people assembled, realizing she was seeing the entirety of the group she would lead, more than a hundred souls, all looking to her. She had only been here two weeks and already her situation was much changed from when she arrived. But she also knew this was temporary, had to be temporary, the responsibility settling heavy in her chest, her heart fluttering in a panic of needing to escape, to return home, but knowing that there was nothing she could do. She would ride this wave for now. She had little choice.

“We come together today to honor our fellow mage, Connor Guerrin.” Fiona folded her hands slowly before her, giving the impression that she chose her words carefully. “Lest there be rampant rumors, you should know how he died. He took his own life, hanging himself.”

Berta glanced around the tables, looking to see how this was received, thinking she needn’t have been so circumspect about his cause of death in her remarks. The faces around the tables were sad or impassive, a few angry, but everyone quiet. Fiona continued. “I cannot tell you how sorry I am that he made this choice. I am not gifted at speech making; perhaps if I were, I could have persuaded him otherwise. But I say to all of you, we cannot despair. The Inquisition will protect us, and we can rebuild, forge a new circle within the Inquisition. We must persevere, we must survive. We must shine a light that those new mages who have come into their power since the Circles fell, can follow to safety. If the young die, by their own hand or because they have nowhere to go, our cause is lost.”

“Our cause is already lost,” a voice declared sharply.

Berta looked across the circle of tables to the speaker, a thin, pale human woman with short dark hair and narrow features, frowning deeply with her arms crossed over her chest. She wore blue-green mages robes trimmed with fur and a sour expression on her pinched face.

Fiona sighed wearily. “Linnea, this is not the time.”

“When is the time, Enchanter? After these Templars kill us all?” Linnea came to her feet, gesturing towards Briony with disgust.

“The Inquisition’s Templars have killed no mages,” Briony began, standing to meet her challenger.

“Lies,” Linnea hissed.

Fiona put her hand on Briony’s shoulder, urging her to sit back down. The Knight-Captain glared at Linnea but sat, one hand gripping the edge of the table, white knuckled.

“If you mean to imply that the Inquisition’s Templars killed Connor, that is simply untrue. I was there. He slept beside his fellow mages and no Templar had access to our chambers during the night.” Fiona looked at Linnea, her stare fierce. “Sit down and do not speak of things which you know nothing about.”

Linnea sat slowly, staring daggers at the Grand Enchanter. The angry mutterings around the tables quieted.

Fiona smoothed her features, looking around the gathering, gesturing to the food before them. “Let
us take this meal in memory of Connor and with hope for our future.”

“In Andraste’s name,” said Mother Giselle.

“In Andraste’s name,” everyone murmured in response.

Fiona sat and served herself from the closest platter using her bread as a plate and putting a small amount of fruit and cheese upon it. “They are distrustful, and rightfully so,” she said softly to Berta. “The Inquisitor has not shared her plans with me and I do not know what future she intends for us. I can only tell them not to lose hope.”

Berta nodded slowly, not knowing what to say. She found the Inquisitor opaque in her motivations and while she could assume the mages would be called to fight in some capacity, Aveline’s plans for the mages beyond the Inquisition had not yet been made clear. All around the tables the assembled members of the Order of the Red Cross began talking and eating, the tension of a few moments ago dissapating for the moment.

“May the Maker enlighten Lady Lavellan,” Mother Giselle said, reaching to serve herself from the platter before her.

“And may she have more liberal views than Andraste,” Fiona said to Berta under her breath.

Berta said nothing and served herself equal helpings of fruit and cheese but avoiding the sausages. She ate a few bites and drank more of the mead before brushing her hands off on her apron and standing. The tables quieted, seeing her coming to her feet.

“Please,” she began, “don’t let me disturb your meal. I am sorry that we are to have our first meeting of the Order of the Red Cross on such a sorrowful occasion, but our work won’t wait.” Berta shuffled her papers together and cleared her throat. “For those of you I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting, I am Doctor Berta Shaw, the Chief Healer of the Order of the Red Cross. I thank you all for coming to this meeting this afternoon and I thank you for volunteering.”

There was a twitter around the tables, largely from the mages that Berta could see, and she realized too late that “volunteer” was probably the wrong word. Linnea in particular looked unhappy, but Berta plowed ahead before anyone had a chance to comment.

“Our Order has been founded to care for the health of the people of the Inquisition and the refugees it protects. Corypheus can’t be defeated by an army that is sick or diseased. To that end, let me explain how things will work.” She glanced down at the top sheet of her notes. “In the mornings, assignments will be posted in the keep’s Infirmary and here in the mages’ camp.” She indicated the sign that was being erected when she entered. “Thank you,” she said finding the two mages who had placed it and nodding to them before continuing. “We will work in teams of three, a healer or midwife, a mage and a protector. Some teams may also have a trainee.” There was a hiss of conversation around the tables again. Berta could see brows furrowing in consternation and Linnea was angrily whispering to one of the mages seated next to her. “I personally understand the need for bodyguards. A refugee camp is not a safe place. My face and Connor’s death are proof of that.”

“And how do we know that the Templars won’t abuse us?” Linnea’s jaw jutted out aggressively as she stared at Berta.

Berta glanced at Briony. The Knight-Captain came to her feet. “You have my word that no harm will come to any mage of the Inquisition at the hands of our Templars.”

Linnea spat at the ground. “And what good is the promise of a Templar?”
“Your objection has been noted,” Berta barked, realizing she sounded just like the Commander. “If any member of the Order is harassed or abused by anyone, I expect to be informed immediately.” Briony nodded in acknowledgement and sat back down.

Linnea frowned, unmollified, but quiet for the moment. Berta took a deep breath and continued. She outlined the four sites of care, the staffing of each of the sites, the process for requisitions, the schedule of lectures, oversight of trainees and the schedule of the sites, including the overnight staffing of Sick Bay and the Hospital. This brought groans and muttering from more than just the mages this time. Berta was unsurprised that taking call was unpopular in any world. There were several questions from the midwives, mainly around making sure that only female mages would be allowed to be in attendance of laboring women, a request that fortunately Berta was prepared for thanks to Mother Giselle’s fair warning. There was a smattering of other questions, none of which were unanticipated until the last one.

“What about uniforms?” It was Talwyn the mage asking. “Shouldn’t we have something that identifies us as members of the Order of the Red Cross?” Several of the mages nodded in agreement.

Berta could see the wisdom in having something that identified them, especially the mages who might feel that visual association with a healing order might give them some protection from suspicion or harassment. “That’s an excellent idea. Yes, we should. I will speak to the Quartermaster about it.”

She looked around the tables. Everyone seemed, if not excited, at least eager to get to work. “Alright, if there are no further questions, we will adjourn until tomorrow morning. Thank you for your attention.” She sat down and made to finish her meal quickly before making the climb back up to Skyhold and the Infirmary.

Briony gave Berta a salute and left the camp, headed to speak to her Templars about their new duties. Mother Giselle excused herself to return to the clinic and the rest of the Order began to disperse, the mages returning to their tents and the orderlies taking the tables back to the sparring grounds. Fiona stayed seated next to Berta as she finished her food. The elf looked around at the mages and healers, apothecaries and midwives, some still milling about chatting and introducing themselves. She had a small smile on her face.

Berta raised an eyebrow at Fiona. “You look pleased.”

“I am. I feel like we are at the beginning of something new. Something that can change things.” She brushed the crumbs of her lunch off the table before her. “I am too idealistic, but I can never quite give up hope entirely.”

Berta thought again of getting home, unable to give up hope entirely as well, and looked around at the people, her people, her responsibility and wondered what would happen when she left them. Would Fiona be pleased to take over when Berta was gone?

Fiona looked at her with curiosity. “You don’t look pleased. You have accomplished much in a short time.”

“I’m just thinking about home, is all.” She sniffed and shook her head. “But let’s not dwell on that. Race you back to the infirmary?”

“No. Grand Enchanters do not ‘race,’” Fiona said with mock seriousness. “Let’s return to the Infirmary though and my first patient of the afternoon should be you. Now that I am rested, I should like to address your bruises and the remaining swelling. We can’t continue to have our Chief Healer looking like she was in a tavern brawl.”
“Yes,” Berta agreed. “Most inappropriate.” And together they left the mages’ camp to climb back up to Skyhold.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to Darius Christopher Brooks.
Rest In Peace, my friend.
Foundations

Happiness lies in the active life, sorrow in thought.
-Marty Rubin
Musical Accompaniment:
"Whistle (While You Work It)" - Katy Tiz

Berta rubbed at her eyes sleepily, squeezing them tight and then opening them wide, trying to wake up. There was no residual pain or tenderness after the treatment she had received at Fiona’s hands the day before. This second round of healing had been almost pleasant, a faint tingling and warmth suffusing her face. Berta hoped any residual tension between mages and Templars would fade as quickly as the last of her bruises, but she was not that naive.

She was sitting at the small table in her tent, sipping her second cup of tea of the morning after nibbling on the breakfast Meena had brought. She flipped through her papers, collecting her thoughts before she headed to Cullen’s office for morning meeting. She had stayed up too late the night before, stumbling through learning to play Wicked Grace with Leliana, Josephine and Vivienne, but it had been worth it. Vivienne had procured for them a truly excellent wine, reminiscent of a Provençal red, from her lover’s estate vineyard. Between the wine and speaking exclusively in Orlesian, Berta couldn’t remember the last time she’d enjoyed herself so thoroughly. Speaking French always reminded her of lazy, sun-soaked summers in Lourmarin, the village where her mother grew up, terrorizing the countryside on bicycles with her cousins or eating ice cream with sand between her toes at Plage de la Pointe Rouge in Marseille. Vivienne seemed to be coming around as well, her regard visibly increasing with each successful bon mot Berta tossed off in perfect, grammatically correct Orlesian.

Today, however, would be for working and she gulped the last of her tea, mentally cataloging her list of things to do before heading to Cullen’s office. The infirmary was in much better shape, the space completely cleared of construction detritus and the grass trimmed. The tarps had been raised giving a large covered area to work. The supply tent had been repitched to the side closer to the gate by the stairs up the outer wall, but her own tent still needed to be relocated. She needed to oversee setting up Sick Bay on the military side of the valley and meet with Josephine about numerous niggling details, including understanding what compensation she could promise to the craftsmen that she would need to employ for the Order, from the glass blower that Henley had already found to a wood crafter she hoped to hire to make more apothecary boxes and healing kits. At some point she needed to swing by the quartermaster’s and find Mother Giselle to ask her about caring for the children of the members of the Order while they worked. There was much to do. She grabbed her two copies of the rotation rosters for the day and left her tent.

Fiona and most of the mages from the tower in Skyhold were milling about, waiting for their assignments for the day. Berta gave one copy of the duty roster to Meena to have her run to the mage’s camp to post there and the second to Fiona to peruse before posting it on the board that had been affixed to the wall next to the infirmary.

“Good morning,” Fiona greeted her. “It is exciting, isn’t it? The first day of the Order of the Red Cross?”

Berta smiled in return. “I’d be more excited if I were less tired. I stayed up a little too late last night playing cards with the ambassador.”
Fiona nodded sagely. “Social obligations will follow with your new role. You do well to fulfill them.”

Berta hadn’t thought of it that way, but supposed Fiona was right. As much as she disliked politicking, whether it was with the hospital administration at home or here in the Inquisition, it was probably a necessary evil. Though she couldn’t pretend that she didn’t have a good time last night. “I’ll do my best,” she promised. “I’ll catch up with you later. I’m going to float to each of our sites today and have some meetings to clear up some details. I’ll see you in the Clinic later.”

Berta left the infirmary to head to Cullen’s office. The Commander was nursing a cup of tea himself, a small, steaming ceramic pot sitting on the edge of his desk. He looked better rested than he had of late and seemed less irritable this morning for which Berta was grateful. The meeting was brief, Berta having little to report beyond the fact that the plans she presented the day before were being implemented and that the day would be invariably busy. Berta, Mother Giselle and Briony all left his office within 15 minutes to head to their respective duties. The weather had cleared, and the bright sunshine seemed a harbinger of a good and productive day.

Berta returned to her tent to grab her bag and healing kit, observing that patients that had already clustered around the infirmary entrance. She did not plan on spending any time there as it was staffed with two mages and two healers from the rotation, but before she could make her way out the gate, someone called her name. It was a Templar, a man in his thirties with a truly horrific porn star mustache.

“Lady Shaw?” He approached her holding out a folded piece of parchment in his gloved hand. “Madame de Fer sent this for you.”

Berta took the proffered parchment, unfolding it to read its contents, an invitation to Berta to visit the First Enchanter to discuss the letter that had arrived last night from Dorian’s contact in Minrathous. Berta chewed her lip, teetering for a moment. She didn’t want to be late to her first interaction with Cullen’s captains, but she could not go through her day not knowing what the letter said. “Thank you, Ser...?” She trailed off, looking at the mustachioed Templar.

“Paxley, m’lady,” he offered, giving Berta a combined Inquisition salute and a bow simultaneously, before briskly returning to his post in the infirmary.

Berta decided she could make it quick as she didn’t think she would be able to focus on anything else until she knew what the letter said. She hurried up the three flights of steps, from the lower to upper courtyard, through the great hall and then above to Vivienne’s alcove.

When Berta reached the top of the third flight, she forced herself to slow down and take a few deep breaths. It would not do to come rushing into Vivienne’s domain winded and anxious. She exited the stairwell along the balcony above the great hall, heading towards the First Enchanter’s perch.

The First Enchanter was standing with her arms folded, her back to the hall, looking out the windows towards the upper courtyard where a group of soldiers were training under the watchful eye of the Commander. Rylen, Alia and Jim all hovered behind him in attendance. Even from this distance their body language showed their eagerness for their Commander’s approval. Vivienne turned her head from the view as she heard Berta enter her domain.

“Madame de Fer,” Berta greeted her.

“Ah, Madame Shaw. Et comment allez-vous en ce beau matin?” She arched an eyebrow, her eyes drifting briefly over Berta’s attire, unable to help herself, apparently.
Berta returned the pleasantries in Orlesian, ignoring the Enchanter’s not so subtle judgement, and took a seat on the end of the chaise. “You have had word from Minrathous?” She asked, continuing in Orlesian, crossing her ankles and folding her hands in her lap. Berta glanced about the alcove, briefly wondering at Madame de Fer’s ability to furnish herself so comfortably in such a brief period of time, surrounding herself with books, candelabra, paintings and the upholstered ornate chaise while some members of the inquisition were still sleeping on the ground. Being First Enchanter with a Duke as a lover clearly had its perks.

“Yes,” Vivienne said, switching back to Common. “Though, in truth, Master Pavus’s colleague asks more questions than she answers.” She glided to the chaise and sat opposite Berta, reaching for a roll of parchment on the end table, unrolling it languidly.

“They are somewhat hamstrung in their research efforts as no rifts have been found in Tevinter. Their work is, at this early juncture, purely theoretical.” She extended the scroll towards Berta.

It took a Herculean effort not to snatch the scroll out of Vivienne’s hands. Berta gently took the letter and read it slowly, having difficulty between the foreign characters, the minuscule hand writing and the theoretical magical jargon which meant nothing to her. Pressing her lips together in frustration, she looked at the Enchanter. “What did you make of this?”

Vivienne cocked her head slightly. “Fade theory is not my area of expertise. I am more versed in combat magic.” She took the letter back from Berta perusing it again. “It is as Master Pavus suspected; the only presumed instances of physical travel into the Fade are of the ancient magisters when they entered the Fade to defile the Golden City.”

“Presumed?” Berta had been under the impression from Dorian and Solas that this was more of a fact.

Vivienne sighed and looked piercingly at Berta as if deciding something. “My dear, I have known you but a little while, but I gather from observing you that you and I are somewhat alike. We are not given to naivete or self-deception.”

Berta kept her face carefully neutral. “Your point being?”

Vivienne gave the softest scoff, a puff of air from her lips, derisive yet sympathetic at the same time. “You would not lie to yourself, nor would you suffer others to keep the truth from you.” She paused, her eyes resuming their pitying look. Berta could begin to feel her blood beginning to boil, burbling up her neck to her temples.

“Whatever you’re trying to say, Vivienne, just say it.”

Vivienne leveled her gaze at her, all pity evaporated. “My dear, I doubt it is possible to get you home. Your presence here is likely a freak accident, nor can I see how it would behoove our Inquisitor to let a resource like you go, even if a ready conduit to your world could be located.”

Berta felt her stomach twist. The very same thoughts had occurred to her, rattling around her brain in the quiet moments between wakefulness and sleep in her tent, but she had learned long ago to shove such inconvenient truths below the surface and hold them there until they quit struggling, silencing them in the interest of immediate survival. To voice them only made ignoring them harder, the truth eroding her resolve like acid. She breathed in and out slowly.

“You’re hardly telling me anything I don’t know,” she said harshly. “But I fail to see how that knowledge helps me in any way. Yes, I would like to go home. No, it may not be possible, but if I give up trying, I can guarantee I will never return. Will the Inquisitor try to keep me here against my
will? Probably only if I get close to finding a way out of here. So, your opinion changes nothing.”

Vivienne looked at her appraisingly, her eyes cold and her face calm. “It is good that you have thought on these things, my dear.” She made to roll the parchment up, but Berta reached for it, taking it from her hand.

“I’ll keep this.” She tucked it into her bag. “I’ll review it further when I have more time. Thank you for letting me know.” And with that she stood and left the First Enchanter alone in her extravagant perch.

Berta spent the rest of the morning in the lakeside camp focusing on the setup of Sick Bay and meeting with the commanding officers of each company, letting them know the Sick Bay schedule and what to look for in their troops regarding infectious disease in close quarters. She was dismayed to discover that they were currently having an outbreak of “soldier’s disease,” that omnipresent combination of vomiting and diarrhea that plagued most armies before the discovery of germ theory and public hygiene. Berta ended up taking the nickel tour of the latrine ditches, mess facilities and the rest of the soldier’s encampment. She ended with strict instructions regarding hand washing and use of the latrines. After meeting with the captains, she wrote a memo to Cullen regarding quarantine of the sick soldiers, punishments for any soldier found relieving himself outside of designated areas and food safety in the mess tent among other recommendations for life in the soldiers’ encampment. While she thought she might have the latitude to make some of these changes herself, she thought it best that the orders come from the Commander’s desk. Cullen’s thawing attitude didn’t need to be tested just yet.

The area for Sick Bay lent itself to a similar configuration to the infirmary in the keep, a sheer rock face jutting up from the valley floor towards the base of the keep high above. Gatsi’s dwarven workmen had affixed pilons to the rock wall and Cullen’s soldiers tied two large overlapping tarps from the anchors and pitched them below, leaving the same covered work area as in the infirmary and the clinic. Berta commandeered a small table and chair from one of the captains, with a minimal amount of grumbling on the man’s part. She sat under the tarps and made her list of supplies for Sick Bay, requisitioning another tent to secure the supplies as well as the usual equipment, shelves, hand washing buckets, cauldrons for boiling water, bedrolls and cots and rough curtains to cordon off treatment areas. She headed to the mage’s camp and gave her list for the quartermaster and her memo to Cullen to one of the orderlies she found at the runner’s station for delivery.

Lunch time found Berta on the same rock outcropping near the clinic, basking in the sun and sharing her meal with Fiona who had spent the morning paired with Seria and watched over by a Templar named Hugh.

Fiona sat perched on the stone, her legs curled up in her robes as she took a long draw from the water skin one of the orderlies had brought them. “Things are going well. We had a few problems this morning, but they’ve worked themselves out.”

“Such as?”

“Linnea and two other mages are gone. They disappeared last night.” She shrugged. “I suppose it is not surprising. Not all the mages are happy to be here though most are glad to have protection and it is better than trying to survive on our own as apostates. Briony wanted to mount a search party when she found out, but the Commander told her that it wasn’t worth it.” She took another drink and a bite of dried apple. “We’ll see what the Inquisitor thinks when she returns.”

Berta chewed thoughtfully. “Well, good riddance I guess?”

Fiona shrugged again. “Somehow, I don’t think we’ve heard the last of her.”
Berta nodded, wiping her hands on her apron and taking the water skin from the elf. “Fiona, I’ve never asked you, would you prefer if we spoke Orlesian?”

Fiona raised an eyebrow as if surprised at the suggestion. “No. It is my native tongue, but it is bad enough to be a mage and an elf. It is even worse to be Orlesian, at least in the eyes of most of the Fereldens and Free Marchers here. I grew up speaking Common as well, so it is no trouble.”

“Oh.” Berta felt slightly disappointed. “I grew up speaking both as well. My father is English, where they speak the same language as Common and my mother was French, the language very similar to Orlesian.”

“Well, then perhaps if we ever need to speak privately, we can use Orlesian. Most members of the Inquisition won’t understand a word, save Mother Giselle and the Inquisitor’s high advisors.”

They were interrupted by Hugh ambling up the hill carrying a small trencher gingerly, proclaiming that he had brought them “treats.” He leaned over towards Berta and Fiona, offering the plate, his shaggy chestnut hair falling into his dark brown eyes.

“Oh,” Fiona gasped. “You did bring us a treat.”

On the tray were three bite sized pieces of honeycomb, dripping with sticky golden sweetness. Fiona wasted no time ripping a piece of bread off the loaf she shared with Berta and scooping the confection up and into her mouth. “Mmm,” she sighed. “Thank you.”

Berta followed suit, smacking her lips at the sweetness. It was almost overwhelming given her recent diet but delicious all the same. “Thank you, Hugh. No, don’t run off. Sit for a moment if you have time.”

Fiona excused herself to return to work, thanking Hugh again for the dessert. Berta offered Hugh a piece of the bread from the loaf and he accepted it, popping the bread and last bit of honeycomb into his mouth whole. He sat heavily on the rock next to Berta, his armor clanking, propping one elbow up on a knee.

Berta watched him chew for a moment. “How are your fellow Templars adjusting to their duties?”

“Well,” he said firmly after he swallowed. “It’s good to have a task instead of just training or sitting around waiting for something to happen.”

“How many Templars are there in the Inquisition?” Other than Briony and Belinda, Berta hadn’t had much interaction with the other Templars in the Inquisition. She knew what the mages thought, but she also knew there were at least two sides to every story.

“Maybe 60 or 70. A whole lot of us came from Kirkwall with Knight-Commander...sorry, Commander Cullen. He was the second in command at the Circle there and we followed him when Seeker Pentaghast recruited him to lead the Inquisition forces. By that time, the Circle there had pretty much fallen apart and there were hardly any mages left to guard. Of course, there’s a group of loyalist templars from Orlais who accompanied the Divine to the conclave but weren’t high ranking enough to be there when the temple was destroyed. And a few of Ferelden’s templars came to the conclave to declare their fealty to Divine Justinia and then stayed.” He sucked the last of the honey off his fingers from his piece of comb. “We’ve had a few trickle in here and there who left the rogue Templars or left their Chantry when no more orders were coming. There are probably more out there. The Knight-Captain said the Seekers commanded the Templars to abandon Orlais and withdraw to the old Seeker fortress but every Templar here is a true loyalist, through and through.” He pounded his fist against his other palm emphatically. “Divine Justinia called the conclave to end
the war and now...well, we’re staying to follow the Inquisitor. That’s what Seeker Pentaghast said we should do.”

“Wasn’t the circle in Kirkwall known as the Gallows?” Berta was pretty sure that was the Circle that Fiona had mentioned as one of the worst in Thedas for the lives of the mages imprisoned there.

Hugh licked his lips and looked at his lap before answering. “Yes,” he said quietly, “and may I live my whole life and never go back there. Some stains you can’t wash away. Not even with sweets for those you’ve wronged.” Berta followed his gaze over to Fiona who was standing at the entrance to the Clinic, helping an old woman into the tent.

Berta wanted to ask more but Hugh stood quickly and gave her a salute. “Back to work, my lady,” he declared with forced cheer before grabbing the empty trencher and trotting off. Berta watched him go, thinking she would need to talk to Briony further about the backgrounds of the Templars the Knight-Captain planned on assigning to the Protectors and maybe Fiona as well to know which Circles the mages had come from. Assigning a mage from Kirkwall to be protected by Hugh or one of the Templars from the Gallows might well be setting up the Red Cross to fail.

Berta left the Clinic after lunch and made her way back to the keep, stopping in the infirmary to check on Petra, Talwyn and the two healers assigned to them and the three orderlies there for support. Paxley was still there and with him, Ruvena, a pretty, blond woman whose cold beauty seemed misplaced in her armor. Assured that everything was under control in the infirmary, Berta headed to the cloisters to spend some time learning from Elan. She planned on spending at least one day a week training herself in Thedosian healing techniques.

Elan welcomed her with open arms if Adan was a bit crustier about “another know-nothing assistant.” Berta and Toph weeded two large beds in the garden, planted seeds for some of the rarer plants and watered everything and then covered it with a loose layer of straw to protect against the cold. When they finished, Berta looked at the beds with satisfaction, resting her hands on her hips and then teaching Toph to high five. Berta hadn’t done any gardening since the previous summer in her vegetable and flower beds at home and the sun on her neck and dirt under her finger nails did her soul a world of good. She scrubbed her hands hard with water from the well and a coarse bristled brush she borrowed from Adan before moving to her next task. Elan was showing Toph how to scrape the minute milky liquid from the ugly blossom tops of the rashvine nettle plant and collect it to boil to make nettle syrup. Berta begged off what looked to be a tedious job but asked if she could learn to make healing potions. She spent the next two hours mincing elf root leaves into fine threads for the first step of the process. Four bushels of elfroot would be boiled and soaked for two days and then strained and pressed, the resulting liquid steeped with the macerated roots of prophet’s laurel, making sure to exclude any green parts of that plant that were poisonous, and then mixed with the oil pressed from the petals of dawn lotus. Elan showed Berta the press, a hand cranked device that would roll the petals through four rotating dowels sort of like a pasta maker, the oil squeezed from the pale petals landing a drop at a time on the tray below. Then the spindleweed leaves would need to be split, exposing the inner wet pulp of the succulent plant, which could then be scraped with a flat, dull metal blade and the resulting gelatinous mess could be added to the mixture and then the entire concoction would be boiled down over days until it reached the syrupy red phase, filtered to remove any remaining solids and then bottled, producing a single vial of healing potion. No wonder Elan made it only for the Inquisitor and her companions.

The glassblower Henley had identified came to meet Elan. The man’s name was Nort and he introduced himself enthusiastically as “a right proper gaffer whether you need free blowin’ or mold.” Berta had no idea what the man was talking about but from the rest of the conversation gathered that he had been a resident of Haven and he and his three apprentices, his two sons and a daughter, had escaped but all their equipment had been lost. Either new utensils would need to be requisitioned or a
team sent back to Haven to attempt a recovery.

Berta told Nort to make a list of what he needed and to give it to the quartermaster and she would inquire of the Commander if any parties could be sent back to Haven.

It was time for supper and Berta made her way to the great hall. She seemed to have successfully staked her claim to her table and she sat at its head surrounded by Fiona, Briony, Mother Giselle, Elan, Adan, Toph, Mikkel, Lysette and oddly enough, Sera, who proclaimed loudly that she was there to see “what the stink of the Red Cross was all about,” since as a Red Jenny they had a color in common and she wouldn’t tolerate a rival gang, or words to that effect. Dinner in general was a much more boisterous affair than usual without the severe eye of the Inquisitor watching over her subjects, the great hall bursting with laughter and conversation. Sera managed to instigate a minor food fight with some of the hard rolls from their table, but Berta put a stop to her shenanigans and the elf slunk off, decrying Berta’s lack of “joy duh viver.”

“You should be grateful for all what’s good in your life. Like me. I’m a frigging delight!” she declared and left the hall, vowing revenge.

After dinner, Berta followed Josephine to her study and they sat in front of the fire, each enjoying a glass of brandy. Josephine instructed Berta to send any craftsmen she intended to hire to the her directly as the seneschal of Skyhold and holder of the purse strings of the Inquisition so she could directly negotiate with them for their services. Berta was much relieved as she knew nothing of the currency or the going rate for anything she might need. They moved on to discussing modes of dress for the Order of the Red Cross.

“I’m not sure what to suggest,” Berta mused. “I don’t wish to waste resources on uniforms, but I think the mages would feel better if they were obviously marked as protected by the Inquisition.”

Josephine pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Most Thedosians would prefer to see mages in their robes, it identifies them and makes them feel safe. And your Protectors must wear their armor. What about wearing their own clothing but giving them something else to identify them?”

“What did you have in mind?”

In the end, after some sketching on parchment and a bit of discussion, it was agreed that the members of the Order of the Red Cross would wear surcoats, a smock like garment over their clothing, belted at the waist and bearing the symbol of the order on the chest, a scarlet red cross with four arms of the same length. The left shoulder would bear the symbol of the Inquisition and the right the symbol of division of the Red Cross to which the member belonged, a staff for the mages, a hand for the healers and midwives, a leaf of elfroot for the apothecaries, a flame for the orderlies and a sword for the protectors. Josephine recommended that the Red Cross be on a white background as those were also the colors of the Chantry and would imply a similar role of offering succor, healing and charity. Berta thought the upside to the surcoat style was that the smocks could be washed frequently, keeping things clean and protecting everyone’s clothing from contamination.

Berta felt a little silly discussing uniforms and fashion when there were so many other things to attend to, but Josephine was insistent. “The Inquisition must live in the same world that Orlesians inhabit,” the she said. “It is important that everyone is identifiable. And now, what of your banner?”

If discussing uniforms felt silly, choosing a flag felt doubly so but Josephine pointed out that at some point they would probably need to identify a field hospital in battle and a banner was a necessity. Berta cringed at that, not eager to think about going to war. In the end, a plain white field with a large Red Cross, the same as the surcoats, would fly as the Order’s banner. At the bottom would be the symbol of the Inquisition above the five emblems of the divisions of the Order.
With that decided, Berta excused herself, hoping to get a good night’s sleep before she got up tomorrow to bustle about the keep again, checking off items on her list. Meena greeted her with her bath when Berta returned to the infirmary and she turned in for the night. Despite her mind fixating on tasks for the next day, it was not long before she fell hard asleep.

Berta awoke far too early the next morning. She lay on her cot, staring up at the tent in the dark, trying not to think about Vivienne’s assessment the day before and hoping to go back to sleep for a while longer. She punched the lumpy pillow and wrapped the scratchy wool blankets around her but could not get comfortable again, so she gave up, rising to get dressed for the day. She tucked her hair behind her ears and lit a candle on the desk. She had been close to needing a haircut before Christmas but thought she’d have time to get it done when she returned from vacation. How wrong she had been. She sighed and sat at the table, writing up the postings for rotations for the day, consulting her larger list that she had made for the next 5 days before sliding it back into the drawer of the table. Then she sketched some notes for her lecture the next day, “Hygiene and Germ Theory.” By that time, it was beginning to get light outside and she tiptoed past the patients and the overnight team, Ellendra and Myron. Bran, the Templar on duty, perked up and saluted when he saw Berta and she hoped he had not forced himself to stay awake all night. That was not what was intended by having the infirmary staffed around the clock.

She climbed the stairs to the top of the battlements, thinking to watch the sunrise while she waited for Mother Giselle and Briony, but when she reached the top it was too windy even to be warm in her woolen cloak. She knocked on the Commander’s door. There was no answer, so she opened the door a crack. Cullen wasn’t at his desk.

“Commander?” She called.

There was a muffled thud from above followed by an exasperated, “Maker’s breath!”

Berta hesitated a moment but then entered, closing the door behind her. Someone had stoked and lit a brazier near the Commander’s desk, giving the room a warm, toasty glow. Berta headed over and warmed her hands over the fire, looking up abruptly as the Commander slid down the ladder from the loft above. He stalked over to his desk, staring daggers at her.

“Yes, what is it?” he snapped.

“I’m sorry, Ser,” she stammered. “I didn’t mean to bother you. I was just up early and...” She trailed off taking in his rumpled linen shirt and realizing that it was the first time she’d ever seen him without his armor. “Wait, do you sleep upstairs?”

“Well I have to sleep somewhere,” he said irritably and grabbed his feathered cloak off the back of his chair and threw it around his shoulders. He pinched the bridge of his nose and blinked rapidly, trying to clear sleep from his mind. He placed his hands on his desk and looked intently at her. “Now, what is it that you need?”

Berta looked back at him, his mussed hair and unshaven face, the dark circles under his eyes. He was pale and there was a sheen of sweat across his upper lip as if he were feverish.

“Commander...Cullen, are you alright?”

His countenance immediately flicked toward anger and Berta fought the instinct to back away. Instead, she took a step closer and gingerly put her hand on his. “I’m charged with taking care of the Inquisitor’s forces. All of them,” she stressed meaningfully.
Cullen blinked rapidly in response, looking at her hand on his but not pulling away. He swallowed hard and clenched his jaw. “I have difficulty sleeping,” he said stiffly, not meeting her gaze.

The door opposite slammed open and Jim entered bearing a tray with breakfast, “Oy, it’s blustery out there this morning, Ser. But this will-”

He drew up short, seeing Berta standing close to his Commander. Cullen yanked his hand away from her and took a step back, clearing his throat. “Yes, thank you for that, Lady Shaw. I will take that under consideration,” he said loudly.

Jim set the tray on the side of the Commander’s desk and looked at Berta. “Sorry, m’lady, I didn’t bring enough for two. Didn’t know the Commander was having company for breakfast.”

Berta suppressed a smile. “I’ve already eaten but thank you.”

“Yes, thank you, Jim. You’re dismissed,” Cullen said more brusquely than Berta thought warranted.

Jim withdrew quickly, looking worried that somehow he’d failed his master, giving an obsequious bow on his way out.

She turned back to Cullen, wondering if she could help him, but the moment had been lost, Cullen straightening the papers on his desk and spreading a piece of bread with butter. “I didn’t mean to disturb you,” she apologized. “I just assumed you’d be here and...” She trailed off, feeling stupid. What, did she think he didn’t sleep?

“It’s alright. You didn’t know I billeted here.” Cullen poured himself a cup of tea. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“I didn’t know if you’d had a chance to look over my report from reviewing the military camp yesterday. I had a few suggestions.”

He nodded and sipped his tea. “Your note left the impression that you can prevent further outbreaks of soldier’s disease.”

“Yes.” She smiled benignly. “If my instructions are followed.”

Cullen gave a thoughtful, assenting grumble. “Yes, your note was very...directive.”

Berta looked back at him, trying to gauge his level of annoyance. “That doesn’t mean I’m wrong.”

“The quarantine may have a negative effect on battalion cohesion and morale. And the cooks in the mess are sure to complain.”

Berta said nothing, letting him come to his own conclusions. Cullen’s observations were no doubt true, but it didn’t change the fact Berta’s changes were good ones, from the quarantine to mandated hand washing to separation of raw and cooked foods and changing the sleeping arrangements in the tents so the soldiers slept head to foot. She had found in her past dealing with hospital administration that sometimes just shutting up instead of pushing too hard was the way to get what she wanted.

Cullen eyed her warily, unsure of what to make of her silence. “Fine, we’ll try this your way, but any problems or further spread of disease and we’ll go back to the way I’ve always run the army.”

Berta felt a small smile creep into the corner of her mouth. “Yes, Ser.”

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“Angel of Temerity. And I raise you one sovereign.” Josephine’s coin clinked as it landed in the pot.
“Your turn, Berta.”

Berta was yanked from her reverie, absently thinking about plans for her next lecture and the next rotation schedule, lifting her hand to look at her cards. She had accomplished a lot in the last week, but a rock-solid understanding of Wicked Grace was not among her completed tasks. She thought she had two pair, but she wasn’t entirely sure because she didn’t know if the Song of Autumn was considered virtue or a vice card. She picked her unpaired Serpent card and discarded it on the pile. “Serpent of Pestilence. And I match your sovereign.” She tossed a gold piece onto the pile. What the hell. She drew a card from the stack. Angel of Fortitude. Crap. She had nothing else in that suit.

Leliana clicked her tongue. “Now it’s getting interesting.”

Berta paid only a little attention to the spymaster’s move because if there was one thing Berta had learned since the first evening of Wicked Grace that she had played over a week ago, it was that she had no chance in hell of winning. Now that Cassandra had joined them, Berta was no longer in last place but as long as Josephine was present, no one but the ambassador would be winning the hand. They had switched back this evening to conversing in Common. Cassandra spoke Orlesian, she could hardly not, given her duties as the right hand of the Divine, living in Val Royeux, but she was more comfortable in casual conversation in Common and the others deferred to her preference as it seemed almost cruel for her to lose every hand and have to speak her less preferred language.

Leliana made her move, holding her hand, and she matched the sovereign.

Berta watched Cassandra fuss with her cards. As formidable a warrior as the Seeker was, she was just as hopeless a card player. She had no patience and her tells were epic, disgusted noises abounding when the cards did not go her way and delighted smirks when she got what she wanted. The woman was an open book.

True to form, Cassandra discarded a card, Dagger of Justice, and took another from the pile, a triumphant, “Ha!” following its examination.

Vivienne tsked. “Gloating is most unbecoming, my dear Seeker.”

“Leave her be, Vivienne. She has so little opportunity to gloat,” Leliana chided. Cassandra scowled at Leliana who in turn patted her arm fondly.

“Alas, I have no cause to gloat. I cede.” Vivienne stacked her cards neatly and set them atop the discard pile. “Knight of Strength on top.”

Josephine snickered. “Well, I do love a good man on top.”

Leliana giggled wickedly as Cassandra snorted in derision and rolled her eyes. Berta chuckled. It had only taken them two sessions of Wicked Grace to fail the Bechdel test.

“Oh no, you cannot pass judgement on me,” Josephine said, wagging her finger at the Seeker. “Leliana has already told me your secret.”

Cassandra froze and scowled at Josephine, a florid blush creeping up her neck to her cheeks. “You wouldn’t dare...”

“Josie might not, but I would.” Leliana smiled sweetly at the Seeker. “Cassandra is a fan of Swords and Shields,” she announced to the remainder of the table.

Vivienne looked down her nose at Cassandra, her gaze withering. “And I thought a Chantry
education would inspire a love of quality literature.”

Berta looked back and forth between her fellow card players. “So, Swords and Shields is not quality?”

“It’s romance,” said Josephine while at the same time Leliana said, “It’s smut.”

Berta feigned shock, fanning herself with her hand. “My lady Seeker, oh my.”

“I am only waiting for the day when the author finds out that Cassandra is his biggest fan.” Leliana looked slyly at the Seeker and then returned to studying her cards.

Berta looked from Leliana’s smirk to Cassandra’s scowl. “Wait, it’s Varric, isn’t it? Thedas’s most popular author?”

“I am a fan of book, not the dwarf,” Cassandra said harshly. “And he will never find out,” she said pointedly looking at Berta. “I know you drink with him and the Magister.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” Berta mimed locking her lips and throwing away the key. She glanced at Leliana thinking that the woman was demonstrating quite the loose lips for a spymaster but perhaps that had more to do with the company and the bottle of fortified Orlesian liqueur that they had nearly polished off than with any inherent lack of discretion.

“There is something to be said for the swooning romance,” Josephine sighed. “The chevalier in shining armor sweeping you off your feet.”

Vivienne laughed lightly. “Romance is a fantasy. Give me power and influence over flowery poetry and I will show you a man for whom I will move mountains.”

“That is a very mercenary view of love,” Berta observed.

“It is a realistic view.” Vivienne languidly reached for the bottle and poured herself another half glass. “It has always held me in good stead.”

“Give me a lover who will shower me with flowers and affection,” Josephine sighed. “And, short that, be a noble hero. Or have a great fortune. Or look very fine on my arm, that’s good, too.” She giggled at her own demanding list.

“Well Cullen should do well for you then.” Berta beckoned to Vivienne to hand the bottle over. “He’s handsome.”

Josephine, Leliana and Cassandra all simultaneously burst out laughing. Josephine shook her head vigorously. “Ug, it would be like marrying my brother. But I’ll tell him you said so.”

Berta shook her head. “Please leave me out of it.”

Vivienne pursed her lips as if seriously considering the suggestion. “He is very pretty and perhaps noble in sentiment but not in blood, nor in possession of a fortune. Cullen would do well to attach himself to a woman of power. That is how he may climb.”

Cassandra flared her nostrils in distaste. “Perhaps that is what is most charming about our Commander, his lack of desire to climb.”

Josephine said nothing, holding her cards and raising another sovereign. “Can you match that?” she asked Berta.
“You cannot change the subject so quickly,” Leliana said to Josephine. “We still are discussing a partner for you.”

Leliana tapped her lips thoughtfully while Berta discarded her Angel of Fortitude and drew another card from the deck, Song of Love. Appropriate, Berta mused, adding her sovereign to the growing pile, guessing she would never see it again. “What about Krem?”

“Well then what about Varrie?” Berta asked, straightening her hand. “He is rather charismatic- I mean if Cassandra isn’t going to speak for him?” She smirked at the Seeker who frowned seriously.

Vivienne shook her head emphatically. “Dwarves are simply too short.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Leliana said, again holding her cards and throwing another gold piece into the pot. “I once knew a dwarf who bragged that he was just the right height to show a human girl a good time.”

Berta guffawed and Cassandra blanched. “Charming,” said Vivienne.

Cassandra discarded the Song of Mercy before drawing another from the deck and casting her coin in, frowning transparently. “You and Dorian would have truly beautiful children,” she said wistfully to the ambassador.

Vivienne snickered. “My dear Seeker, our lady ambassador lacks the equipment to please our Altus, even if he weren’t going to be pressed into an arranged marriage someday.”

“Oh,” Cassandra said. “I had not realized.”

Berta pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. How someone could not know Dorian was gay was beyond her. “Surely there is someone for...Josie?” She tried on the ambassador’s nick name and Josephine smiled broadly in return.

“Why are we playing matchmaker for me and not you?” Josephine asked. “My father will arrange someone suitable for me, I’m sure. I think you need our efforts more than I.” She smiled harmlessly at the healer and reached out to squeeze her hand. “Don’t you agree?”

Berta shook her head and glanced at Vivienne. The enchanter kept her face neutral, looking at Berta with something more sympathetic and less pitying than her usual countenance, but said nothing.

Berta still clung to a hope that she wouldn’t be in Thedas long enough to form anything resembling a romantic attachment, but if she couldn’t get home? What then? Looking around the table at the women gathered she saw four independent, powerful and unmarried women. Thedas did not seem to require a man to survive. She pushed these thoughts aside and decided to avoid the question all together. “You shouldn’t wish me on any man from your world. I have a knack for catastrophe in my love affairs.”

Leliana scoffed at Berta. “You cannot say something like that and not tell us the story.”

“Did you leave someone behind?” Josephine leaned towards her, practically on the edge of her seat with anticipation of a juicy, tragic tale.

Berta gave a small bitter laugh. “The other way around. I was stupid and fell in love with a...” She paused, trying to think of a Thedosian equivalent of a journalist, “…a storyteller of sorts. I was working as a healer in a civil war on the other side of the world from my home, treating both sides and everyone caught in between, and he was there to observe the war and tell stories about what was
happening to the rest of the world. We were both from the same country, the only Americans there, the same city, in fact, and I let that disarm me.”

Josephine smiled dreamily. “Was he very handsome?”

“Yes,” Berta laughed. “Too handsome, and he knew it too. At any rate, I returned home before him and we wrote letters for a time. Then he stopped writing and I never heard from him again. I found out later he had promised himself to someone else before me and he married her.”

“Bastard,” Cassandra said, the heat in her words surprising Berta.

Berta fanned her cards out precisely in her hand. “At any rate, that was nearly six years ago. I don’t think about it much.”

Leliana looked sidelong at Berta, perhaps sensing that the healer was not being entirely truthful. “So, who is suitable for Josie, then?” The spymaster tapped her cards against the table impatiently, rescuing Berta from having to elaborate any further. “Does anyone in the Inquisition meet your standards?” she asked Vivienne.

The Enchanter swirled her glass and took a thoughtful sip. “No one comes to mind. Oh wait, me. But alas for you, my dear,” she directed at Josephine, “I am spoken for.”

Josie smiled quietly to herself, spreading her cards before her. “I might like a certain Grey Warden.”

“You can’t be serious?” Vivienne set her glass down rather hard. “The man is...well, ill-suited for you.”

Berta looked from the ambassador to Vivienne, feeling a little indignant on the Warden’s behalf. “Wait, what’s wrong with Blackwall?”

“Leaving aside the man’s insufficient grooming and complete lack of refinement, he is a blunt instrument, a weapon specialized to combat a foe that is not a current concern.” Vivienne waved her hand. “Honestly, I don’t even know why he’s here.”

Josephine looked slightly put out. “I just think he’s charming and kind,” she said quietly.

“Not to mention that famed Grey Warden stamina,” Cassandra said, studying her cards. Everyone looked at the Seeker in surprise. “Or so I’ve heard,” she finished lamely.

“Oh, Josie, you are a sweet soul.” Leliana looked fondly at the ambassador. “And what do women in your world value in a mate, Berta?”

Berta shook her head. “I can’t speak for all womankind, but I can imagine women in my world having pretty much this same conversation.”

“So, Earth women might salivate over a Qunari the same way the tavern girls do every time Iron Bull walks by?” Leliana raised an eyebrow.

Berta chuckled. “I’m sure he would have great appeal to a certain segment of the population.” She took another large sip of liqueur. “But enough of this. It is your turn, Josie.”

Josephine drew her card and laid it on the table. “Angel of death,” she said with a vulpine smile, laying all her cards out. “And unless I am very much mistaken, I win.”

Berta sighed, throwing her cards down on the table. It was to be expected, really. “Varric’s going to
have to rethink my nickname when he gets back.”

The players dispersed, Josephine kindly choosing not to count her winnings in front of them. Berta eyed the liqueur and seeing that it was nearly gone, knocked the last bit back directly from the bottle and handed the empty bottle to Vivienne, who raised her eyebrows but said nothing. Josephine, Leliana and Vivienne took the stairs that led to Vivienne’s balcony and their bedrooms off the throne room and Cassandra and Berta exited the large front doors and headed down the steps. When they reached the upper courtyard, Berta made to say her good nights, but Cassandra wavered a moment, shuffling her feet.

“What is it?” Berta blinked at the Seeker. She had observed her most days in the last week either training the troops or sparring in the upper courtyard. With a blade in hand she was fearless, capable of shaking off physical blows that made Berta feel lightheaded, giving Berta the distinct impression that the Seeker’s armor would bend and break well before the warrior herself would. But here she was, weaponless, shifting uncertainly.

The Seeker frowned and clutched her fists at her sides, as if to keep from wringing her hands. “You will not tell the dwarf about...” She trailed off uncertainly, worry knitting her brow.

Berta pressed her lips together to keep from laughing at the Seeker’s distress. “You’re really worried about this.”

Cassandra sighed explosively. “If he were to find out, he would be insufferable.” She shook her head and paced away from Berta before turning back. “You do not know him as I do. I held him prisoner and questioned him when I was sent to investigate the Chantry explosion in Kirkwall. I did my duty but...I have no doubt he would take any opportunity to seek retribution.”

Berta nodded sagely, trying to reassure the Seeker. “Cassandra, I keep secrets and I keep promises. If Varric hears of your admiration for his work, it won’t be from me.”

Cassandra visibly relaxed. “Thank you. This eases my mind.” She turned to leave.

“Might I ask something of you?”

The Seeker tensed as if expecting a condition for Berta’s silence.

“Could I borrow it when you’re done? I’m almost through ‘The Tale of the Champion’ and it’s nice to have something to read other than infirmary and casualty reports before bed.”

Cassandra relaxed again and smiled. “Vivienne may accuse me of sullying the minds of the Inquisition’s agents, but I will gladly lend it to you.” She bowed formally, a smile twisting the corner of her lips. “Good night, Lady Healer.”

Berta returned the Seeker’s bow, adding a hand flourish and laughing. “Goodnight, Lady Seeker.”

Berta turned and went down the last flight of stairs to the infirmary. There were three patients asleep on their bed rolls around the fire and Seria and Talwyn were bunked on their cots nearby, assigned to the overnight shift in the infirmary, wisely getting sleep while they could in case of emergency. Berta headed to her tent, tying the flaps behind her. The bath water was cold as Berta had forgotten to tell Meena that she was playing cards with Josephine, but she took a quick bird bath and splashed her face before changing into her scrubs and crawling into bed. She had barely begun to mentally review her day tomorrow before exhaustion and Orlesian liqueur took over and she fell hard asleep.

*~*~*~*~*~*
“M’lady?”

Berta groaned and pulled the blanket tighter. Hadn't she just climbed into bed?

“M’lady, wake up!”

A gentle hand shook her shoulder and Berta opened her eyes to see Meena leaning over her, a shawl around her shoulders and a candle in her hand. “Meena? What is it?” She sat up, seeing one tent flap tied open. It was still dark outside.

“I’m sorry, m’lady, but Commander Cullen sent for you. You’re to report to the War Room right away.” Meena put the candle on the desk and brought Berta’s sweatshirt out of the chest. “Put this on, m’lady. Hurry.”

Berta rubbed her face and tried to flatten her hair, tucking it again behind her ears, before pulling on the sweatshirt and sliding into her boots. “Ok, I’m up. Where’s the War Room?”

“I’ll take you, m’lady.”

Berta nodded, not feeling quite awake, but stumbling after Meena out of the infirmary. The patients and Seria and Talwyn were still asleep and Berta thought it quite unfair that the Red Cross members on overnight duty were getting more sleep than her. She sighed and followed her maid up the steps and through the great hall. They turned into Josephine’s empty office where a fire was blazing despite the hour, and through the far door into a dilapidated hallway ending at a set of massive wooden double doors. The wall to her right was crumbling and Berta could see the sky through the gap in the stones, its yawning blackness hanging menacingly outside the torchlit corridor. Meena knocked on the doors at the end of the hall and Berta heard Cullen’s voice bark a command to enter.

“I’ll be right here if you need anything, m’lady.”

Berta nodded numbly and opened the great doors to step inside. The room was a giant semicircle with intricately paned windows and a ring of statues displayed on poles: an owl, a fist and an Inquisition eye like the Seeker’s symbol, arranged around an immense irregular wooden table sitting on a tree trunk with gnarled roots for legs. On the table was a huge parchment map of Ferelden and Orlais, nearly covering its entire surface, scattered with markers that looked a bit like enlarged chess pieces, presumably marking Inquisition actions and troop movements. Berta took in the table, the map's vastness and the distribution of the markers, strewn across Ferelden, on the other side of the mountains in Orlais and even across the sea to the north in the Free Marches. The Inquisition’s reach covered much of the known world of Thedas. Berta swallowed hard, her own small part of that responsibility fluttering suddenly in her chest. She really had had no idea what an enormous enterprise the Inquisition was. Cullen stood on the far side of the table, dressed in his armor and cloak with dark circles under his eyes and his stubble longer than usual. Leliana stood next to him, looking wide awake as if she had perhaps not been to sleep at all. Josephine, dressed in a ruffled silk robe over her sleeping gown, held a cup of tea out to Berta as she came to stand beside the ambassador who drank from her own cup. Berta took the cup and sipped from it, grateful for something to help her wake up.

“I’m sorry to awaken you,” Leliana said. “We’ve had a raven from Crestwood. Caer Bronach has been captured and a dragon has been slain. The Inquisitor is grievously injured and has requested you attend her.”

“Wait, what?” Berta felt a little lost. “Caer Bronach? And a dragon?”

Cullen gestured to the map where there was a dark iron castle chess piece, slightly northwest to the
large lake that ran north to south along the line of mountains in the middle of the map. “A fortress along the Imperial Highway between Ferelden and Orlais. It was overrun by bandits and highwaymen, but the Inquisitor has recaptured it for our purposes.”

“Does the letter say how the Inquisitor was injured?” Berta was trying to think of what she would need to have prepared.

“By the dragon, I’d assume,” Cullen said somewhat sarcastically.

Berta gave him a withering look. “I figured that much. I meant, what are her injuries?”

Leliana shook her head. “The letter did not say.” She rested her hands on the table and looked between Cullen and Josephine. “We need to send Lady Shaw immediately, but we also need to garrison and supply the fortress.”

“I’m going there? I thought she was on her way back.” An all too familiar careening off-balanced sensation gripped Berta's stomach.

Josephine frowned primly. “She is too injured to move. You must go to her.”

Berta set her cup of tea carefully on the edge of the war table, willing her hands not to shake. She was just starting to feel safe and, if not comfortable, at least settled in Skyhold. Now she’d have to leave the little bit of Thedas known to her and set off into the wider world. The idea was, quite frankly, nauseating.

“We can have a supply train packed by first light,” Josephine was saying. “Cullen, you’ll need to pick your soldiers to garrison there.”

Cullen nodded. “Already done. I have several companies ready for deployment. One should be sufficient to garrison the fortress.”

“I will ready the ancillary staff.” Josephine tapped her quill thoughtfully. “The village itself may be a profitable place to look for new agents and resources.”

“I’ve had my agents working in the area for weeks.” Leliana picked a raven topped piece and moved it toward the fortress. “I will recall them to the keep to help organize reinforcements.”

Josephine scribbled something on her parchment. “Once the supply train makes it to Gherlen Pass, we can switch out to wagons for the rest of the trip. Unfortunately, a carriage will not be forthcoming,” she apologized to Berta. “Upscale transportation was not much of a consideration when outfitting our lyrium trading station.”

“Unless you can ride?” Cullen asked hopefully.

Berta nodded. “I can handle myself on a horse.”

Leliana smiled. “Good. Then from Gherlen’s Pass you can travel ahead with an escort. The wagons will only slow you down.”

“And I need a mage to accompany me,” Berta interjected. “Without knowing what the Inquisitor’s injuries are, I need to be prepared for every eventuality.”

Cullen nodded. “We can send a Templar escort as well. Who will you take with you?”

Berta thought quickly. “Fiona.”
“Alright. It’s settled then,” Cullen said with certainty. Everyone assemble at the training grounds. You’ll set off at first light.”

The next two hours were a flurry of activity as Meena helped Berta get ready to leave. A runner was sent to the tower to advise Fiona to make ready to depart. Meena was indispensable, producing traveling clothes for Berta, loose pants of some sort of rough grey material as heavy as canvas but softer and tall pale blue-gray cloth boots fitted with hard leather over the shins and flat smooth soles for riding. There was a fitted pale red undershirt, padded over the chest and back, a yellow linen tunic with a low-cut neckline and a pale blue heavy brocade coat that buckled up the front, with leather pauldrons sewn onto the shoulders. The coat’s sleeves were slightly puffy, in something like a renaissance style, but had the effect of giving her full range of motion in her arms despite the layers. The sleeves were also cut at the elbow which seemed strange to Berta until she saw the leather forearm protectors and the long knit fingerless gloves to pull over them that Meena also had found her. Everything had any number of leather straps and clasps to adjust things to her body and, other than the breeches sitting a little too loosely around her waist despite pulling the laces tight all the way, were, on the whole, comfortable. Meena brought a dark gray heavy, long wool cloak with a hood to wear over the entire outfit. It was densely woven, and its fibers coated with something slightly oily that Berta thought might render it largely waterproof. She emptied out her work bag and repacked it with parchment, two pens, an extra set of small clothes, her chemise for sleeping, chapstick, a drinking cup, a small eating knife and a sliver of herbal soap wrapped in a washing cloth. She thought briefly about leaving the letter from Minrathous behind but thought maybe she’d have time to review its contents with Dorian once she reached Crestwood.

Elan and Toph were summoned to help Berta fill each of the jars in Berta's healing kit to the brim and to pack a chest full of wax sealed bottles of precious healing potion with straw carefully layered between them. Berta stocked a basket full of boiled cloth bandages and added to it a bottle of strong spirits that Meena brought from the Herald’s rest, nesting it between the soft bandages, placing an oil cloth over the top of the basket and securing it with string.

Meena left Berta in her tent while she ran about getting the last of the supplies. Berta had just enough time to sit at her desk and scribble a list of pending tasks and instructions for Mother Giselle. She had finished the rotation schedule for the next seven days but would need the priestess to make the daily postings. She was supposed to meet with the wood craftsman from the refugee camp to discuss specifications for the apothecary kits but that would have to wait. Her lectures would wait as well. She hoped everything she had spent the last week carefully crafting did not fall apart in her absence.

And then suddenly it was time to go. Berta headed out of the keep and down the switchbacks to the training grounds in the dark, Cullen lighting the way with a torch, Jim and Meena helping Berta haul her gear and Josephine bringing up the rear. An entire company of soldiers were loitering on the training grounds, hurriedly lining up and snapping to attention as Sergeant Alia’s order as the Commander descended into their midst. Master Dennet was there and two of the young stableboys, one holding a torch and the other helping to wrangle the horses. Berta looked around and spied Fiona but was surprised by her appearance. She was in her mage’s robes and had no luggage with her.

“Fiona?” Berta asked, greeting her. “You don’t look very ready to go.”

Fiona bent her head apologetically. “I hope you will agree with me that it best that I stay here.”

“But I need a mage-“ Berta began to protest.

Fiona gestured for her to be quiet. “I know. Finn should go with you.” She looked earnestly into Berta’s face. “Finn is the most accomplished spirit healer we have. If the Inquisitor is injured, she
should have the best to care for her wounds.” She stepped closer keeping her voice low. “It also might not be a good idea to have the leader of the rebel mages seen riding free across Ferelden. Finn was not with the rebellion. He may be an apostate, but he is an anonymous apostate, being watched by an entire company of soldiers and a Templar.”

Berta followed Fiona’s gaze to the soldiers, undergoing a brief inspection by their Commander and Hugh, standing apart but looking very much at the ready. She nodded soberly, disappointed but knowing that Fiona probably had the right of things. She had hoped to have a friend along on her journey.

“Besides,” the petite mage continued, cocking her head, “we can’t have the leadership of two divisions of the Order absent. I hope I have your trust to run things in your absence.”

“You’re right, of course.” She chewed her lip thoughtfully. “Everything you need is in the drawer in the table in my tent. I had labelled it for Mother Giselle but Meena can bring it to you. The lecture can be skipped this week,” she paused looking to the enchanter, “unless there is something you want to cover?”

Fiona nodded thoughtfully. “I thought I might cover basic healing magical theory for the non-mage healers and midwives. It would foster greater understanding.”

Berta smiled. “Excellent. Let me tell Cullen that you’re officially in charge while I’m gone. Is Finn ready to go?”

Fiona returned her smile, obviously glad that Berta was willing to be flexible. “I’ll fetch him.” She turned to head towards the mage’s camp.

Dennet called Berta over, holding the reins of a chestnut horse, the mane and tail the same russet red as the coat, a white blaze down his forehead. He was a magnificent animal, his coat shining in the firelight, already saddled and bridled.

Berta reached for the reins but Dennet pulled them away, looking at Berta sternly. “The Commander said you know how to ride but I need to hear it from you. You can take care of this boy, yes? I’ll not have someone abusing him or not brushing him or feeding him properly.”

Berta looked Dennet in the eye. “I spent four years tending my own horse, Master Dennet. I will take good care of him.” Berta stepped forward, cupping her hand to the horse’s velvet soft muzzle, letting him smell her, his hot breath warming her fingers. “Do you have a small treat I could give to him? Not too much before we ride, but enough to let him know I’m his friend?”

The horse master smiled at her, producing a carrot from his pocket, pressing it to her hand. Berta broke it in halves and held it up to the horse’s mouth, keeping her fingers flat, letting the large animal take it from her hand. “That’s a good boy,” she murmured, patting his neck. “What’s his name?”

“This here is Hurlock, on account he was as ornery as a nest of darkspawn when he was broken but if you have a strong hand, he’ll treat you right. Show him respect but show him who’s boss and you’ll be fine.”

Berta nodded seriously. “Thank you, Master Dennet. I’ll take good care of him.”

Finn appeared at Berta’s elbow. “Time to go, my lady,” he said. He had a leather pack on his back and his staff but was wearing his mages robes.

“Not the best riding clothes, Finn,” Berta observed.
“I’m not much for horses.” He eyed Hurlock suspiciously. “I’ll walk with the soldiers.”

Berta started to protest but Alia was calling to the soldiers to form up and the riders to mount. Berta hurriedly found Cullen and told him of the change of plan with Finn accompanying her, leaving Fiona in charge in her absence. Cullen frowned slightly but said nothing. Berta, certain that the Commander did not like surprises of any sort, was just relieved he didn’t make a stink. She returned to Hurlock and mounted, Dennet handing her the reins so he could make a final adjustment to the stirrups. The saddle was halfway between a Western and English saddle, either of which Berta was used to, having a smaller pommel and horn than a Western saddle, but also a shorter cantle along the rear of the seat and a lighter weight leather jockey and skirt, more like an English saddle. She thought she could easily manage.

Josephine came up beside Berta, holding two items. “Here,” she said, reaching up to Berta. She handed her a small leather coin purse that lightly jingled and a dagger, a foot-long blade in a hardened black leather sheath, the unadorned handle glimmering a faint silver in the torchlight. “Take it.”

Berta reached for the weapon automatically as Josephine held it out to her. It was heavy and foreign in her hand and not much more useful than a paperweight given Berta’s lack of skill. “Josephine, I don’t...I can’t-”

Josephine shook her head. “I know. Just take it. Just in case.” She patted Hurlock’s neck perfunctorily. “And the money is yours, a portion of your earnings if you need it. Be safe, Berta.”

Berta felt a small lump in her throat. “You too, Josie.” She hastily tied the dagger’s scabbard to the ties along the front jockey on her right where she could reach it quickly, if needed, and tucked the coin purse inside her bag, slung across her back under her cloak.

“Inquisition, move out,” called Alia, mounted on a dun horse with a black mane. Hugh was behind her on a heavy gray war horse, strong enough to accommodate a man in full plate armor and Berta fell in behind them. Then came the first half of the soldiers and Finn on foot, then the pack horses of the supply train, loaded with gear, tents, bedrolls, food and spare weaponry. Berta located the horse loaded with her healing supplies, visually double checking to make sure everything was there. The other half of the company brought up the rear, Alia’s second in command on horseback at the back of the group.

Berta waved to Fiona, Meena and Josephine as the convoy started away from the training grounds, the women returning her wave. Cullen raised his hand as well, nodding encouragingly to Berta before she turned to settle into the saddle. Ahead lay the refugee camp, quiet in the predawn stillness. The faintest light was just appearing in the east at the end of the valley, a brighter bold blue than the rest of the inky night sky. Berta shivered and pulled her cloak around herself though she was not cold. Here we go, she thought. Out into the wide, wide world.
On the Road

What is that feeling when you're driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? It's the too-huge world vaulting us, and it's good-bye. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies.
-Jack Kerouac

Musical Accompaniment:
“That Lonesome Road” - James Taylor

The supply train was slow, but the path from the valley of Skyhold was only in the vaguest sense of the word a road. It plummeted sharply from the funeral grounds, twisting along the river between boulders and trees. Their pace would have been no faster even if it was only Berta and the other riders. Alia had said it would take at least four days to get to Crestwood, including their stopover at the lyrium trading post. Berta tried not to fret about the Inquisitor’s condition, doing her best to relax and enjoy the scenery. The path was beautiful, surrounded by dense short needled pines and soaring snow-covered mountains, all accompanied by the burbling of the river to their left as they descended.

They passed several Inquisition watch towers, inauspicious wooden structures, all recently constructed from their fresh hewn appearance. They were each manned by four soldiers and topped with signal fires, ready to light. If the Inquisition had been surprised in Haven, Commander Cullen had taken pains to make sure they would not be caught flat footed a second time.

By mid-day, they were on the lower slopes of the Frostbacks, traversing smoothly rolling hills over tussock-covered ground. Beyond, the terrain sloped shallowly to a huge lake, Lake Calenhad, Berta remembered from the map. She could only just see the other side in the distant haze and beyond it, stretching to the horizon, a great flat land of browns and greens. The snow had not yet reached down out of the mountains to the plains before them.

They headed straight for the lake, weaving between the brush on the hillside. As they neared the water, Berta saw what at first she thought was an aqueduct but as they came closer, she noticed a ramp up to the top, leading beneath the narrow stone arches along its side. Portions of the structure were crumbling into disrepair, leaving gaps in the pale gray stone. Was it a wall?

“Hugh?” Berta trotted Hurlock up beside him as he glanced back at her. “What is that?”

Hugh followed her gaze toward the structure near the lake. “Oh, that’s the Imperial Highway.”

“A highway? Why is it way out here? I don’t really see a lot of people around to use it.”

“It’s a relic from the Tevinter Empire.” Finn spoke up from behind them, gesturing toward the road. “In the ancient past it was part of a network of imperial roads that connected throughout Thedas. This one heads south toward Redcliffe and completely surrounds Lake Calenhad. North of here, it branches towards the east to Denerim and to the west to Orzammar and then on to Orlais. In Ferelden, a lot of it is missing, scavenged for stone. In Orlais, parts of it are meticulously maintained.”

“Let’s get to the Lake. We’ll water the horses and rest,” Alia announced. As they neared the lake, Berta saw there was a gully under the highway, washed out beneath its stones. They picked their way through the gap, the riders ducking their heads under the roadway above. Berta reached up to trail her fingers along the underside of the ancient stones, wondering how long ago it had been built.
and who had held the chisel that shaped these stones. When they came out to the other side, the riders dismounted and stretched their legs. Berta removed her cloak, rolling it up and tying it to the back of Hurlock’s saddle. It was so much warmer now that they were out of the mountains, she didn’t think she’d be needing it again until night fall. Two of the soldiers began distributing food from the packs, hard tack biscuits and dried fruit, while another, a grey bearded veteran who introduced himself as Jaxon, took charge of watering the horses. Berta sat on a fallen tree by the edge of the lake next to Finn.

“How you holding up?” Berta took a drink from her water skin before offering it to the mage.

“Oh, just fine. I’ve walked plenty farther than this.” He produced his own skin and took a long draw. “Ariane and I have been all over Ferelden. We could never stay in one place for too long.”

“Because you were an apostate?”

He nodded. “That and Ariane’s clan didn’t take too kindly to her marrying a ‘shem.’”

“I’ve heard that word before. What does it mean?”


Berta cocked her head. “I don’t understand what’s insulting about being ‘quick.’”

“Ah,” Finn sighed. “We are the quick children because we are not immortal like the ancient elves. If you believe that sort of thing.”

Having seen her share of sick and injured elves over the last weeks, Berta was disinclined to believe in elven immortality. “So, when do I get to meet her?”

“Ariane? Whenever you like. As soon as we get back.”

Alia stood from where she was resting on a large stone by the water’s edge. “Alright, men, break’s over. Let’s move out.”

The pack horses were strung together again, the soldiers formed up and the riders remounted. Alia led them back under the road and up a ramp on the far side, bringing them to the wide smooth surface of the Imperial Highway. Berta was impressed, seeing the stone road stretching far before them, reminded of Roman ruins.

The road stayed near the edge of the lake, never straying too far, occasionally bridging small streams that came down from the foothills of the Frostbacks and once forming a wide span over an inlet of the lake. Three times they had to leave the road to navigate a collapsed section and once they had to carefully pick their way over a collapsed archway.

The scenery varied little, the high jagged tops of the mountains to their left and the wide expanse of Lake Calenhad to their right, the sandy shoreline dotted with infrequent stands of what looked like cottonwood trees, their downy seeds drifting in the sunshine.

The soldiers had an easy camaraderie with each other, and Berta enjoyed listening unobtrusively to their conversation. There was a great debate about who was the best champion of the joust until someone broke in stating that in his opinion the melee was the real test of a knight’s worth. That led to a spirited volley of insults, culminating in some coarse assumptions about sword size before Alia told them to knock it off because there was a lady present. Berta assumed Alia meant her.
They stopped twice more over the course of the afternoon to rest. Not long after the second break, the terrain began to steadily climb up and away from the lake, high cliffs emerging over the water’s edge. About the time the shadows really began to lengthen, the highway forked, the elevated road continuing to the northeast, following the shoreline, and another branch, no longer elevated, leading back up into the mountains to the west.

Alia dismounted and declared that they would camp for the night before pushing on to the trading station in the morning.

Berta dismounted begrudgingly, thinking that there was plenty of light left yet to continue before setting up camp. She beckoned to Finn and asked him to hold Hurlock’s reins while she spoke with the Sergeant.

“Sergeant Alia?” Berta followed her as the woman headed towards the other soldiers. She pitched her voice low, not wanting to question her in front of her men. “Isn’t it a little early to stop? I’d like to get to the Inquisitor as quickly as possible.”

“It’s Captain,” Alia said gruffly. “Commander Cullen promoted me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Berta apologized, acutely feeling her nonmilitary role. “Uh, I mean, congratulations.”

Alia continued towards her men who were starting to set up camp. “There’s not enough light to make it all the way to the trading station and you don’t want to be out and about in the pass after dark.” Several of the soldiers gave assenting grunts.

“Lots of crevices to the Deep Roads around Orzammar, m’lady,” chimed in Jaxon. “We’re not in a Blight but the darkspawn still raid from time to time. Best not be around when they do.”

Berta had heard a lot about darkspawn and the Blight, none of it good, but she still didn’t feel like she really understood where these below ground monsters came from and what constituted a Blight. Having nothing intelligent to say on the matter, she let it go. She was well aware that she was cargo to be delivered to Caer Bronach, and she didn’t want to fulfill the expected role of unnecessarily demanding noblewoman.

Berta turned to see Finn standing at arm’s length from Hurlock, holding the reins, bent awkwardly at the waist, clearly attempting to stay as far away from the animal as possible.

Berta chuckled under her breath at his tense posture as she began to unsaddle the horse. “You know, you could pat his neck and tell him he’s a good boy. He won’t bite you.”

“I know for a fact that’s not true,” Finn said stiffly. He scooched his feet further away, inadvertently pulling on the reins. Hurlock obediently took a step toward him. Finn gave a small, unmanly squeak.

Berta quickly unsaddled the horse, trading the tack to Jaxon for a cloth and brush, rubbing Hurlock down, drying the dampness from his coat and then brushing him. She felt eyes on her back and turned to see Jaxon appraising her. He said nothing and walked away, smiling to himself and shaking his head. Berta wasn’t sure what the source of his amusement was, but she was determined that she would not be dead weight on this trip.

Jaxon handed her a length of rope. “You ever hobble a horse before?”

“Can’t say that I have.” Berta was game. “Show me how?”

“Alright. Now you always want to be on your horse’s left and loop the rope around the right leg
first...there you go, move it below the fetlock...now twice around...”

Berta knelt at Hurlock’s hooves and followed Jaxon’s instructions, hobbling the gelding successfully. She unbridled him and passed the tack off to Jaxon, then looking around for what to do next.

Berta helped unload the supply train horses, laid out bedrolls, and did her part gathering wood for the fire. She offered her help for supper but was shooed away by the soldier in charge of the cooking. Berta had to admit that everyone was probably better off. While she had some skill with sweets, she wasn’t much of a cook.

Berta set her bed roll up against the side of the highway, out of the way, where she could sit cross legged and lean against the stone. She put her bag by the head of her bed roll and pulled out the small coin purse Josephine had given her. She emptied the contents into her hand. Five gold sovereigns, each stamped with the likeness of King Alistair she had been told, ten five-silver pieces and ten single silvers. It felt like play money. She didn’t know what she could possibly spend it on as the Inquisition seemed to provide everything she needed but she supposed it was good to have, as Josephine said, just in case.

Berta put the coins away in the purse and stashed it back in her bag. She watched the soldiers’ interactions, their clear comfort with each other and their company. The two cooks worked side by side with ease, their tasks delineated without discussion. Jaxon and the other soldier tending the horses worked efficiently, one passing the brush to the other at the same moment the other reached for it. The company was a unit, moving together almost like a living organism. Berta stayed on her bedroll feeling out of place as Alia checked in with each and every member of the company, making sure they were well. Their smiles and gentle ribbing showed their admiration for their new Captain. Finn must have felt similarly out of place as he was hunched on his bed roll down the wall from Berta, his nose in a book.

The sun set and they supped in the firelight, wooden bowls of some kind of steaming boiled grain and beans. After supper, while the soldiers busied themselves with final preparations for bed, Alia came and stood over Berta on her bedroll. Berta jumped to her feet.

“Captain.”

“Healer.” She gestured to the bedroll. “Mind if I sit?”

“Oh, no, please.” Berta sat back down, leaving room for the Captain.

Alia sat somewhat gracelessly, resting her elbows on her knees looking towards the cook fire. “I’ve never properly thanked you. I didn’t realize what you’d done until some of the other guards told me.” She turned and looked at Berta, her large hazel eyes boring into her. “So, thank you. You saved my life.”

“You’re welcome.” Berta smiled at her. “It’s my job.”

Alia smirked. “Well you’re good at it. I figure if the Inquisitor needs you, we best get you there as quickly as possible. Tomorrow, I’ll lead the company to the lyrium station. I’ve got to unload the horses into wagons and send the supply train back to Skyhold with fresh lyrium stores. Jaxon can escort you straight on to Caer Bronach. You seemed to get on well with him.”

“What about Finn?”

“What about him? If he can’t ride, he can’t keep up with you. He’ll be along in the wagons.” Alia shrugged as if it made no difference. “He’ll be a day behind you at most.” She stood. “I’m assuming
that plan is acceptable, m’lady?”

Berta nodded mutely, again feeling her faux nobility like a wall between her and the Captain. “Yes, thank you.”

The Captain looked down at Berta. “Best get some sleep, m’lady. We’ll be up early.” She nodded her goodnight and turned to find her men assigned to first watch.

Berta removed her boots and jacket, sleeping in her clothing like the soldiers, her cloak folded up for a pillow. She smelled of horse and sweat but was really too tired to care. Everyone was settling down to sleep, their silhouettes outlined by the faint light of the banked fire. Berta could just see Alia and two soldiers heading away from the camp, setting their perimeter for the watch. She rolled onto her back, staring up into the night sky dense with stars and was struck by a sudden memory, a camping trip long ago, she must have been in high school, on a trip with the Outing Club. They were on the banks of the Green River, sleeping under an open sky after a long day of rowing. Listening to the water lapping far below the cliffs on the shores of the lake, she could almost imagine she was on that same long-ago river bank, and a feeling of peace came over her. She had saved Alia, she could save the Inquisitor too. A half formed, faraway thought drifted across her brain in the moments before she fell asleep: maybe this is where I’m supposed to be.

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Berta awoke to Finn shaking her shoulder. She was stiff and cold, the sun not yet above the horizon. There was a fine layer of frost over the grass. The soldiers were all up and moving, putting out the fire and loading up the horses. Berta hurriedly put on her boots and jacket and swung her cloak around her shoulders. She packed up her bedroll, tying it into a neat bundle. She looked up to see Jaxon standing over her holding a saddle and bridle.

“You know how to tack up?”

Berta took the equipment, looking around for Hurlock. “I can manage, I’ll holler if I need help.”

The gelding was not far away, pulling at some dry grass. His ears perked up at Berta’s approach. She set the tack down and patted his neck then running her hands over his back, making sure there were no burrs or debris in his coat before saddling him.

“I don’t know why Dennet said you were such a monster. You’ve been a very good boy.” Hurlock whinnied and tossed his head as if to say, I know, right? Berta stroked his forehead and rubbed his neck again. “Yes, you’re a very good boy.”

Berta put on the blanket and the settled the saddle on his back, running her hand beneath the pommel to make sure it wasn’t putting too much pressure on his withers and then tightening the front girth. Her dagger had come loose, and she tightened it in place. Hurlock chuffed at her as she put on the bridle put quieted as soon as knelt to undo his hobbles. She stood, holding his reins and saw Jaxon looking at her.

“You’re not quite like most ladies I’ve met,” he observed, leaving Berta nonplussed.

“Uh, thanks?” She wasn’t sure what he expected but she suspected that the pampered noble stereotype had its roots in truth.

He laughed at her response and handed her a set of the saddle bags from over his shoulder and a water skin. Berta secured the saddle bags and then collected her bedroll and her bag and tied the bed roll to the back of Hurlock’s saddle. Jaxon had his horse and the reins of one of the pack horses in
his hands. Berta checked the pack horse’s luggage, verifying that the apothecary box, basket of bandages and crate of healing potions were all accounted for. She tied her work bag to the top of the bandage’s basket.

“I guess we’re good to go.” She looked around for Finn and found him standing nearby looking guilty.

“I’m sorry I’m not better with horses.” He shuddered. “They’re just so big and smelly. And dangerous.”

Berta had initially been a little irritated but being annoyed with Finn wouldn’t change anything. “Just hurry along as soon as you can.” She placed a hand on his shoulder and looked at him in mock seriousness. “Because if my horse eats me, it’ll all be up to you.”

Finn laughed and shoved her hand off his shoulder but looked nervously at Hurlock. “Don’t be daft.”

Hugh clapped Finn on the back, the mage wincing at the heavy familiarity. “I’ll get him to you in one piece, m’lady.”

“Thank you, Hugh. I know you will.”

And with that, Berta and Jaxon mounted and rode north, as Captain Alia led the supply train and the remainder of the company west towards Gherlen Pass.

*~~~~~*~~~~~*

They made good time, trotting and walking, never pushing the horses too hard. The road became more broken and there were longer stretches without the high overhead arches. By mid-morning, Berta could see small islands appearing out of the mist on the lake, too far away to tell if they were inhabited. Twice they saw other travelers on the road, merchants with wagons and small complements of presumably hired muscle who looked at them suspiciously as they rode by. In the late afternoon, a small island appeared in the distance, out in the middle of the lake, a tall spire atop a building with graceful flying buttresses.

“Jaxon, what’s that?” Berta shielded her eyes with her hand, wishing she had her sunglasses.

“That there’s Kinloch Hold.”

Berta had thought that the Tower was just a manner of speech, like the Circle. She didn’t expect it to literally be a tower any more than she had expected it to be a circular building. It looked almost Gothic in architectural style. “How do you reach it? By boat?”

Jaxon shrugged. “Not sure why you’d want to. Mage towers are to be avoided. They’re locked up for a reason, right?”

Berta said nothing in response. “Welcome to Alcatraz,” she murmured under her breath, wondering if this world that had dragons might have some shark-like variant lurking in Lake Calenhad’s depths.

They pushed on until it was almost too dark to see, taking shelter in a copse of pines off the main road, hobbling the horses and unrolling their bed rolls under the low hanging branches of the trees. Jaxon took first watch much to Berta’s gratitude. Two days in the saddle after not riding in recent memory had left her sore and exhausted. Sometime after moonrise, Jaxon shook her awake and Berta traded off with him, leaning up against a tree, peering out into the dark, not sure what she was to watch for. Bandits? Highwaymen? Lions, tigers and bears? Oh my?
She drifted off at least once despite her efforts to stay awake, the soft wind and the smell of the pines lulling her brain with their pleasant summer camp ambience. She awoke with a start some time later. When it began to get light, she woke Jaxon.

“We can make Caer Bronach today if we push it. Maybe get some fresh mounts at the Calenhad docks.”

Berta nodded in agreement, not having much else to say and wondering if Master Dennet would have her hide if she didn’t bring Hurlock home. She was starting to get rather attached to the gelding but if they could arrive at the fortress sooner, then that was the choice she’d have to make. They packed up quickly and took their breakfast on the road, eating another meal of hard tack and dried fruit, the horses at a walk. Once they’d finished their food, they pushed again to a trot and then an easy canter, letting the horses eat up the road.

By noon they had reached the Calenhad Docks, which Berta saw was a small hamlet of wattle and daub buildings built right up against the walls of the highway, clustered together down a steep slope to the water where several wooden docks jutted out in the lake. There was a broken branch of the highway that led out toward the Circle tower but didn’t extend far beyond the shore before crumbling into the water, segments of bridge scattered along a broken line out to the far shore. The tower was far closer to the docks than it had been when Berta first glimpsed it. Up close it was foreboding, a tall dark structure with narrow windows. Sauron’s eye would have looked right at home perched atop it.

They made their way into the village. It felt strangely lifeless. There were few people about and all of them looked warily at Jaxon and Berta, skittering away into their cottages like so many roaches when the light turns on. They didn’t see anything resembling a stable, so they tied their horses up at the what appeared to the only tavern in the village, a frothing mug of ale on its battered wooden sign, and went inside.

The main room of the tavern was nearly empty, only one patron at a table near the back, head down on the table, dead to the world.

“Welcome to the Spoiled Princess. What can I get you?” The man behind the bar said with more cheer than Berta expected. He was a slightly heavy-set fellow with hair that was dark but shot with grey.

“We’re looking for fresh mounts,” Jaxon said.

The man shook his head sadly. “I’d send you to the stables, but it wouldn’t do you any good. Any horse worth taking was bought or stolen when the rebel mages left the tower.” He shrugged and listlessly ran his hand along the bar. “And the rest were eaten. We don’t have a lot of trade coming through here what with the war and the tower empty. And no pilgrims taking boats to Haven anymore neither.”

Berta looked at Jaxon and inclined her head to the door.

“You and your woman want a room for the night?” The man tried to smile invitingly but just ended up just looking desperate. “You can rest your horses in our paddock.”

Jaxon shook his head, amused at the man’s assumption. “Nah, we’d best be on our way.”

The innkeeper looked crestfallen. “Well, for a copper there’s a pump and bucket outside. You can water your horses before you’re off.”
“There’s a rather large lake nearby for free,” Jaxon observed.

The innkeeper smiled sheepishly. “Can’t blame a man for trying, serah.”

Jaxon inclined his head to the man. “We’ll take our leave.”

Berta followed Jaxon back out to the horses. She picked her empty water skin off her saddle and pulled her coin purse out of her bag. “If you’re going to water the horses, I’ll be right back.”

Jaxon glanced at the water skin and shook his head. “He’ll try to rob you blind.”

Berta shrugged. “Probably.” She trotted back inside, Jaxon behind her shaking his head.

The innkeeper eyed her suspiciously. “Back so soon?”

Berta plopped her water skin down on the bar. “How much to fill this with wine?”

The man made a show of hefting the waterskin and holding it up to his hand in estimation. “That’s a fair size. Four silvers, I’d say.”

Berta had no idea what the Thedosian going price was for wine, but she was sure that four silvers was ridiculous. “It must be a fine wine,” she ventured.

The innkeeper nodded soberly. “A fine wine for a fine lady,” he said, all smiles.

Berta gave a small laugh. “Sure,” she said. “White or red?”

“I have a solid workman’s white and a fine Orlesian red.”

Berta also highly doubted that this backwater inn had a real Orlesian red given the difficulty Vivienne had claimed to have procuring wines from her Duke’s vineyard in these troubled times. “The white will be fine. For three silvers.”

The wine was still clearly overpriced given the alacrity with which the innkeeper agreed but that wasn’t really the point for Berta. He took the skin from the bar and went into the back room, where Berta was fairly certain he was watering the wine. He came out a moment later holding the skin before him.

“Three silvers, please, as agreed.”

Berta looked in the small coin purse Josephine had given her and took out a silver piece that was stamped with the rune for the number five. “Do you have change?”

He frowned seriously and Berta could see the frank desperation for the money on his face. “Not sure I can break that.”

Berta pressed her lips together to suppress a laugh. The innkeeper was remarkably transparent. “Well how about you throw in some food for the road. What have you got?”

The man pretended to waver. “Everything we have is fresh made here in our kitchens,” he boasted. “Not much good for the road.”

“Well how about you make me a sandwich?”

“A what?” He seemed genuinely confused.
Berta sighed, deciding to pull out the big guns. “I’d like to tell the other Inquisition forces about your tavern here. I’d like to tell them it’s good spot to come for a rest, a good mug of ale and a good meal.”

The man’s eyes widened. “You’re with the Inquisition?”

Berta nodded. “Yes, serah.”

“Oh, well why didn’t you say so?” He bustled back into the back room taking the waterskin with him. “Larana,” he hollered. “Get your hide into the kitchen!”

Berta left the Spoiled Princess a few minutes later carrying her waterskin, refilled with a crisp white wine, the innkeeper saying that now that he felt it again, it seemed a bit short, and two approximations of sandwiches, fine crusty white loaves, stuffed with blackened fish and fresh herbed pickles that the innkeeper swore were Larana’s specialty, both wrapped in oiled parchment paper. Larana herself had peeked out from the kitchen to thank Berta for her patronage and Berta felt so sorry for the wan looking woman that she pulled another five-silver piece from her purse and snuck it into her hand when the innkeeper wasn’t looking.

“What took you so long, m’lady?” Jaxon asked, not hiding his irritation.

“Just spreading a little Inquisition good will,” Berta said. “And here. Have some lunch.”

They rode away from the village by the docks headed east along the imperial highway, eating their lunch in the saddle. Before too long the highway crumbled to gravel, becoming nothing but a rutted track in the grass.

“What happened to the road?” Berta asked.

“Scavenged for building. West Hill’s not too far from here. The city walls are made from stone from the highway as is the keep.”

They continued along the road, such as it was, alternating pace to keep the horses from getting too tired. Jaxon wasn’t much of a conversationalist but at their pace there wasn’t much time for chatting. Over the afternoon, the terrain rose from the lake, becoming hilly and rocky, large boulders protruding from between the grass and brush. They crossed a stream and stopped to water the horses again. Berta splashed her face in the ice-cold water and ran her damp fingers through her hair. She hoped there was somewhere to take a bath when they reached Crestwood. She felt like her clothes could stand up on their own.

The sun had just set when they saw ahead two short square towers on either side of the road. They looked abandoned, no light in their windows and no one manning their crenellations.

“Crestwood tollhouse,” Jaxon explained. “Guess not many travelers these days.”

They passed beneath the towers as the light was fading, the dark empty windows filling Berta with dread. The road sloped down toward a small lake. There was a towering stone statue of a woman at the edge of the lake. She would have been at least twenty feet tall if her head and most of her shoulders were not lying in the shallows at her feet. Vines climbed up the statue’s skirt, adding to the atmosphere of decay.

They reached a well-maintained flat stone bridge over the end of the lake, large stone hounds carved into the posts at either end of the bridge, one with a lit brazier crackling in the dimming light.

“Well, someone’s been out on the roads,” Jaxon observed, looking at the lit brazier. He stopped and
“Why are we stopping?”

“We’re almost there. I just want to light a torch so they can see it’s us. I don’t want to get shot by our own men.” He pulled a prepared torch from their pack horse’s luggage and thrust it into the lit brazier. Once it caught, he handed it to Berta, mounted, and then beckoned for it back.

“Oh, I can carry it—”

“No, m’lady. If the bandits aren’t completely cleared out, they’ll take a shot at whoever they can see.” He matter-of-factly took the torch from her. “Ride behind me at the edge of the torchlight.”

Berta nodded obediently, a little ashamed at how grateful she was to have Jaxon with her. “Thank you.”

“If I let the Chief Healer die on the way to save the Inquisitor, I don’t think I’d be around much longer anyway.” He set his mouth into a serious frown. “Let’s go.”

The roadway beyond was irregular and hard to follow in spots, fading into the grass as it steadily climbed. In a few places, Berta wasn’t sure how Jaxon knew the way, the path was so indistinct. They passed several wooden framed cottages, their windows dark and doors left open. There were stone walls around small kitchen gardens, overgrown and tangled with weeds. After long tense minutes of walking the horses in the semi dark, keeping her eyes on the ground so she wouldn’t be night blinded by the torch, the road began to slope downward again. She looked up, realizing that they were almost on top of the keep, its tall walls blotting out the stars of the night sky. But then she saw the gallows, a rough wooden structure hung with corpses, most rotted to nearly bones, hanging motionless in the still night. Their features were grotesque, distorted by decay and the flickering torchlight. Berta looked away, keeping her focus on the pack horse ahead of her.

They followed the path down to the front of the keep, a wide-open ramp of dirt and stones leading up to great wooden doors.

“Halt! In the name of the Inquisition, who goes there?” a familiar voice cried from the top of the battlements over the doors.

“Jaxon Farrier, man-at-arms of the Inquisition, second to Captain Alia, and Lady Shaw, Chief Healer of the Order—”

“Lucky?”

“Varric is that you?” Berta squinted up and saw the light glinting on a cross bow trained on them.

The dwarf laughed, withdrawing his weapon. “Get your ass in here.” And then to someone below, “Open the doors!”

The large wooden doors began to creak open and Jaxon and Berta walked their horses up the ramp and through the great doors into a courtyard. There were two Inquisition soldiers by the doors, beginning to push them closed again as soon as the horses were through. There were lit torches along the walls of the courtyard. There was a stable ahead of them, with the Inquisitor’s party’s horses visible inside and two long staircases on either side, leading up into the rest of the keep. Varric slid down a ladder at the top of the stairs to their left and hustled down toward them.

“You made it. Hero will be thrilled. His head was about to explode with worry.”
Berta dismounted looking around the otherwise empty courtyard. One soldier who had been manning the door came to take Hurlock’s reins from Berta while the other began unloading the pack horse.

“Quit that,” Varric said irritably, shooing him away. “Get up there with a bow. You’re on watch until I get back.”

“Yes, Ser!” The soldier said enthusiastically, grabbing a bow and quiver from the weapon rack under the eaves of the stable and running up the steps.

“And I’m not ‘Ser!’” He called after the soldier. “These new recruits are so eager,” he said under his breath. “Let’s get you to her Inquisitorialness.”

Berta glanced at Jaxon, who was already walking the horses into the stable. “Don’t worry about it, m’lady. I’ll take care of them.”

“Wait a moment.” Berta hurriedly unlaced her healing kit from the pack horse and looked to Varric. “Lead the way.”

He led her up a long flight of stairs to a landing where the stairs made a sharp left to meet their mirror from the other side of the courtyard. On this second landing was a single wooden door beneath a stone archway that led into a secondary courtyard with a small outbuilding to their left and wide shallow steps leading to a large raised dais on which a fire was burning brightly. Dorian sat on a wooden bench, a book open in his lap, his staff leaning casually against his shoulder.

“Hey, Sparkler, look what I found.”

Dorian looked up from his book languidly, then saw Berta and shot to his feet. “Vishante kaffas, you look horrid.”

“Good to see you, too, Dorian.” She noted that the mage had not a hair out of place and looked quite dashing in his cream-colored robe with blood red armor accents. How on earth did he wear that color in these conditions and still look pristine?

“Why didn’t you tell me she was here?” he accosted Varric.

“She just got here. I'm telling you now.”

Dorian rushed to her, looking concerned. “Have you supped? You need a bath, if I may be so bold, and perhaps a change of clothes...you smell of—”

“Horse, I know.” Berta looked between Varric and Dorian noticing that neither of them seemed particularly anxious to get her to the Inquisitor. “Don’t I need to tend to the Inquisitor right away? I doubt she cares what I smell like. Isn’t she ‘grievously injured?’”

“Well...” began Varric.

“Yes and no,” said Dorian.

Berta put her hands on her hips and looked at the mage and the dwarf. “I did not ride for three days and ignore my duties to the Red Cross for ‘Yes and no.’ What the fuck?”

Varric had the decency to look sheepish while Dorian pursed his lips as if tasting something he disliked.
Berta stood there waiting for them to say something. “Well?”

Varric sighed heavily. “Just come see for yourself.” He trudged off towards the next flight of stairs.

Berta followed him and Dorian trailed behind her up the stairs to a short balcony like section of wall overlooking the second courtyard, through another door and into an upper courtyard, strewn with debris. Varric headed towards another wooden door to their right, tucked in at the base of the high stone wall. “She’s in here.” He held the door open for Berta to go through and then followed with Dorian close behind.

It was a large, high ceilinged room, lit by torchlight, lined with large wooden barrels taller than Berta. It had an earthy smell of yeast and barley that told Berta that the barrels presumably contained ale. Blackwall appeared from around one of the barrels, wearing his armor and brandishing his giant two-handed sword as if they were intruders.


The Warden's face lit up immediately when he saw Berta. “Thank the Maker you're here. You must be able to help her.” He disappeared back around the corner.

Berta glanced at Dorian and Varric in turn. Varric gestured as if to say, ladies, first. Berta headed around the barrel to find herself in the other half of the L-shaped room. A bedroll had been placed on the floor and the Inquisitor sat on it, leaning back against the crates behind her, her legs thrown out in front of her. At first Berta thought she was raising her right arm in greeting, but she quickly took in the bend of the Inquisitor’s elbow and her hand limp just above her shoulder. Her head slumped awkwardly to her left, her back leaning against the wall as if she was exhausted from being in this position. Averanna’s yellow eyes met Berta’s and she gave a soft hiss.

“It's about time, Healer.”
Caer Bronach

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My armor is like tenfold shields, my teeth are swords, my claws spears, the shock of my tail a thunderbolt, my wings a hurricane, and my breath death!

-J.R.R. Tolkien

Musical Accompaniment:

“Amhran Na Farraige” - Lizz Robinett, Luke Thomas

Berta froze in surprise, taking in the Inquisitor’s awkward position. “How long have you been like this?”

Avyanna shifted where she sat and grimaced. “Since I stabbed a dagger through a dragon’s skull, and it tried to throw me off.”

Berta couldn’t imagine the slight woman engaged in hand to hand combat with what she imagined as a typical dragon, but she knew the Inquisitor was stronger than she looked. Berta paused, taking stock of the Inquisitor’s position as she sat on her bed roll, leaning awkwardly against the tarp covered crates behind her, her legs extended. She had managed to remove her armor, presumably with help, but she was still dressed in her heavy coat that reached up to her neck. “I need to examine you first, my lady.”

“Alright, let’s clear out, boys,” Varric said.

Blackwall knelt by the Inquisitor’s side, his brow furrowed with worry. “I’ll stay, Your Worship, if you’ll permit me.”

Avyanna frowned and waved him away with her left hand. “I don’t need a nursemaid.”

“Yes, Your Worship.” Blackwall stood, bowed and reluctantly left the room with Varric and Dorian.
Berta set her apothecary box down on the floor and wiped her hands on her pants. She knelt on the bed roll next to the Inquisitor, hesitant to invade her personal space. She felt the nervous twinge in her fingers that usually meant she was about to perform a challenging surgery.

“I’ll need to take this off.”

“You’re no squire but I trust you’ll figure it out.” Avyanna’s yellow eyes flashed over her and Berta gave a nervous smile, hoping that the comment was an attempt at humor.

Berta unbuckled the clasps of the padded, fitted jacket that the Inquisitor wore beneath her armor, noting the fine but sturdy make of the silver clasps, the soft, pliant dark green leather and the felted wool lining, dense and soft against Berta’s knuckles. She knew nothing about appropriate clothing for fighting but she could tell that the Inquisitor’s garments were well crafted and functional as well as beautiful.

The trickiest part was sliding the sleeve of the coat over Avyanna’s extended right shoulder, but she managed to straighten her arm to give Berta a straight shot to pull the sleeve up and off. As soon as Berta removed the offending garment, Avyanna let her arm collapse again with a low groan. There was a faint sheen of sweat on her forehead and across her tanned cheeks.

“Alright. Almost there,” Berta said, filling the awkward silence with her voice as she undressed the elf.

Underneath the coat was a light linen shift, shapeless and wrinkled. “Just cut it off,” Avyanna growled. “I have others. Use my dagger.”

Berta followed Avyanna’s gaze to the two identical sheathed daggers next to the bed roll, nested in the loose straw on the floor. She picked up the closest one and unsheathed the cruel looking weapon. It was heavy, and longer than the dagger Josephine had given her, the precise angular blade glowing with a faint green sheen in the torchlight. Berta knelt up and held the cuff of the Inquisitor’s right sleeve, taking care to lift the linen away from the Inquisitor’s skin, and sliced down the arm to the neck, the fabric parting cleanly on the razor honed edge. The renting fabric sounded loud in the otherwise quiet room. Leaning over the Inquisitor, she detected a faint scent of warm cloves and cinnamon oil. She found the sweet smell faintly jarring, not the blood and metal odor she might have expected. She idly wondered if the Inquisitor wore perfume. Berta let the remnant of the sleeve hang at the Inquisitor’s side, leaving her covered toga style in the remains of her tunic.

Berta replaced the dagger in its sheath and set it aside. She crouched next to Avyanna to examine her, feeling small and inconsequential beside Avyanna’s expansive presence. Berta swallowed hard
and focused on the task at hand. The shoulder was obviously dislocated, but Berta needed to ascertain if there were any other injuries. She inspected her patient’s arm, noting the deep nutmeg brown of the Inquisitor’s face lightening to a pale caramel color over Avyanna’s shoulder and arm. The skin was intact, unbroken with no scrapes, abrasions or bruising. Berta felt the smooth, hard bulge in Avyanna’s hairless arm pit that was the head of her humerus. Her arm and chest were covered with ropes of muscle, hard and sinewy. Just above the neck of the ruined tunic, there was a rough irregular scar, roughly an inch wide, encircling the base of her neck. Berta felt a shudder creep through her own shoulders as she avoided thinking about what had caused such a scar. She pressed gently but firmly along the sharp line of Avyanna’s collar bone, feeling the hard callus of what she guessed was an old fracture, and along her shoulder blade, looking for acute fractures and finding none. Avyanna’s face remained stoic but Berta saw the muscles in her jaw clench.

“Did you try to reduce...um, put your shoulder back in place?”

“Of course I did,” she snapped. “We couldn’t move it, so I took a healing potion. It made it worse.”

Berta’s cocked her head. “Worse? In what way?”

Avyanna took an exaggerated slow deep breath. “The healing potion made my whole shoulder feel like it was tied in a tight knot. I couldn’t move it at all then. Can you fix this or not?”

Berta felt her own jaw clench. “I need to understand what I’m dealing with. I need to ascertain if the tendons are torn or if there’s a fracture. Of course, I could just yank on your shoulder and see what happens.”

Avyanna hissed softly. “Get on with it.”

Berta sat back on her haunches, willing herself to be calm and not to let the Inquisitor bully her into doing something stupid. She chewed her lip, puzzling over the worsening of her condition with the healing potion. Berta thought back to her very first day in Thedas in the refugee camp. She had to set a bone together before the mages could heal a fracture. What if the fracture fragments weren’t put near each other properly first and then healed by a potion? Or what if the tendons were torn when her shoulder was dislocated but then healed before the shoulder was put back in place? Either of these possibilities might explain the Inquisitor’s condition. She might have to tear the tendons anew or fracture the shoulder again to put the bones back where they belonged. She wasn’t sure she would be strong enough to do either alone.

“Alright,” she said, making up her mind. “When did you eat last?”
Avyanna looked puzzled. “Midday,” she said cautiously.

“Perfect.” Berta didn’t want to sedate the Inquisitor if her stomach was full; she could vomit and suffocate. She turned to her apothecary box and pulled out the vial of concentrated nettle syrup. She poured a small amount into the graduated metal cup from the kit and took her water skin and filled the cup half way, swirling the liquids together until mixed well. She held the drink out to the Inquisitor.

“I’m not drinking that. If I took my vallaslin in silence, I can stand your treatment.” There was challenge and not a small amount of anger in her eyes.

Berta nodded her head in supplication. “I don’t doubt it. But the nettle syrup is not just for pain. I need your muscles to relax before I try to realign your shoulder. I cannot do it if you’re fighting me.”

Avyanna exhaled through clenched teeth. “As you say, healer.” She took the drink from Berta and knocked it back in one gulp.

Berta took the cup back and set it atop the apothecary box. “It will take a few minutes for that medicine to work. I’m going to need an assistant. I think that—"

“Blackwall.”

Berta stood. “Alright. Let’s get you in position and then I’ll get him.” Berta helped the Inquisitor to stand and moved her bed roll to the center of the room before instructing her to lie down on her back. Berta folded her coat and stuffed beneath her arm to support it. “I’ll be right back.”

She strode quickly from the room. Outside, Varric, Blackwall and Dorian were clustered together, looking like a group of soon-to-be fathers hovering around the delivery room. They just needed cigars. They all looked expectantly at Berta as she left the ale room.

“So, what’s with her arm?” Varric asked. “Why is it stuck up in the air like that?”

“Luxatio erecta,” Berta began to explain.
Varric raised his eyebrows. “Huh, sounds dirty.”

Dorian smirked and rolled his eyes. “It’s ancient Tevene. ‘Displaced up,’ if I’m not mistaken.”

“Quite so,” said Berta. “Her shoulder is dislocated, but rather than being pushed forward, like most dislocations, it’s displaced down, trapped under the neck of her shoulder blade so her arm is stuck up in the air. I’m going to need a second set of hands to help me pop it out and around to where it’s supposed to be. She requested you assist me, Blackwall.”

Blackwall nodded gravely. Varric and Dorian exchanged a glance that was part worry and part relief that the task of assisting Berta was not falling to them.

“I just need to grab my other supplies and I’ll be right back.” Berta started towards the door to the lower courtyard.

“We’ll get them,” Dorian volunteered, pulling Varric towards the lower courtyard. He nodded his head toward Blackwall. “You go help her.”

The Warden frowned seriously and followed Berta back into the ale room. When they came around the corner, they saw the Inquisitor’s eyes were already closed and her breathing was slow.

Blackwall immediately went to her side, kneeling. “I’m here, my lady.”

The Inquisitor opened her eyes slightly, her gaze lighting on the Warden before letting them close again. “Do whatever she tells you.”

Blackwall looked solemn. “I will, my lady.” He turned his gaze to Berta, awaiting her command.

Berta looked about the room, taking in the other bedrolls and packs. “I need a light blanket or...oh, this will do.” Berta grabbed a coil of rope sitting atop one of the packs.

There was a knock on the ale room door. Blackwall went to open it and retrieved Berta’s supplies
from Dorian and Varric, lugging in the crate of healing potions, the basket of bandages and her personal baggage.

"Just set it anywhere," Berta said. "And come help me with this."

In a few moments, with Blackwall’s assistance, Berta had the length of rope slung over Avyanna’s right shoulder, running behind her and across her chest, the ends meeting at her feet. Berta wrapped two bandages around the rope several times where it crossed Avyanna’s shoulder as padding to keep it from cutting into her skin. She knelt above the Inquisitor’s head, gently removing the folded coat from beneath her arm, wrapping both of her hands around Avyanna’s bicep.

“Kneel by her feet,” she instructed Blackwall. “I’ll count to three and on three, pull firmly and slowly on both ends of the rope straight down towards you. I’ll be pulling her arm the opposite way.”

Blackwall’s face was hard and serious, and Berta felt the urge to burst into inappropriate giggles as she was suddenly struck by the absurdity of kneeling on a straw covered floor in a castle with an elf as her patient and an armored knight as her assistant, using ropes to attempt to relocate a shoulder that she was only partially sure she could fix. She hadn’t personally reduced a shoulder dislocation in years, not since her trauma rotation in residency, and then only under the watchful eye of the senior orthopedics resident. Berta took a deep breath, pushing aside thoughts of failure. She could do this, sure. Why not? She reached up to tuck her hair behind her right ear before returning to her grip on the Inquisitor’s arm.

“OK, on three. One, two, three.”

Avyanna groaned and bared her teeth as Blackwall pulled and Berta torqued the Inquisitor’s arm over her head, pulling both up and to her left. Berta pulled hard, leaning back on her knees, hoping to feel a pop at any moment as the shoulder slid back into place. But there was no pop and after a count of fifteen seconds, Berta nodded to Blackwall and they both slowly released. Berta anxiously felt Avyanna’s arm pit and tried to bring her arm to her side without success.

Blackwall said nothing but looked at her and then Avyanna with concern. Berta wanted to say something encouraging but her mouth was dry and the empty platitudes that jumped to mind were disingenuous at best. A nervous sweat began to drip down the back of her neck, her hair sticking to her skin. She nodded encouragingly, more to herself than Blackwall, and repositioned herself, squatting so she could use her full weight. She adjusted her grip on the Inquisitor’s arm, moving closer to the elbow. “Let’s try again. One, two, three.”

This time she pulled straight up, worrying that she might fracture the glenoid of the Inquisitor’s
scapula, but concerned that she wouldn’t be able to generate enough force if she tried torqueing the
shoulder again. Berta leaned back, gritting her teeth against the resistance of the Inquisitor’s shoulder.
There was no pop, but there was a sudden ripping sensation transmitted up the Inquisitor’s arm
making Berta gasp in surprise. Avyanna gave a broken cry in her nettle-induced haze, her voice
cracking in pain.

“Ok, stop pulling.” Blackwall released the rope. Berta hesitantly began to lower the Inquisitor’s arm
to her side, and she let go of the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding as she met no
resistance. She palpated firmly around the shoulder and then gently moved Avyanna’s arm forward
and back, making sure that the joint seemed in place. Avyanna moaned as Berta folded her arm
across her stomach.

Berta wiped her face with her hand, her own shoulders sagging. She felt slightly shaky and
nauseated. “That seems to have done it.”

“You brought healing potions with you?” Blackwall stood and looked down at her.

“Yes, but I don’t want to risk whatever happened last time she took a potion. We should wait until a
mage gets here.” She stood and went over to the basket of bandages, rifling through its contents to
pull out a cloth that could be fashioned into a sling and another long wide bandage for splinting
Avyanna’s arm to her side. She tied the ends of the sling together and came back to kneel beside the
Inquisitor. “Help me sit her up a bit so I can splint this.”

Blackwall knelt and eased the Inquisitor to sitting, his arm around her. Avyanna’s head lolled onto
his shoulder and she gave a mighty snore. The giggle Berta had suppressed before slipped out and
she glanced up at Blackwall to see a lighthearted conspiratorial sparkle in his own eye, both of them
captured in relief that the Inquisitor’s arm was fixed.

“How much nettle syrup did you give her?” Blackwall asked ruefully.

“Enough, apparently.” Berta slipped the sling around Avyanna’s neck and gently slid it over her arm.

Blackwall held Avyanna gently as Berta wrapped the bandage over the Inquisitor’s forearm,
tethering it to her torso to keep it from moving.

“Ma serannas, Alriel...” the Inquisitor murmured as Blackwall gently laid her back on her bedroll.
She muttered something else unclear, the foreign syllables soft and low.
Berta looked sharply at her, but her eyes were still closed, and she breathed deeply, still clearly sedated from the nettle syrup. “Rest easy, Inquisitor,” she said quietly. “I’m here if you need me.”

Blackwall unfolded a blanket and draped it gently over the elf, remaining kneeling at Avyanna’s side. Berta relaxed back on her knees, closing her eyes, grateful that she had been successful. She didn’t know what she would have tried next. Avyanna mumbled something else groggily in the same foreign tongue.

Blackwall rested his hand on her shoulder. "I'm here, Your Worship," he whispered. He smoothed her hair back from her brow and tucked the blanket up to her chin. Berta looked away, feeling like she was intruding on a private moment. She stood and busied herself with rearranging the contents of the basket of bandages.

Blackwall stayed by Avyanna’s side, his dark hair falling across his face before he looked up at Berta. “Thank you, my lady.”

Berta nodded in acknowledgement. “You’re welcome.” She watched him a moment longer, the set of his eyes as they gazed at Avyanna, the glint of the torches on the gryphon breast plate he wore. He stood guard over the Inquisitor, devoted and alert, even here in relative safety. Berta felt a tug of longing, of envy even, that the Inquisitor would have someone look at her that way.

Berta heard the door creak open and then Varric's guarded voice. "Everything alright in here? Can we come in?"

Berta looked around the corner and beckoned the dwarf and the mage in. "Yes but be quiet. She's sleeping."

Varric came around the corner, taking in the Inquisitor’s lowered arm. He quietly clapped Berta on the back. “Nice work, Lucky."

Berta smiled wanly, feeling like it had indeed been luck, not skill.

“Yes, nicely done, indeed,” agreed Dorian in a whisper, trailing behind. “Well, now that’s all taken care of, what shall it be first? Food, bath or bed?”
“Food, please.”

Dorian briskly clapped his hands together. “We’ll be by the fire. Let us know if our Inquisitor needs anything, will you?” he said to Blackwall.

Blackwall didn’t look away from Avyanna. “I will. I’ll be here.”

Berta shook her head firmly. “No. I can’t leave her. She’s sedated and I need to watch her until the sedation wears off. She might...” She trailed off, not wanting to alarm them with unlikely, but possible complications of the nettle syrup.

Blackwall looked at Berta gravely. “I will watch her, my lady.”

Berta hesitated. She was ravenous and filthy and wanted food and rest in equal measure but she didn’t want to leave her patient so soon. “No, I have to stay.”

Dorian sighed dramatically. “Well, then we’ll bring your supper here. Tales of our exploits in Crestwood and your journey here can wait until tomorrow.”

Berta smiled in gratitude. “Thank you.” She settled down cross legged at Avyanna’s side, across from Blackwall. The Warden kept his eyes on Avyanna with all the seriousness of a death bed vigil.

“Come on, Sparkler,” Varric muttered and the two of them left.

The ale room was then quiet but for the soft crackling sound of the torches. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Berta lifted the blanket over the Inquisitor, folding it back over her chest and arm. She leaned over her patient, reaching for her wrist and checking her pulses, both radial and ulnar felt normal, and gently pressing on her nails to look for capillary refill. She didn’t know what she would do if she had caused a vascular injury but so long as she hadn’t, she wouldn’t worry about it. She glanced at Blackwall who looked back at her, questioning her examination.

“I’m checking for blood vessel injury.” Berta saw Blackwall’s eyes flick over the turned back blanket. “If she seems cold, I’ll cover her again, but the blanket makes it difficult to watch her breathing.” She looked back at the Warden. She thought she could see a faint relaxing of his guard, his shoulders sagging slightly and resting further back on his heels, his watch, and his burden for the Inquisitor shared with Berta, if only for a little while.
Berta watched Avyanna’s breathing, the silence filling the room. In sleep, the Inquisitor’s face softened, her features becoming almost unrecognizable from the woman who had threatened Berta on the battlements. She wondered at the life that had made the elf who she was, what events had transpired to create such anger and fierceness in her. She glanced up toward Blackwall. His gaze was focused on Avyanna’s face. In the torchlight, his eyes looked tired, their blue lost in the shadow of his brow. His lips were turned into a slight frown, largely hidden by his unkempt beard. Berta’s hands fidgeted in her lap.

“She’s going to be fine, you know,” Berta observed softly.

“I know,” Blackwall grunted softly in reply. “I’m not worried.”

Berta opened her mouth to call out his obvious lie but thought better of it. There was a creak of the door opening and Dorian appeared around the corner carrying two wooden bowls each with a flat wooden spoon. Berta thanked him quietly and took the bowl, sniffing it to try to identify the ingredients. In it was a square of hard tack floating in a pool of thin broth that was redolent of chicken soup. Blackwall took his from Dorian, nodding his thank you to the mage and drinking directly from the bowl. Berta follow suit before digging into the softened biscuit with her spoon.

They ate in silence as the torches burnt down and Dorian bustled and muttered, getting ready for bed. He flopped loudly onto his bedroll at the other end of the room, sighing heavily. Blackwall gave him a stony glare but said nothing.

“Where’s Varric?” Berta asked softly.

“He’s taking the next watch at the gate. He’ll come get me when it’s time to switch and third watch will go to one of the soldiers. Wouldn’t want to interfere with your staring contest.”

Berta gave him a withering look as Dorian smiled sweetly in return. “Good night,” he said benignly and rolled over. If his slow heavy breathing was any indication, he was asleep within moments.

Berta stood, stretching. Blackwall watched her rise, a faint look of worry on his face. “I’m just getting ready for bed,” she explained. She looked through the pile of her luggage that Blackwall had brought and unlaced her bedroll, unfurling it at what she thought was a respectful distance from the Inquisitor but near enough to be readily available if she was needed. She grabbed her bag and went around the corner of the room. She unlaced her boots, pulling her socks off and stretching her toes against the cold stone floor. She pulled her chemise over her clothing and undressed under it, folding
her stiff clothing and small clothes into a pile. She came back, padding barefoot to her bed roll, leaving her things against the wall of barrels, out of the way. She pulled the blanket off her bed roll and wrapped it around her shoulders before settling back at the Inquisitor’s side. Blackwall glanced at her, his eyes flitting over her thin chemise before returning studiously to the Inquisitor’s face. Berta briefly checked the Inquisitor’s pulse again before pulling her blanket closer, wrapping it tightly across her chest like a shawl. Maybe another hour, and then she would sleep.

Sometime later, Berta jerked awake, her head dropping forward, jarring her from sleep. Varric was back, snoring softly on a bed roll at the opposite end of the room. Dorian was gone, presumably down at the gate on watch. All the torches were out but one. Blackwall was still across from Berta, his head down, his chin to his chest, his breathing heavy.

Berta reached out to nudge his shoulder gently. His head snapped up, his eyes bleary with sleep. “I’m awake,” he mumbled.

“The nettle syrup has largely worn off by now,” she whispered, pulling the blanket up over Avyanna. “We should both get some sleep.”

Blackwall made no move. Berta sighed and stood. She settled into her bed roll, curling up on her side, pulling the blankets up to her chin.

“She’s lucky to have you,” Berta said quietly. It came out more wistfully than she intended. “Don’t hesitate to wake me if she needs anything.”

The last thing Berta saw before she closed her eyes was Blackwall keeping watch over his Inquisitor, his eyes dark and tired, his hands clasped in his lap.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

When Berta next woke, it felt like morning. Varric, Dorian and Blackwall were formless lumps under their blankets, illuminated by faint light coming through cracks in and underneath the door to the courtyard, but the Inquisitor’s bedroll was empty. Berta sat up, kicking off her blankets, feeling wide awake. She tiptoed to gather her clothes, dressing under her chemise and then pulling on her boots. She slipped out the door into the early morning light to look for her patient and make sure the Inquisitor wasn’t doing anything that might put her shoulder at risk.

It must have rained during the night because everything was wet. The air smelled fantastic, fresh
washed and clean. The upper courtyard was empty except for old straw and piles of rubble. She walked to the edge where she could see down into the middle courtyard, which was empty, the fire out but slightly smoking. She turned and walked over to the other door along the wall of the courtyard. She peeked inside but saw nothing but a ladder leading down into the gloom beneath the castle. She doubted Avyanna was climbing any ladders with her shoulder splinted.

Thinking that if she was up early and enjoying the morning, she would head up rather than down within the keep, she wandered across the courtyard and walked through a series of archways which led to a long staircase ascending into the gloom above. Berta climbed it to find it opening into yet another courtyard space, this one all of stone with a sort of dais jutting out into space above the courtyard below. There were candles lining the dais and a large statue of an owl, like the ones in Skyhold’s dungeon. She wondered at the recurrent symbolism.

She heard a door open behind her and the sound of booted feet on stone stairs. She turned around to see one of the soldiers from the gate last night heading down from a stairwell that led up to the very top of the keep.

“Oh, good morning, m’lady,” he said. “The Inquisitor’s on the upper balcony if you’re looking for her. Saw her go that way a while ago.” He gestured across the courtyard to a set of steps that appeared to lead to the high point of the castle beyond the corner tower.

“Thank you...?” She looked at him expectantly.

“Bevin, m’lady.” He bowed perfunctorily and hustled off down the stairs. Berta strolled across the open space, enjoying the lightening sky, looking out the barred windows in the wall to her left, absorbing the vista of green rolling hills. She went up the steps at the far end of the courtyard.

There was a flag pole erected in the middle of the balcony, an Inquisition standard attached, the sword and eye surrounded by flames flapping in the breeze. The Inquisitor stood at the far bannister, looking out over the surrounding hills and lake, far smaller than Lake Calenhad, gray and still in the early morning light. Avyanna had pulled her jacket over her shoulders, covering her ruined tunic. The breeze blew her white hair back from her face as she looked out to the horizon. Berta walked slowly towards her, coming to the balustrade a few feet away, not wanting to intrude on the Inquisitor’s peace. She said nothing for a moment, just taking in the view.

The vista was lovely, the waters of the lake reaching out to low hills still shrouded in morning mist. To her right, Berta could see tendrils of smoke rising from beyond the stony hills. The village must be that way.
Avyanna glanced at her briefly but remained silent.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Inquisitor.” She felt compelled to apologize. “How is your shoulder feeling this morning?”

Avyanna turned her yellow cat eyes on Berta. “Tolerable. You did not give me another healing potion.”

Berta licked her lips, aggravated at herself for feeling so nervous around Avyanna. “No. I thought it better to have a mage examine you first. He should arrive today or tomorrow at the latest. I don’t want to have a similar outcome to the last healing potion you took.”

Avyanna nodded and returned to studying the landscape.

“May I examine you, Inquisitor?”

Avyanna nodded again wordlessly. Berta went to the Inquisitor’s right side and lifted her jacket from her shoulders, laying it on the bannister. Her shoulder appeared normal, no bruising or swelling that Berta could see. “I can remove the splinting if you promise me not to use your arm.”

Avyanna raised an eyebrow at her. “I promise, Lady Healer,” she said, her tone amused.

Berta thought the Inquisitor might be messing with her but ignored her amusement. She undid the bandages binding the Inquisitor’s arm to her body. She left the sling in place and pressed around the shoulder joint. She thought it felt a little swollen, but she couldn’t tell much else. She wished Finn was there now.

“So, will I live?”

Berta smiled faintly. “Yes, Your Worship. Let your arm rest. If you decide you need something for pain, let me know.”

Berta replaced the Inquisitor’s coat around her shoulders and then rolled the bandages back up to be reused. She watched Avyanna for another moment and then made to leave. “Excuse me, Inquisitor.”
She had taken only a few steps when Avyanna spoke. “Healer, Solas tells me you have no elves in your world.”

Berta paused unsure where she was going with her question but stepping back to the bannister to answer. “No, we don’t, Inquisitor.”

“I wonder then, what you see when you look at me.” She turned to face Berta, her eyes cold and appraising.

_I see a scary-ass homicidal killing machine_, Berta thought, but it seemed impolitic to say so. She clenched her jaw and chose her words carefully. “I see a powerful woman. A leader who will do what she must.”

Avyanna scoffed and inclined her head, a small rueful smile twisting the very corner of her mouth. “Very diplomatic.”

Berta raised her chin slightly. “But also true.”

Avyanna breathed a sigh and looked back at the lake. “Most shems see a savage or a thief, a slave or a whore. But I am none of those things. The humans’ Maker has chosen me. He has abandoned His children but chosen me to be their savior, a savior for the entire world.”

Berta swallowed hard, her own vague agnosticism making her uncomfortable with the Inquisitor’s fervor. “Yes, Inquisitor,” she said lamely. “If I may ask, do you still worship the elven gods as well?”

Avyanna turned to Berta, her yellow eyes narrowing. “Do not presume to judge me, alin. You are a Stranger here. You know nothing of the struggles of the Dalish. You know nothing of how I’ve fought to survive.” Her left hand gripped the stone railing, her knuckles white. “What have the elven gods ever done for me? I have burnt the offerings, sung the songs, spoken the prayers. I took my vallaslin in utter silence. And in the end, nothing. They will not have my worship.”

“I meant no offense, Inquisitor. I only wished to understand.” Berta gripped the balcony as well to keep her hands from trembling. “I guess I ask too many questions. I apologize, Your Worship.”
Avyanna looked away, apparently mollified. “We are both very far from home.” She opened and closed her left hand as if it were painful before pressing her palm against the cold stone of the balustrade. She glanced back to Berta with a thoughtful look on her face. “What boon would you ask me to give you, Healer?”

Berta was momentarily stunned into silence. She had no idea what the elf was talking about. “Excuse me?”

Avyanna faced her squarely. “In exchange for healing me, surely there is a request I could grant?”

Berta fumbled for something to say. “There’s no need...this is my job...”

“Amongst my people, a debt does not go unpaid. Hunters are given bread for their kills; bakers are given pelts for their bread. Mothers give their children life and children give their mothers obedience. Favors bind a clan together.” The Inquisitor gave a wry smile. “So, I ask you again, what would you ask of me?”

Berta struggled to think. “Really, Inquisitor, it's not necessary...”

“It is,” the Inquisitor said sharply. “Ask me. Do not protest a third time.”

Berta swallowed hard, grasping for something Avyanna could grant her. The Inquisitor couldn’t grant her wish to go home. She could ask that the Inquisitor make Solas stay in Skyhold until he figured out a way to send Berta back to Earth but she didn't think Avyanna would agree and she was more worried about what Avyanna might say or do if she asked for something unreasonably out of proportion to the service rendered. Her immediate next thought was her car. The commander had said no, he couldn’t spare the men or risk the avalanches, but that was before she was the Chief Healer of the Red Cross. There were things she could use in her car, expired medical supplies and books, not to mention her pillow and blanket from her office, items that would bring her comfort. She couldn't think of anything else.

“My car, Inquisitor,” she finally said. “The...transportation I came here in. It should still be where I was found. The commander said he couldn’t spare the men, but I would-”

“What do you need this ‘car’ for?”
“It’s full of supplies- a lot of things I could use for the Inquisition.”

Avyanna considered briefly. “Done. When you return to Skyhold, the Commander will fetch your car.”

Berta couldn’t help grinning. “Thank you, Inquisitor.”

A small smile crept into Avyanna’s face as well. “I will await your mage, Healer. Don’t leave the keep unaccompanied. There are still wild beasts in the hills. I would not see you come to harm.”

“No, thank you, Inquisitor.” Berta then withdrew, racing down the steps from the balcony to find Dorian. She thought he would be intrigued to see her car.

When she arrived in the middle courtyard, Varric, Dorian, Blackwall, Jaxon and the two Inquisition soldiers, Bevin and Pip, were around the fire, eating breakfast, the men sitting on the wooden benches and Varric on a shorter stool that he had found somewhere. The soldiers saluted her and returned to their posts by the gate and Jaxon excused himself to continue squaring away the stables, leaving an empty space for Berta next to Blackwall. Berta sat and warmed her hands at the fire before accepting a wooden bowl from Blackwall. Breakfast was a warm oatmeal-like mush with bits of dried fruit mixed into it. It was sticky but otherwise satisfying, warm and filling.

“You make lumpy porridge, Sparkler,” Varric complained, discontentedly stirring the contents of his bowl with a spoon.

“If you find my provender unsatisfying, next time you may impress us with your culinary achievements,” Dorian said good naturedly. “I believe I am quite accomplished for someone who has never cooked before.”

Blackwall shook his head. “Spoiled prat.”

“Hairy lummox,” Dorian shot back without missing a beat.

Blackwall looked at Berta as if to say, see, I told you so.
Berta suppressed a smile, ignoring the insults. “Guess what?” she said to Dorian. “The Inquisitor has agreed to get my car. She said she’ll have Cullen send men to get it when we get back to Skyhold.”

Dorian perked up. “This shall be interesting.”

Blackwall looked puzzled. “Car?”

“What people in my world use to get around. Kind of like a carriage but without horses. I traveled here in mine.”

Blackwall’s forehead wrinkled as if he couldn’t quite imagine what she was talking about. “Well,” he said, obviously trying to understand her excitement, “that must be good if it makes you this happy.”

“Yes, it makes me very happy.” Berta grinned and tucked back into her oatmeal.

Dorian stood and stretched. Varric eyed him. "Where are you going?"

“I cook, you clean up,” he said gesturing to his empty bowl beside him on the bench. "I’m going to examine the books in the keep’s library, see what we can salvage. Care to join me?” he asked Berta.

Berta swallowed her bite of oatmeal and nodded. “I’d be happy to, but I was wondering if there’s somewhere I could freshen up a bit first? I’m feeling pretty ripe.”

Dorian eyed her greasy hair. “You could use it. It won’t be hot, but there is a small grotto under the keep with fresh water.”

“Oh, great,” Berta said, brightening.

Varric chuckle. “Yeah, we cleaned out all the spiders.”

Berta scoffed. “I’m not afraid of spiders.”
“No, Lucky,” Varric chuckled. “Spiders.” He gestured with his hands to indicate their size. His hands were a good three feet apart.

Berta wasn’t sure if he was kidding. “Ah, well, in that case, I may request an escort.”

After they finished breakfast, Dorian showed Berta to the grotto beneath the keep, Blackwall tagging along, insisting that he do a final sweep for spiders before leaving Berta to her ablutions. No arachnids of unusual size being in evidence, the two men left her alone. Berta undressed and splashed in the shin deep water, trying unsuccessfully to not be creeped out by the skeletal statues around the cave and the echoing drip of water in the semidarkness. She scrubbed her hair and coated her entire body with a layer of soap before laying down in the shallow pool, her teeth chattering but feeling clean for the first time in days. It was worth the brush with hypothermia. She washed her chemise and her set of dirty small clothes and then dressed in her fresh small clothes and her not so fresh traveling garb. She’d have to set aside some time to wash them tonight. She hung her clothes over the wall of the courtyard outside the ale room, letting them dry in the sunshine.

Berta followed Dorian’s directions to the room at the very top of the keep that appeared to function as a library but had seen better days. The windows were all missing and the humid air permeated the space, leaving the books damp and molding. Varric and Dorian were sorting through the books, putting anything salvageable in a large wooden crate to be packed up to return to Skyhold. Berta pitched in, though most of the titles took her longer to read than either the mage or the dwarf. As they worked, Berta realized that printing was such a rare resource that almost every book had something of value to the Inquisition and the only ones that didn’t were too compromised by water damage and rot to be readable.

Berta crouched to gather a stack of books off the lower shelf of the bookcase closest to her, bringing them to the long table they’d pulled into the middle of the room. She perched on the edge of the table and picked the top book off the pile. “‘On Lyrium: A Templar’s Memoir’ by Ser Treus?” She translated, holding the cover up for Dorian to peruse.

“Keep. Definitely.” Dorian declared, tossing another mildewed tome into the discard pile, its cover falling off as it landed.

The next book was a thick tome covered in dark blue leather with a peeling silver embossed gryphon on the cover. “Grey Wardens Through the Ages: A History.” She opened the book and perused the title page and the chapters. “‘A History of the Blights and Warden Heroes by Merida Vael, Warden Archivist of Weisshaupt, 9:22 Dragon.’ I still don’t really understand the whole ‘Blight’ thing.”

“Isn’t this your responsibility to explain?” Varric looked at Dorian.
“Oh, yes, let the evil Tevinter whose existence has nearly destroyed the world five times over do the explaining,” Dorian huffed. “If you had asked me just a year ago, I would have told you it was all a Chantry fable but now...”

Varric nodded darkly. “Corypheus has made us all rethink a few things.”

Dorian set the book he was holding into the crate. “Chantry fables aside, there were seven old gods of Tevinter, who appeared in the form of great dragons. Whether they created the darkspawn, or the ancient magisters did is cause for debate, but now the old gods sleep deep in the earth. Their call is heard by the darkspawn who dig until they release them. Then the corrupted old god comes to the surface as an archdemon, controlling all the darkspawn that hear its song. That is a Blight. The archdemon and its darkspawn horde cover the land. And it’s not just the creatures themselves. Their taint kills livestock, causes the land to blacken and die, poisons rivers and wells, makes the land unlivable for man or beast.”

“They say that the First Blight did such a number on the Anderfels that it’s still dry as a bone and nothing grows there,” Varric added, helping himself to another book off the shelves before adding it to the growing pile of rotting parchment. “Ferelden got off pretty easy all things considered. The Fifth Blight only lasted a little over a year. The Fourth Blight lasted over a decade and destroyed much of the countryside of the Free Marches and Antiva. With any luck we won’t see another Blight in our lifetimes.”

“So, an old god becomes an archdemon but that’s different from the demons that come from a rift,” Berta said thinking out loud. “That’s stupid and confusing. Why not call it something different? Like an Arch Darkspawn. Anyway, so why are the Grey Wardens so special?”

“'The Maker smiles sadly on his Grey Wardens,'” Varric quoted. “They can bring down an archdemon- they can sense darkspawn and they know when an old god has been awakened. They're immune to blight sickness. But they’re a secretive bunch. Good luck getting any of them to talk about it.”

“And Blackwall is one of them?” Berta asked, feeling like she understood a little better.

Varric chuckled. “Hero, right? Where do you think the nickname comes from?”

The next book Berta picked up looked new with a thick pressed paper cover instead of leather. It was much smaller in size than most of the books, more like a paperback. Unlike the other books, this
one had a full illustration on the cover of a bare chested, muscled man in a uniform brandishing a sword and a large breasted woman in a revealing robe kneeling at his feet, her hand on his thigh, looking adoringly up at him. “Hard in Hightown 3: The Re-Punchening? Varric, is this your work?”

Varric looked up sharply from the tome he was perusing. “Give me that.” He took the book from Berta, shaking his head in disgust. “Some hack trying to cash in on my hard work. Ruffles has contacted a few Antivan publishers to put a stop to it.” He tossed it on the floor next to the discard pile. “New category: burn.”

Between sorting the remaining books, Varric and Dorian regaled Berta with tales of their adventures in Crestwood, the undead they’d slain, the rifts the Inquisitor had closed, the wyversn they’d fought and the mayor of the village who had disappeared when it came to light that he had purposefully flooded the caverns beneath the village killing all who were living there to escape the Blight 10 years ago.

“Though from the sounds of it, most of the refugees had blight sickness,” Dorian observed.

“Poor bastards.” Varric shook his head.

“There’s no cure for the blight sickness? Or even a treatment?”

“Short of undergoing the joining ritual for the Grey Wardens, no.” Varric shrugged.

Dorian nodded sadly in agreement. “Magic can’t cure everything.”

After they finished with the books, they set themselves to gathering up the damp papers that had been blown about the room, perusing them for any information about the bandits that had occupied the keep. The notes were brief, terse communications between brigands and a few half-finished letters, nothing of true import.

Blackwall appeared near lunch time, dressed in his full armor. “I thought my lady might like to see the dragon the Inquisitor killed.”

Berta immediately put down the crumpled missive she had been reading. “Hell, yeah.” She had assumed sightseeing would not be a priority on this trip.
“If Master Pavus can spare you,” he looked pointedly at Dorian.

Dorian rolled his eyes and waved a hand. “Fine. Go gawk if you must. There won’t be much to see in a day or two as soon as the soldiers start butchering the carcass. I’m almost done here anyway.”

Berta couldn’t suppress her smile. “Is it far?”

“Not very, my lady. I’ve taken the liberty of saddling your horse.”

Berta hesitated a moment. After three days in the saddle she had hoped that perhaps they could walk there. Blackwall saw her hesitation and smirked. “Best to work through the soreness if you’re stiff from the road. It will only be a brief ride.”

Berta nodded, acknowledging that he was probably right. “Alright. I’ll be back soon, Dorian.”

“Yes, yes...” he muttered. He didn’t even look up from the papers he was examining.

Varric gave a wave. “You kids go have fun.”

Berta followed Blackwall down through the keep to the lowest courtyard by the gate. Jaxon was waiting with their horses.

“Afternoon, m’lady,” Jaxon said, handing the reins over to Berta.

Berta returned his greeting and took the reins and then hopped up into the saddle. She patted Hurlock’s neck before looking at Blackwall. He and Jaxon exchanged a look that Berta couldn’t interpret. “What?”

Jaxon smiled and handed the reins of the bay horse to Blackwall. “She’ll hold her own with the horses, Ser.”
A smile crooked Blackwall’s mustache. “Aye, I believe she will,” he agreed.

“You know you don’t have to talk about me like I’m not here.” Berta flicked the reins in mild irritation, and started walking Hurlock towards the gate.

Blackwall mounted and followed on his bay. Berta held up outside the gate, not sure where they were going, waiting for Blackwall to bring his mount up beside her. “This way, my lady.”

They headed back along the path that she and Jaxon had come along the night before but before long, turned to head west, climbing over rougher terrain, large boulders poking out of the grass. The path was wide enough that they could ride two abreast.

Blackwall kept his horse at a gentle walk, clearly not in a hurry. He glanced down at Berta’s saddle, his eyes catching on the dagger still tied to the side of the pommel. “That’s a fine weapon. How’d you come by it?”

Berta had almost forgotten she’d had it. “Oh, Josephine gave it to me. ‘Just in case,’ she said.”

Blackwall arched an eyebrow at her. "You know how to use it?"

There was no point in being evasive. “No. Not my kind of knife.” And then smiling at a memory of one of her favorite books she added, “Stick ‘em with the pointy end, right?”

That earned a laugh from Blackwall. “Well, that’s not a bad start. But you’d do better to keep the scabbard on your person than on the saddle. If you get unseated, you won’t have your weapon.”

Berta shook her head. “I’m not sure it makes much difference if I don’t know how to wield it effectively.”

Blackwall gave her a sly smile. “With it tied to your saddle everyone knows you don’t know what to do with it. If it’s at your waist, they’ll have to wonder.”

Berta appreciated the advice. “Maybe when I get back to Skyhold I can ask Josephine if she has a belt or something I can borrow.”
Blackwall straightened up in the saddle. “Here we are. Almost there.”

They rode around a rocky rise and between two large boulders, the ground sloping away steeply down toward the lake. The horses picked their way down the gully and Berta leaned back in the saddle and tightened her knees the way she’d been taught. The gully twisted to their left and then suddenly she was granted a vista of a wide-open field and crumbling ruins beyond. And in that field, was the dragon.

It was immense, larger than Berta had expected, its haunches laid out to one side, the massive length of its tail snaking away from the body. This was a Tolkien dragon, not a How to Train Your Dragon dragon. One front leg was curled under its chest and its head and neck were extended towards the rubble of ruins at the edge of the cliff, the other leg thrown out to one side as if it had tried to stand just before it died. There were twisting horns on its head, half again as wide as Berta was tall, swooping to point forward toward its snout. She was surprised by its coloring, the lavender sheen of the scales on its head and horns, the points ending in a cream-colored hue. Its body was rusty brown with white stripes on its sides and continuing down its tail. The wings were splayed out to either side and one was torn, a long, jagged tear in the papery flesh.

It nearly took her breath away. It was majestic and sad, and not terrifying only because it was dead. Berta rode closer, coming to dismount near its head. Its mouth was slightly open, giant jagged teeth protruding from its jaws, flies buzzing around its mouth and eyes. It stank with a dead predator’s smell of blood and rotting meat.

“Is it safe to touch?” she asked. “It doesn’t have poisonous skin or something?”

“Yes, it’s alright.”

Berta pulled off her riding gloves and reached out to feel its scales. They were hard as steel, of course, but with an organic feel, like leather covering a stone. She lifted up on the scale finding a thick leathery membrane sealing the scales together. She turned her attention to its mouth, crouching down to look more closely at the teeth, lifting the flesh to look at the lining of the mouth, which was the same violet as the scales.

“Do they really breathe fire? I would think they wouldn’t have such normal looking mucous membranes if they do.” She moved to the tip of the nose and crouched to peer up the dragon’s nasal passage. “Or does the fire come out their nostrils? Can they really fly? It’s so massive, how does it generate enough lift...is that why you attacked its wings?” She lifted the dragon’s eye lid showing a yellow, cat-like iris, already clouded with death. She pulled on the edge of the lid. “Oh, and it has a...a what do you call it...a nictitating membrane! Of course, it does, it would have to if it breathes...
fire.” She turned to look at Blackwall. “Does it breathe fire?”

Blackwall was standing back, holding the horses’ reins, watching her with an expression of bemused delight. “No.”

“Oh.” Berta felt immediately foolish. “I guess that’s probably just a fairy tale.”

Blackwall shrugged. “I’m no expert. Dorian said some do breathe fire. This one spat lightning at us.”

“Really?” Berta looked back at the giant head, musing. “I wonder how they do that.”

“Easily,” he said, coming to stand beside her. “And frequently.”

Berta laughed and shook her head. “I would have loved to see it fly. It’s a shame you had to kill it.”

“It was a majestic creature. Its roar shook the very ground.” He looked sad briefly and then shrugged. “But we can’t have it keeping travelers off the main road and eating livestock. Three farms near here have been completely cleaned out.”

“I imagine it eats a lot.”

“The farmer we met said it ate almost an entire head of druffalo in a day. Speaking of which...” He turned back to his horse and reached for the saddle bags. “I brought lunch.”

Berta grinned. “Just in case a head of druffalo isn’t enough to tie me over?”

Blackwall bowed gallantly. “I make no assumptions about your appetites, my lady.”

Berta smirked, but before she could fire off another rejoinder, there was a surprised cry of “Warden Blackwall, ser!” and she whipped her head around to see a young man, dressed in an Inquisition uniform coming out from behind a low, crumbling wall of the ruin, hustling to buckle his sword belt in place and don his helmet at the same time.
“I was beginning to wonder where the morning watch was,” Blackwall said, fixing his gaze on the soldier.

“I was- I-“

“We’re here, Ser,” said a second soldier, popping out from behind the same wall. Berta looked at her mussed braids and rumpled trousers and didn’t have to wonder what the two soldiers had been up to behind the wall. She pressed her lips together to keep from smirking and glanced at Blackwall who did not look amused.

Both soldiers gave a hasty Inquisition salute to Berta. “M’lady,” they mumbled in unison.

“I’ll hobble the horses,” Berta said, taking the reins from Blackwall, and getting out of the way.

In the end, he was more gentle with them than Berta expected, giving them a tongue lashing about dereliction of duty and threatening to tell the Inquisitor if it happened again, before dismissing them to return to the Three Trout Farm encampment. After they hustled off, he took the saddle bags and found a spot on the steps of the ruin in the sunshine. Berta made to move further up the ruins towards the top, hoping to have a view of the lake but Blackwall shook his head and beckoned her back.

“It’s a mess up o’ carcasses up there. Someone’s been leaving offal for the dragon.” He sat down on the steps. “Hoping to appease it, I suppose.”

“Oh.” Berta came back and joined him on the steps, sitting across from him and leaning against the crumbling wall, turning her face toward the sun, watching the two soldiers as they disappeared over the crest of the far hill. “What were they doing out here?”

Blackwall gave a low chuckle. “I thought that much was obvious.”

“No, I mean,” Berta stammered and felt herself blush, “I meant why they were stationed here.”

“Ah,” he said. “Scavenger chasers. We’ve been keeping the local wildlife off the carcass until the Inquisition sends equipment and men to butcher the dragon. There’s been a big wyvern female sniffing about as well as the usual crows and vultures.” He chuckled to himself. “Not the most
exciting duty. I suppose I can't blame them.”

Berta laughed. “Oh, yes, dead dragon, offal smeared ruins, vultures...the perfect spot for a passionate interlude.”

“Well then, one romantic picnic coming up,” he joked. He reached into the saddle bags, producing a small round of soft cheese, two fresh apples, a hard sausage and a small loaf of fresh pale bread. “Went to the village this morning,” he said by way of explanation, laying out their feast on the cloth it was packed in. “The villagers are beginning to emerge from their homes. The baker was back at work.” He broke the small loaf of bread in two and handed half to Berta.

Berta took the bread and held it up to her nose giving it a deep huff. “Oh, fresh bread. And not brown.”

Blackwall nodded. “Orly White they call it in these parts.”

“Orly?”

“Orlais,” Blackwall said with a mocking Orlesian accent. “Same thing as ‘fancy.’”

Berta smeared the end of her bread with cheese and took a bite. It was crusty on the outside and soft on the inside just like a good baguette. The cheese was delicious, with a goat cheese like tang and the apples were tart and crunchy. Berta rolled her eyes in satisfaction. “Mmm, this is so good. I haven’t eaten fresh fruit or vegetables in...well, since I got here. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, my lady.” His voice had a deep, rumbling warmth and Berta could feel her stomach flip as he smiled his crooked smile at her. God, she felt like a fucking teenager.

“How long had they been in hiding?” Berta asked, changing the subject. “The villagers, I mean.”

“Almost two months since the rift opened and the undead started walking out of the lake. The village has been under siege ever since.” Blackwall cut off slices of sausage and then stuck the knife in the cheese.
“Until you killed the undead, drained the lake, ran off the highwaymen and closed the rift,” she rattled off. “Dorian and Varric told me all about your adventures.”

Blackwall shook his head. “Not me. The Inquisitor.”

Berta cocked her head at him and proceeded to spread a thick layer of the cheese on a slice of sausage. “Last I checked, she wasn’t doing it all alone.”

“It’s not my mark. It’s my place to follow.” He looked down at his hands. “I...I’m no leader.”

Berta looked at him closely, his furrowed brow and wondered why he was so quick to dismiss himself. He glanced at her reaction to his words then looked furtively away.

“You didn’t or don’t command other Wardens?”

“No,” he looked out at the dragon and took in a deep breath. “I’ve been on my own, traveling, recruiting. Not much need for an organized chain of command between Blights.”

“Is that why you joined the Inquisition? It doesn’t interfere with your duties as a Warden because there’s no Blight?’

“I became a Warden because it was the right thing to do. And I joined the Inquisition because it was the right thing to do. It doesn’t interfere.” He squinted at her in the sunlight. “Why did you join the Inquisition?”

“Because I didn’t have any choice,” Berta said, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice. “I had no idea where I was, what was happening. I only wanted to survive and aligning myself with the Inquisition seemed the best way to do it.”

“There are worse reasons to join.” He took a large bite of bread and cheese and chewed thoughtfully in silence before taking a swig from his waterskin. “Is it very different here from...” He paused trying to remember the word, “Earth?”

Berta gave a small laugh. “You have no idea.”
“You’re human, aren’t you? How different could it be?”

Berta sighed. “There are things in my world that would blow your mind.”

Blackwall gave a chuckle and raised his eyebrows at her. “‘Blow my mind...’ I don’t know what that means but I think I’d like to find out.”

Berta smiled and looked away from the curious sparkle in his eyes. She was pretty sure he was flirting with her, and as attractive as she found him, she was also pretty sure that encouraging him was a bad idea. She was uncertain about the nature of his devotion to the Inquisitor; it didn’t seem precisely romantic. It was more, or perhaps less, than that, but she didn’t think that flirting back with a man that Avyanna might have claimed as hers was a winning move. She questioned the sincerity of her own interest as well; being quite literally rescued by a man was a new experience. She’d never needed rescuing before and she assumed that she was projecting, letting her fear at this new world and anxiety about getting home overwhelm her, leaving her grasping for something solid and real and Blackwall was certainly that. She felt safe with him and given the precariousness of her situation, that was understandably alluring. She mentally gave herself a pass for her infatuation while simultaneously dismissing it. She’d get over it if she didn’t indulge.

“To blow your mind means to be totally amazed or awed by something. It can mean something that's so incredible, it's hard to understand or affects you really strongly.” Berta gestured towards the dragon. “Like, you have dragons here.” She pointed to her temple. “Mind blown.”

Blackwall laughed. “I see. And what else blows your mind about Thedas?”

“So much.” She toyed with a slice of apple. “Magic, of course, but elves and men with horns growing out of their heads, and demons and rifts and blights...it's been a lot to take in.”

“But some things are the same,” he said looking over at their mounts. “You clearly know your way around horses.”

“Yeah, horses are familiar.” She looked at him, seeing that he wanted the story. “The school I went to, everyone was required to learn to ride and take care of a horse in their first year. After that, you could choose if you wanted to continue, but I had fallen hard. Serrano was my first love. She was a dun quarter horse that I was assigned when I arrived at school. She'd just been broken not long before, and I'd never ridden, but we figured it out together. I took care of her for the next four years. I rode her in a lot of events. Barrel racing, flag races, pole bending, jousting-”
“Jousting? You?”

“Not like with armor and knocking each other off. Just tilting at rings.” Berta crossed her arms at his skeptical expression. “Don’t look so surprised. I was pretty good at it. My last year I even made it to the State competition. I didn't win anything, but I loved it.” She sighed at the memory. “The next year I went off to university and left Serrano behind. She didn't belong to me, so I had to leave her. Riding fell by the wayside. I still enjoy it, though.”

Blackwall was shaking his head. “You jousting...” He laughed again and pointed to his own temple. “Mind blown.”

Berta laughed and held her hands up as if to dampen his expectations. “It's been a long time. I probably wouldn't be able to do it anymore.”

Berta heard hoof beats and looked up sharply for the horses, making sure they hadn't gotten loose. They were both munching on the longer grass on the far side of the dragon carcass, right where they should be. The sound came from two riders cantering towards them, coming down the hill from the keep.

Blackwall turned and squinted into the sun, shading his eyes with his hand. “It’s Pip and Bevin.” He stowed the remains of their lunch back in the saddle bags and stood, brushing the crumbs off his breeches, heading over to meet the riders. Berta trailed behind him.

Bevin reigned his horse up as soon as he reached them and dismounted. “M'lady, Warden Blackwall,” he said tersely. “The Inquisitor wants you both back at the keep. There's been a raven from Skyhold. And the Chargers have just arrived.”

*~~~~*~~~~~*

The Bull’s Chargers may have been a relatively small mercenary group, but their presence felt outsized in the previously deserted keep. Iron Bull was bellowing orders to set up their camp in the middle courtyard when Blackwall and Berta entered.

“Blackwall, good to see ya.” Iron Bull grasped his forearm in greeting.
“Good to see you, too. What’d you find in Therinfal?”

“Nothing good. Let’s go,” the mercenary said, heading up the stairs. “The boss wants to see us.”

Berta started to excuse herself, but Bull shook his head. “You too, Doc.”

Berta was surprised and more than a little curious. She followed as they headed towards the upper courtyard.

Bull glanced back over his shoulder at her. “I knew there was a woman here when I found some unmentionables drying on the wall. Didn’t know it was you.”

“The Inquisitor doesn’t count as a woman?”

Bull laughed. “Not really no. Not with her clothes on anyway.”

Berta wasn’t entirely sure what he meant by that but didn’t have time to ask, stopping to grab her dry small clothes and chemise and toss them into the ale room. She hustled after the two men as they climbed the steps, heading all the way to the library room at the top of the keep.

Avyanna sat at one end of the long table, twirling a small scroll of parchment in her fingers. There was a raven in a cage behind her, near the windows, pecking at corn scattered inside its enclosure. To her left stood an elf that Berta had not seen before. She was pretty in the way of most elves, finely boned with large light eyes and the distinctive ears of her kind. Her blonde hair was drawn up in braids on her head and there was a fine dusting of freckles across her face.

Iron Bull and Blackwall moved to the side of the table to the Inquisitor’s right. Berta hung back behind Blackwall’s shoulder, feeling like an interloper.

They stood in silence for a moment, the only noise Avyanna tapping the parchment on the table impatiently and the rustling feathers of the raven in the cage. They heard footsteps on the stairs outside and then Varric entered through the door.

“Sorry to keep everyone waiting. What did the raven say?”
Avyanna stopped tapping the parchment. “We’ll wait until everyone is here. Where’s Dorian?”

Varric rolled his eyes. “Finishing bathing, I believe.” He moved to flank the Inquisitor on her left.

There were quick steps on the stairs and Dorian burst through the door, impeccably dressed as always but with damp hair. “My apologies, your Worship. But I had to have a bath.”

The Inquisitor frowned and handed the small parchment to Varric. “Read it.”

Varric unrolled the parchment and began to read.

_Inquisitor,

We have received an invitation for a joint operation against the Venatori with the Qun. They propose to block a red lyrium shipment due to arrive on the Storm Coast. A Qunari emissary has agreed to meet you and Iron Bull there with further details. They offer an alliance should the operation go well. We cannot waste this opportunity, your Worship.

Sincerely,

Ambassador Montilyet_

Avyanna looked around the table at her companions, waiting for someone to speak.

Varric grimaced. “Not these assholes again. I had enough of them in Kirkwall.” He glanced over at Iron Bull. “No offense.”

Bull shrugged. “None taken.”

Dorian sighed. “And here I was hoping to return to Skyhold to sleep in a real bed again.”

“Could be a trap,” Blackwall said. “Get the Inquisitor alone, take her out, declare victory for the Qun over the greatest power in South.”
“No,” Bull said without question. “The Qun wipes out the Inquisition and the Venatori grow stronger. If they grow strong enough, they shift the balance of power on Seheron. If Seheron falls, Tevinter wins. The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Dorian’s eyes flashed up to the Qunari. “That simple, eh? And what have you been whispering to your masters in Par Vollen? That the Inquisition is no threat to them and to just let us be? I thought you’d be all for destabilization of the South.”

“If the Southerners are fighting each other, they’re not fighting us, true. But if this Corypheus asshole takes over the South and adds that power to Tevinter, that’s not so good for us.” Bull shrugged. “And Leliana reads my letters.”

Dorian arched an incredulous eyebrow. “All of them?”

Bull leaned forward menacingly on the table, its legs creaking under his weight. “All of them.”

Dorian reluctantly backed down, looking to the Inquisitor for her help. She frowned and turned to Varric. “You’ve had dealings with the Qunari?”

“Dealings is a bit of an understatement. I watched Hawke try to reason with them. I was there when the Qunari sacked Kirkwall.” He glanced up hesitatingly at Iron Bull. “And I was there when Hawke killed the Arishok. They may be assholes but they’re not sneaky. If they’re offering an alliance, I’d take it at face value.”

Avyanna nodded pensively. “Very well. We will go meet these Qunari. Bull and his Chargers will accompany me. Tethras and Pavus, you will come too.”

Blackwall stepped forward and spoke. “Your Worship, I would-”

“No, you won’t,” Avyanna cut him off sharply. “I need you to escort Lady Shaw safely back to Skyhold and ensure that all of our collected resources are delivered.”

Blackwall shook his head at the Inquisitor. “I should be accompanying you. I didn’t join the Inquisition to fetch and carry.”
Avyanna looked levelly back at him. “And I didn’t accept your offer to have you question my orders.”

Blackwall took a step back, quietly stewing. Berta glanced about the table, feeling burdensome and awkward.

“Which brings us to you, Healer.”

Berta started, surprised. “Me, Inquisitor?” She had barely been following the conversation, unsure of who or what the Venatori were and not understanding why she was there.

Avyanna gestured to the elf standing at attention beside her. “This is Charter, one of Leliana’s people.”

By which you mean spies, Berta mentally filled in.

“Pleasure to meet you, Lady Shaw,” the elf said. “The Inquisitor has told me of your skills.”

“Thank you,” Berta said carefully.

Charter glanced at the Inquisitor who nodded at her to continue. “We’ve been monitoring the situation in Crestwood since not long after the first rift in the region opened. The village healer was killed in the first wave of undead attacks and his apprentice has not been seen since and is presumed dead. The villagers approve of us because we don’t impose any levies and we’ve been training a core of village guardsmen, but you can help create even more good will for the Inquisition by coming to the village and giving aid to any who need it.”

Berta nodded in agreement. “I will do whatever I can.”

“Good. You can go to the village tomorrow,” Avyanna announced. “Charter is our Seneschal and Commander of Caer Bronach. She’ll oversee the garrison here.” She looked to Bull, Dorian and Varric in turn. “We leave for the Storm Coast as soon as the Healer’s mage arrives and I can ride. And now, tell us, Bull, what did you find in Therinfal.”
“Nothing good. At first it was pretty much what we expected. Seeker Lucius had pulled all the Templars he could back to the Redoubt, and they were holed up there. We met with the Orlesian nobles that Ambassador Montilyet swayed to our side, but their influence didn’t last long. Lucius killed them all.”

“Oh, shit,” Varric muttered. “That’s not going to encourage many nobles to volunteer as our emissaries in the future.”

“Yeah, well, that was the least of our problems. Turns out Lucius had been dead for ages as had the Knight Vigilant. There was an envy demon in the Lord Seeker’s form controlling the templars. It had been importing red lyrium, switching out the regular lyrium stocks and turning the templars into Corypheus’s minions. We destroyed the lyrium, killed the demon and those who had already been turned and got the hell out of there. We sent every Templar we brought to our side to Skyhold.”

Avyanna gazed up at Bull. “How many templars did you bring to our cause?”

“Three hundred and twenty-three.” He chuckled menacingly. “Enough to blast a few Venatori all the way back to Minrathous. But there’s more. We also found information about Corypheus’s plans to assassinate the Orlesian Empress.”

Dorian sucked in his breath and looked to Avyanna. “Just so. Given what you and I saw in the future, I think we must assume that will be his next move. We should let Josephine and Leliana know we have corroborating evidence.”


“Yes, your Worship,” he replied. Berta guessed he never called her ‘your Inquisitorialness’ to her face. The rest of them filed out of the room.

As Berta closed the door behind her she saw Avyanna handing a parchment and quill to Varric. “Here. Take this down,” she ordered.

Berta poked her head back in. “Excuse me, Inquisitor. It’s alright to use your hand to write. If you support your arm and don’t move from your shoulder, it should be fine.”

Avyanna looked at her as if Berta had just told her that she also had permission to breathe. “I will
“keep that in mind,” she said icily.

Varric raised his eyebrows and made a shooing motion towards Berta before turning back to Avyanna. “Inquisitor?”

The elf glared at Berta for another moment before turning back to Varric. “To my advisors...”

Berta closed the door and headed down the steps. Dorian stood half way down the flight of stairs, waiting for her. Blackwall, Bull and Charter had already disappeared.

Berta shook her head, glancing back at the closed door. “What was that all about? I swear I piss her off even when I don’t think I’m doing anything objectionable.”

Dorian linked his arm through hers as they walked down the steps. He dropped his voice and said, “Has it occurred to you that our dear Inquisitor cannot read or write?”

Berta stopped in her tracks. “Wait, what?”

Dorian pulled her along as he began walking again. “Most Dalish don’t know how. I suppose they may have some learned men or women among them, but you don’t need to be able to read the works of Sister Laudine to hunt rabbits or gather berries. The Dalish have an oral tradition.”

“Oh. I suppose I should apologize.”

“I wouldn’t mention it again if I were you.” He patted her arm. “I figured out her deficiency fairly early on. I believe it embarrasses her.”

Berta thought back to her conversation with Josephine in the garden. She supposed Josephine had never said that the Inquisitor herself was writing a letter to Arl Teagan after Connor’s death and it made sense that someone other than the Inquisitor would speak at the funeral if she couldn’t read her own speech. It cast the very first time she had met the Inquisitor in a new light as well; if she wasn’t reading those papers on her desk, what was she doing? Perhaps trying to look serious and impressive in front of an underling whose education far outstripped her own.
The rest of the afternoon was spent settling into the keep. Leliana’s people continued to trickle into the castle in ones and twos over the course of the afternoon, being recalled by Charter to shore up their position and create their new base of operations. Dorian explained to Berta about the Venatori, the Tevinter sect of fanatics that had pledged themselves to Corypheus, believing him to be the only one who could restore Tevinter’s glory. They were led by a woman Dorian had known in Minrathous, Calpernia, a particularly ruthless and cunning mage. Claiming exhaustion from rectifying Berta’s ignorance, Dorian retired to the ale room to read and nap. Blackwall found a sparring partner amongst Bull’s men and took out his frustration at not being on the team to go to the Storm Coast by beating the crap out of him. Berta was drawn to watch their sparring but after witnessing a few bone crunching blows on both sides, she left to clean and organize the tent that Charter had pitched in the upper courtyard to serve as the infirmary for the keep.

The Chargers took their rest and relaxation seriously once they had pitched their camp within the middle courtyard, stowed their gear and maintained their weapons. A large barrel of ale was pilfered from the ale room by Krem and Rocky and by the time the evening meal was served, the ring of people gathered around the middle courtyard fire was boisterous and merry. Blackwall’s mood seemed to have improved and he and Bull were engaged in an informal contest that centered around describing the most disgusting thing they’d ever had to eat, ending in Bull beating Blackwall’s moldy blue hard tack with some kind of fruit from Seheron that smelled of corpses when beginning to rot. Dorian was chatting happily with a Dalish elf who carried a staff very thinly disguised as a bow. Even the Inquisitor seemed in good spirits as she lounged on a stack of crates just at the edge of the firelight, her legs propped up on a barrel and a large flagon of ale in her left hand, watching her people with the faintest of smiles on her face.

Varric settled next to Berta on the bench where she sat by the fire. “How you holding up, Lucky?”

Berta looked at him in confusion. “Me? I’m fine. Got to see a dragon today. I’m loosening up after a few days in the saddle. And nobody died. So, all in all, a good day.”

Varric looked at her sidelong. “You know, it would be understandable if you weren’t fine.” He took a long drink from his cup. “I mean, you’ve been yanked from your world to this one. You’re put in charge of a bunch of crazy mages and zealous templars and you’ve got a demanding boss. You might be forgiven if you broke down and cried or got angry or something.”

“And what would that prove?” she asked. “It wouldn't change anything.”

“Yeah, but it might make you feel better.”

Berta laughed. “Or it might just give you a dramatic scene for your novel.” She paused and took a drink from her own cup. “Really, Varric, I'm fine. Maybe it's a character flaw, but I really don't dwell on things I can't change. Things are what they are and it's not much use crying about it. Besides, I
don’t think my boss would be overly sympathetic.” She glanced over at the Inquisitor who was silently observing the rowdy mercenaries.

“There is that.” He shrugged. “Just...well, if you ever want to talk, I’m a good listener.”

“And here I thought you were just a good talker.”

“The two go hand in hand. How can I tell good stories if I don’t listen to anyone else’s?”

Eventually the fire began to die and one by one the mercenaries, soldiers and all the new denizens of Caer Bronach turned in. Berta made a move to bank the fire and Dorian tutted, “Fire mage, my dear, not necessary,” and he extinguished the blaze with a flourish of his hand. They made their way by starlight back to the ale room. The Inquisitor and Varric were already asleep on their bedrolls. Blackwall sat on his, leaning up against a barrel, dressed in his coat and breeches, cleaning his armor and setting it aside before bed. Berta gathered up her chemise and clean small clothes and put them in her bag.

“I’m headed to bathe and wash my clothes. Goodnight,” she said to Dorian and Blackwall.

“Goodnight, my dear,” Dorian sighed, kicking off his boots and settling into his bedroll.

“Goodnight, my lady.” Blackwall nodded and turned his attention back to his armor.

Berta left the ale room and turned across the upper courtyard. She helped herself to the torch outside the door to the grotto, carrying it inside to light the braziers on the way down to the stone pool beneath the keep. She put the torch in a wall sconce and undressed by torchlight, taking off her uncomfortably filthy clothing. She left the jacket hanging on the bottom rung of the ladder and set her boots aside with her chemise and small clothes. She knelt naked in the pool and dunked her clothing, then scrubbing them with the lavender scented soap she’d brought from Skyhold. The pants were the worst, smelling of horse and sweat but the padded undershirt was not much better. The water around her was a grayish brown between the dirt and the soap, but the spring that fed the pool washed it away quickly, clear fresh water burbling up from between the stones.

Berta was humming to herself as she turned her attention to scrubbing her face and hair, shivering in the cool water. She rinsed herself quickly and was giving a second pass to her fingernails when she heard a cough echo in the chamber.
She froze, looking around the grotto, not seeing anyone in the shadows around the pool.

“Hello? Who’s there?” She hollered, her voice sounding loud and frightened in the stillness.

No one answered. She splashed hurriedly out of the pool throwing on her chemise without drying off, sliding her feet into her boots without donning her socks and grabbing the torch. She threw her wet clothes into her bag and hurriedly climbed the ladder, awkwardly holding the torch in one hand so she could see.

“My lady.”

Berta yelped in surprise, nearly dropping the torch at the unexpected appearance of Blackwall on the landing at the top of the ladder, his broadsword sheathed across his back.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Blackwall, you nearly scared me to death.” She finished climbing up to the landing as he took the torch from her and offered a hand to help her up. She took a deep breath, trying to slow her racing pulse. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I...I didn’t wish to leave you unaccompanied,” he stammered. He looked at Berta and then turned his gaze to the floor, dropping her hand quickly.

Berta belated realized she was standing there dripping, her thin white chemise clinging to her, made translucent by her damp skin. She tugged self-consciously at the fabric, pulling one side of the neckline up over her shoulder and holding her bag in front of her body, swallowing hard at her sudden exposure. Blackwall turned his eyes to meet hers and held her gaze for a long moment. Berta felt her breath catch, his eyes dark in the torch light, the broad-shouldered bulk of him, standing so close to her. She felt a shiver between her shoulder blades that had nothing to do with the icy water.

Blackwall looked away first, turning his back to her. “I apologize, my lady. I should have announced myself.” He shook his head. “There’s a passage down to the lake from here…and there were the spiders…I wanted to make sure you were safe…I didn’t see you bathing, I swear.”

Berta blinked in surprise. “I’m not worried about you being a peeping tom.”

He turned sharply back to her. “A what?”
Berta shook her head and laughed nervously. “Nothing. I trust you, Blackwall. Thank you for looking out for me, just next time, tell me when you’re lurking nearby. You’ll save me a shock.”

He bowed his head again. “Yes, my lady.”

Berta took a deep breath and stepped toward the next ladder up. “Now, perhaps we should go to bed.”

“My lady?”

“I mean, it’s time to sleep...to retire.” Berta could feel her face turning a flaming red all the way to the tip of her ears. “After you, Warden Blackwall,” she said gesturing to the ladder.

“My lady.” He turned and climbed upwards and then held the door for her to the courtyard. Berta hung her wet things on the wall of the upper courtyard, thankful for the darkness. Blackwall waited at the door to the ale room, holding it open for her.

Dorian was reclining on his bed roll, his head propped up on elbow, reading by the torchlight. He glanced up as they entered, taking in Berta’s wet hair and damp chemise and Blackwall’s effort to look anywhere but at her.

“Have a nice bath?” the mage asked quietly, a fiendish grin playing across his face. “Not too cold, I hope?”

“It was fine, thank you,” Berta replied stiffly, darting under the covers, curling up on her side with her back to the rest of the room, not caring that she was still wet, grateful for the sleeping form of the Inquisitor between her bed and the Warden’s.

Dorian said nothing more and put his book away noisily, fluffed his blankets over himself and sighed contentedly. Berta heard Blackwall doffing his boots and climbing into his bedroll, groaning softly as he stretched into his blankets. She lay there for a long time, hardly breathing, feeling the heat of her embarrassment lingering on her cheeks, and the heat of something else low in her belly, her mind replaying the look in Blackwall’s eyes as she stood there dripping wet. Her body was too keyed up to sleep. Whatever this was, it had to stop.
If you are curious, here's a link to the school and horse program Berta participated in when she was in high school. It's a thing:
https://vimeo.com/286622226
and
https://vimeo.com/272678012

Enjoy!
Berta slept late, for her, the next morning, waking to find herself the only one remaining in the ale room. By the time she had dressed in her nearly completely dry clothing and stumbled down to the middle courtyard, breakfast was in full swing. She endured a little good-natured ribbing from Varric about how nice it was for her to finally deign to join them and sat on a bench by the fire, yawning. The Bull’s Chargers had taken charge of the meal for the keep, resulting in less lumpy but no more flavorful porridge than the day previously, but then Reeve, one of Charter’s underlings, revealed a huge side of salt pork that she had received from a merchant in Jader as a bonus for services rendered. She had carted it all the way back with her to Caer Bronach, carefully wrapped in waxed cloth, because it was too tasty to leave behind. Berta accepted a slice of it to crumble into the porridge, imparting a salty, smoky tang that elevated breakfast from passable to delicious. Some truths are universal and even in Thedas, bacon made everything better.

After breakfast, Bull ordered the Chargers to join him for drills in the lower courtyard and Blackwall and the Inquisition soldiers disappeared with them. Berta returned to the ale room to repack her bag with surplus bandages, sutures, and her surgical tools and grabbed her apothecary box, making ready to head to the village. She grabbed two healing potions from the basket, popping them under her arm as she left the ale room.

“Where are you going with those?”

Berta looked up to see the frowning face of Charter, her eyes fixed on the healing potions. “I’m sorry?”

“Those potions. Where are you taking them?”
“To the village. I thought I’d—”

“Healing potions are for the Inquisitor and her immediate party only.” Charter stepped forward and held out her hands. “Give ‘em here.”

Berta stepped back in alarm. “But I need to take them to the village. And without a mage—”

“You’ll just have to manage the best you can.”

Berta narrowed her eyes at the officious elf and quickly changed her tactics. “I am the Chief Healer of the Inquisition and if I—”

“I know who you are, Lady Shaw,” the elf said with sarcastic emphasis. “And I am the seneschal of this keep acting on orders of the Inquisitor herself. Don’t think you want to cross her now, do you, Chief Healer?”

Berta immediately regretted pulling rank, and begrudgingly handed the potions over.

Charter gave her a stiff smile and an excessively polite bow. “Thank you, Lady Shaw.” She marched off towards a small gaggle of her people lounging about on a stack of hay bales in the atrium to the stairs. She handed the potions to one of her underlings. “Lock those in the supply chest. Everyone else, briefing in the library, now.” They all assembled and headed up towards the stairs.

Berta watched them go, thinking that she’d have to talk to Elan about how many potions they could reasonably make and then come up with a plan for a fairer distribution. The potions were too just too useful to wield indefinitely.

She headed back to the middle courtyard and found Varric and Dorian sitting at the fire, the dwarf polishing his crossbow and the mage reading one of the books he’d salvaged from the day before.

“This is fascinating,” Dorian exclaimed, tapping the page he was reading. “Did you know that there was an Alamarri mage who accurately described the basic principles of entropic magical phenomenon, nearly three hundred years before founding of the first circles? History is just so remarkable.”
Varric ran his chamois cloth over the trigger of the crossbow, carefully caressing every surface, not looking up at the mage. “Something magical and weird...blah, blah, blah...”

“So, who wants to accompany me to the village?” Berta stood looking over the two men as she set her bag and apothecary box down.

“Not ‘til I’ve finished cleaning Bianca,” Varric said. “Any maybe not even then. It’s a long walk.”

“We could take the horses.”

“I’d rather walk.”

“Well, then what about you, Dorian?”

“Hmmmm?” The mage looked up from his book. “What’s that?”

“I am looking for an escort to accompany me to the village.”

Dorian made a face. “Can’t one of Charter’s people go with you?”

“I haven’t asked. They all disappeared into the library with Charter.”

“But you think I’m available for bodyguard duty?”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think you want to go prancing into Crestwood village with me. An evil Tevinter mage terrorizes the villagers.” He returned to reading.
“I wasn’t planning on ‘prancing’ anywhere. You heard the Inquisitor. I’m supposed to go to the village to spread good will.” Dorian continued reading and Varric continued polishing Bianca. Berta sat heavily on one of the benches. She supposed she could search out Blackwall to accompany her, but she didn’t think she would cure her blossoming crush by choosing to spend more time with him.

“Oh, Dorian, I can’t believe I forgot. This should interest you. We got a reply from Minrathous.” Berta dug into her bag to produce the letter. Dorian sat up, plucking it from her fingers and immediately beginning to read it. “Vivienne didn’t think it was good news.”

“Hmm,” Dorian murmured, as if Vivienne’s opinion couldn’t possibly interest him. Berta sat in silence watching his face for any clue. He read quickly, his eyes darting back and forth over the minuscule writing, his brow furrowing. He frowned slightly and made a surprised noise, nodding at the paper. Berta chewed the inside of her cheek, trying to be patient.

Varric stopped his polishing and looked from healer to mage. “The suspense is killing her, Sparkler. What do you think?”

“Well...” the Altus began carefully. “They have not encountered any rifts in Tevinter to perform any direct observation or experimentation, but they have several theories.” He pursed his lips as he continued reading. “Oh, now this is interesting. It seems that the Fade appears to be warping around the location of the initial explosion- if their calculations are correct. Mathematical accuracy can be so tricky with the Fade.”

“Warping?” Berta cocked her head at him. “What exactly does that mean?”

Dorian sighed. “The fabric of the Fade is nonlinear. Our perception of time and distance when our minds are there is radically different from our perception in our waking world. People can spend hours in the Fade and only a few moments go by in real time. As you know, one can always see the Black City in dreams, but never reach it. It is as if the distance in the Fade ‘warps’ such that as you get closer, the distance always increases. Apparently, a similar phenomenon, but in reverse is occurring around the nexus of the explosion at the Temple of Sacred Ashes.”

“All roads lead to Haven,” Berta mused. “Do you think that’s why I ended up near there?”

Dorian shrugged. “Possibly. We really can’t know what brought you here. It is possible that points in your world correspond to points in ours. It could also be that the warping of the Fade around the site of the breach would have drawn you nearer to Haven, regardless of your point of origin.”
Berta listened carefully to Dorian and couldn’t help but think of the breach as something kind of like a black hole. “I wish I could have seen the breach up close.”

“It was terrifying in its scope,” Dorian confessed. “It looked as if the very sky was punctured. That the distances around the site continue to be warped by its presence doesn’t surprise me.”

Berta could almost hear echoes of her college physics lectures on general relativity in Dorian’s descriptions of the Fade and its behavior. “That book you gave me to read by Senior Enchanter Moreno...he was arguing that the Veil and the Fade are a physical location but that implies that there is an argument that they’re not, yes?”

Dorian nodded affirmatively. “Yes. That’s true.”

“So are your colleagues sure that it is distance, or what I might call space, that’s warping? After all, distance covered is a function of velocity, which is a function of time. If our perception of the passage of time in the Fade is vastly different than the waking world, are your colleagues sure that it is distance that is altered and not time? Getting closer to the Black City could result in time slowing down, or time dilation if you will. And perhaps the opposite effect at the explosion nexus is causing time to speed up relative to our perception. You did say that you and Magister Alexius were working on a type of chronomancy...does any of this make sense based on your research?”

“Perhaps, yes.” Dorian tapped his lips pensively. “‘Time dilation...’ What a fascinating idea. I shall have to write back to them.”

“Not that any of that really helps me,” Berta sighed. “But I suppose anything we can learn about the rifts might be useful.”

“Right you are,” Dorian said cheerily. “And if nothing else, you can be a coauthor on my next paper regarding time distortion in the Fade. We’ll shock the circles of Tevinter with our theories.”

Varric sighed as if he was disgusted. “Alright, Lucky, I’ll take you to the village if it will get you two to stop all this magical theory mumbo jumbo. It’s giving me a headache.” The dwarf shouldered his crossbow. “Let’s go. And we’ll walk.”

“I’ll hold on to this for a bit,” Dorian said waving the letter and beginning to reread it. “It may yet spark an idea.”
Berta nodded, picked up her bag and box followed Varric down to the lower courtyard where the Chargers were drilling. At first glance, it looked less organized and disciplined than Cullen and his recruits, but Berta quickly saw that this was because the Chargers needed no external will imposed upon them. They practiced what they needed to practice, showed each other moves, tried to best each other and changed their tactics depending on who they were paired against rather than following a prescribed set of blocks and attacks. These were experienced and enthusiastic fighting men and women.

Blackwall was across from Krem, both carrying a sword and a small round shield. Krem attacked, swinging low beneath the Warden’s shield and Blackwall leapt back, returning a swing with his sword at Krem’s head. Krem raised his shield in time, the blade scraping loudly along the metal edge. Blackwall shifted his weight forward, stepping toward Krem, slamming his shield against the other man’s sword arm with a blow that made Berta’s teeth ache to see it, and then raising the shield up to catch the smaller man under his chin. Krem’s head snapped back but he managed fend off Blackwall’s next blow with his own shield, falling back with the momentum of the blow, landing on his back but rolling over his shoulder to standing, safely out of range for the moment.

“Nice move,” Blackwall said appreciatively. “I could never execute that.”

Krem shrugged, keeping his fighting stance. “Harder for a big bloke like you. The Chief could never master it either. Horns get in the way.”

“Hate to interrupt,” Varric said. “We’re heading into the village. Just wanted to let someone know where we are. I’ll make sure we’re back by sundown.”

Blackwall looked sharply at Berta, lowering his shield. “I should accompany you, my lady.”

Berta bit her lip, unsure when or why Blackwall seemed to have designated himself her personal bodyguard. “It’s not necessary. I’m sure Varric can keep an eye on me.”

Varric patted his crossbow affectionately. “Bianca and I will keep her safe, Hero. I’m choosing not to be offended by your implication that I’m not up to the task.”

Blackwall didn’t have time to protest as the watch soldier interrupted him, yelling from atop the gates. “Riders approaching! Open the gate!”

Berta, Varric and Blackwall cleared out of the way as Pip and Bevin rushed to open the heavy
wooden doors. Within moments Berta saw Alia and Hugh enter on horseback and half the company of foot soldiers behind them. Three wagons pulled up outside the gate on the ramp, loaded with supplies, and the other half of the foot soldiers brought up the rear. Finn hopped down from his perch on the seat of the second wagon, retrieving his satchel and bed roll from under the seat, coming through the gate, looking about for Berta.

“Lady Shaw,” he greeted her, extending his hand.

Berta grinned. “Welcome to Caer Bronach. I’m glad you’re here.”

Finn smiled ruefully. “Me too. The road’s none too smooth from the highway, as you well know. But enough complaining, is the Inquisitor alright? Were you able to heal her?”

“Mostly. Let’s find a place to talk and then I’ll take you to her.” Berta turned back to Varric and Blackwall. “I guess you’re both off the hook for the moment.”

“No problem,” Varric said. “You let me know if you need me later.”

“My lady,” Blackwall murmured and went to join the soldiers who were unloading the wagons into the keep.

“C’mon. We can talk in the infirmary tent.”

Berta led Finn up the steps, through the middle courtyard and up to the infirmary tent in the upper courtyard. Berta sat on a stool and Finn made himself comfortable on the examination cot.

“So, when I got here, the Inquisitor’s right shoulder was dislocated. She had tried to reduce it...pop it back into the socket...but couldn’t and so she took a healing potion. At that point-”

“Let me guess, it was stuck good and proper then, huh?” Finn interrupted. “That’s the thing about healing potions. Yes, they heal wounds, but they don’t put things back where they belong. I once saw a man attacked by a varghest- had his guts ripped out, hanging out of his belly and he took a healing potion.” Finn shuddered. “His belly healed up, it did, but his innards were still hanging outside. It wasn’t a pretty way to go.”
“That’s what I’d guessed,” Berta mused. “I managed to relocate her shoulder, but I think I ripped the tendons of her rotator cuff in the process. I don’t think there’s a fracture.”

Finn looked confused. “A cuff?”

“Let me back up.” She made a fist, holding her arm up, bent at the elbow. “Pretend this is the humerus, the long bone in the upper arm. The top of it is kind of like a ball,” she wiggled her fist, “and the shoulder blade has a shallow cup that meets it.” She cupped her other hand along the palmar side of her fist. “Just like this. Now around this are four separate muscles, the supraspinatus, the infraspinatus, the subscapularis and the teres minor.” She glanced over at Finn to see his forehead wrinkled in confusion. “Never mind- it doesn’t matter what they’re called. But each tendon comes around the head of the humerus like this.” She flattened her hand and slid it over the top and sides of her fist. “They blend together to-”

“What’s a tendon?” Finn asked, cutting her off.

“You know muscles, right?”

Finn nodded affirmatively.

“So, muscles have to attach to the bones to make the bones move. The attachment is called a tendon.” Berta raised her fist again as proxy for the humeral head and draped her fingers of the other hand around her fist to approximate the tendons. “So, the muscles attach around the bone to-”

“Form a cuff of tendons...I understand.” Finn nodded. “And you think you tore them when you put the Inquisitor’s shoulder back?”

“Yes. She could have a fracture as well, but I don’t think so. If she has a fracture it doesn’t seem to interfere with the alignment of her shoulder.”

Finn was quiet, chewing on the inside of his cheek, thinking. “I understand,” he said finally. “I can heal the muscles and tendons and the bone too if needs be.”

Berta breathed a sigh of relief. “Let’s go find the Inquisitor. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to be out of her sling.”
They found the Inquisitor in the ale room, sitting at the small table in the corner near the door, listening to Charter’s update on the organization of the keep. The elf was just finishing her report and left, inclining her head to Berta and Finn as they entered.

Avyanna looked Finn up and down. “You’re the mage.”

“Yes, Inquisitor,” Finn managed to reply, all the while looking like he was waiting for Avyanna to eat him.

“Well, get on with it.” The Inquisitor turned her body in her chair to bring her shoulder closer to Finn.

The mage stepped up to Avyanna, tentatively lifting her coat from around her shoulders and placing his hands on either side of her injury. Berta heard a low thrum as Finn moved his hands slowly around the joint. There was a very faint blue glow coming from his palms. “You’re right,” he said to Berta. “The damage is all to the muscles and tendons. The bone feels intact.”

Berta looked sharply at him. “You can tell that?”

Finn closed his eyes. “Yes. It’s hard to describe. I can feel the flow of...energy...life through the flesh. I can tell where it is disrupted. I have to reestablish the flow. That is how to heal.”

The glow around his hands grew more intense and Avyanna shuddered, turning her head away.

“Nearly there,” Finn said in a whisper. He lowered his hands to Avyanna’s shoulder. She flinched as his fingertips grazed her skin. He began to slowly draw his fingertips along the muscles over her shoulder, tracing the path of tendons as Berta had shown them to him. He then pressed his palms firmly around the joint and sighed. “There. You are healed, Your Worship.”

Avyanna lifted the sling off her neck and over her head, tossing it on the table. She experimentally moved her arm around and then reached behind her shoulder as if grabbing one of her daggers. She took a deep breath and genuinely smiled for the first time Berta had ever witnessed. “Yes. I can kill Venatori again.”
Yay, murders all around, Berta thought, and reached for the sling, unknotting it to get it ready to wash and be reused.

Finn paled slightly at Avyanna’s words. “Yes, well, I’d tell you to go easy on your shoulder but the Venatori won’t wait, I suppose.”

“No, they will not,” Avyanna said humorlessly. “We will leave for the Storm Coast today. Time is short.”

*~~~~~*~~~~~*

Things were chaotic over the next hours as the wagons were unloaded, and the Inquisition truly took over the keep while at the same time the Chargers began packing up and readying to leave. Berta helped Dorian and Varric roll up the bedding and pack up their belongings. Avyanna came and removed her bedroll and pack. That left only two bed rolls in the ale room belonging to Berta and Blackwall which Berta thought that was an untenable situation. She would find other accommodations before nightfall.

By noon time, all the residents of Caer Bronach, new and old, were assembled in the lower courtyard to see the Inquisitor and her companions off. Blackwall looked none too happy about the arrangement, glowering at everyone. Berta gave him a wide berth, standing near Finn and his shadow, Hugh, and the rest of the assembled soldiers from Skyhold, snapping to attention at Captain Alia’s order. Charter and her people lined up along the other side of the courtyard, less strictly organized than the soldiers but Berta supposed that was to be expected given their less straightforward assignations.

Bull grabbed Blackwall’s arm and gave him a hearty clap on the back. “Serves you right for taking down a dragon without me. See you back at Skyhold.”

Blackwall nodded grimly, saying nothing but giving Krem a friendly parting handshake as well.

Dorian gave Berta a brief embrace. “You have no idea how much I’d love to return to Skyhold with you,” he said under his breath. “I can’t believe I’m expected to tromp around in the rain and share a tent with a Qunari. It’s really just so unfair.”

Berta smiled indulgently. “I don’t know. Bull seems like he could be a fun guy to hang out with. It might not be so bad.”
Dorian sighed dramatically. “I shall endure. No homework this time. Simply get safely back to Skyhold.” He pressed the letter from Minrathous into her hands. “Show this to Solas when he returns. He may have additional insight.”

Berta nodded in understanding. “Take care,” she said and pecked him on the cheek. She waved to Varric and Bull as they followed the Inquisitor through the gate, the Chargers marching behind them.

After lunch, Charter informed Berta that she should take Finn with her to the village. Berta agreed that she would be able to do more with a mage in tow. Hugh would come to keep an eye on Finn and assuage any fears the villagers might have of an unattended mage and Blackwall insisted on coming as he was the only one remaining of the Inquisitor’s original party that the villagers would recognize.

Berta helped Jaxon saddle horses for the four of them, much to Finn’s dismay, and they set out towards the village. The road led to the north from the front ramp of Caer Bronach, climbing up a steep slope away from the keep, leading over stony high ground in a wide-open path. Finn clung to the pommel of his saddle, white knuckled and gritting his teeth, his robe awkwardly hoisted up over his knees, skinny white legs hanging limply in the stirrups. Berta tried to give him some pointers, but the mage was resistant and declared himself fine with Hugh holding the reins to his horse, leading them both. Berta shook her head and tried not to laugh at his expense.

“So, Blackwall,” Hugh asked. “Why’d the Inquisitor leave you behind?”

Berta looked over at the Templar and gave him a disapproving glare. It obviously bothered Blackwall and there was no reason to rub his face in it. The Warden grunted in response.

Hugh saw Berta’s look. “I don’t mean it that way, I just mean, why does she only ever take three of you with her at a time? If I had a whole stable of right proper mages and warriors and assassins, I’d bring the lot of you with me everywhere. Like you, Ser Warden. There’s a lot of talent in your sword arm that shouldn’t go to waste.”

“I know why,” Finn offered, jostling in the saddle. “It’s a Dalish tradition, my wife says. Hunting parties always are made up of four. An even number so everyone has a partner, and three is the most a Dalish hunter can keep track of at a time.”

Hugh scoffed. “Dalish can count to more than three.”
“That’s not what I mean. Dalish hunters have what they call a green sense, *dera’elas*, in Elvhen. They feel the forest, their prey, and the other hunters. Their green sense can only reliably maintain focused awareness of three other hunters at a time. My wife was a Dalish hunter,” he explained with pride.

Blackwall looked over at Finn. “The Inquisitor does have an uncanny ability to know exactly where you’re going to be in a fight. Sometimes where her enemy is going to be, too.”

They crested a rise along the road. To their left, there was a wooden stall draped with fraying striped colored canvas. A man dressed in rough spun clothing was on a wooden ladder, taking a fresh board from the boy standing at the ladder base, hammering it to the frame of the stall to shore it up. The boy, with the same wide nose and full lips as the man, looked at them with big eyes, a grin lighting up his entire face as he practically hopped from one foot to the other in excitement.

“Da, look, it’s Warden Blackwall!”

Blackwall raised his hand in greeting and the man stopped hammering and hopped down, wiping his forehead on his arm.

“Good morning, Warden!”

“Morning, Gauld. Getting everything back in order?”

“Yes, Ser. With the dragon gone and the lake all to rights, can’t be too long until we have travelers on the road again. Can’t sell my blankets and clothing without a respectable stall, you know.” He ruffled his boy’s hair. “And I’ve got all the help I can manage.”

Blackwall nodded noncommittally and began to walk his horse on.

“Begging your pardon, Ser, but are you going to the village? Sister Vaughn was hoping that the healing help the Inquisitor promised would be on the way soon.” The man shifted uncertainly, looking hopefully at Blackwall and his companions.

“The healing help is right here,” Berta volunteered. “We’re headed there now.”
Gauld looked relieved. “Oh, good. Just ask for Sister Vaughn when you get there. She’ll put you to work.”

“Thank you,” Berta replied, and they continued on their way. Gauld’s son waved enthusiastically at them as they rode off. Berta waved in return.

“He was rather excited to see you,” she commented to Blackwall.

“I suppose a Grey Warden is exciting if you grew up here,” he muttered. “Boy keeps asking me if I ever met the Hero of Ferelden, no matter how many times I tell him no.”

“I’ve met Warden Tabris,” Finn chirped. “I could tell him all about her.”

Blackwall eyed Finn speculatively. “Is that right? Well, don’t be telling him that unless you want an 8-year-old underfoot the entire time you’re here.”

Finn clamped his mouth shut, glancing back over his shoulder at the boy who was watching them ride away, his apparent dislike of children winning out over his enthusiasm for telling tales of the Hero of Ferelden.

The road sloped downward gently and curved to the right and shortly they came to the village. There were burnt cabins outside the palisade wall and two men dressed in leathers and wool, armed with bows and swords at their belts manning the wooden gate. They nodded to Blackwall as their small party dismounted, tying their horses up at the hitch rail outside the gate. Blackwall beckoned to Berta to follow and they entered the village.

Crestwood was a cluster of small wooden houses on a terraced hillside, their roofs planted with sod and small garden plots behind the homes. The central street, such as it was, was rocky and headed straight up the hillside, dividing the village in two. The villagers were going about their business, mending fishing nets, weeding their gardens, tying up a catch of fish to dry, milking a goat and chatting with their neighbors. Berta was struck with a strong sense of deja vu, remembering an afternoon visit to Plymouth Plantation in Massachusetts. The level of technology and lifestyle seemed not too different from the first pilgrims in early colonial America. There were a few differences though. The women weren’t dressed particularly differently than the men, most of them wearing breeches, and nobody wore hats or bonnets. There was a distinct absence of buckles.
“Warden Blackwall.”

Berta looked up the central lane to see a woman headed toward them. She wore the white long-sleeved tunic and red smock of a chantry sister over her leggings, her head covered with a hood and topped with the red hat Berta had seen some sisters wear, more like a shortened version of a fez than the tall headdress of Mother Giselle. The golden sun symbol of the Chantry graced the front of her smock and hat. She was remarkably pretty for a Chantry sister, with large eyes and high cheek bones that left Berta with the impression that she was masquerading in costume rather than being a sister in actuality.

“Sister Vaughn,” Blackwall replied. “This is Lady Shaw. She’s the Chief Healer of the Inquisition and this is Finn, her mage, and Hugh, his Templar escort.”

Berta wanted to object to her implied ownership of Finn but there was no time as Sister Vaughn was grasping her hands in greeting. “Welcome to the village of Crestwood, m’lady. We are in dire need. We do not have a Chantry here, but I have gathered our sick in the square by the Chanter’s Board. Will that suffice?”

Berta looked uncertainly to Blackwall, unsure of what a Chanter’s Board was and also feeling a bit unsure about the Sister. She spoke in a dreamy sort of voice that made Berta wonder if she was drugged, or perhaps just a Thedosian equivalent of a flower child.

Blackwall nodded to Sister Vaughn. “We can make do, Sister.”

The Sister smiled in relief. “Excellent. This way.”

She led them up the lane to the end of the village and up a steep flight of stone stairs. The stairs widened out into a rectangular open space, delineated by a cottage on one side and low stone walls built into the hillside on the others. The path continued up the hillside, large stones laid into the ground as continuing stairs and a wooden sign post tacked with parchment, rustling in the light breeze; the Chanter’s Board, Berta assumed. There was a motley assortment of people of all ages, sitting on the stone wall or laying on pallets on the ground. Berta counted twenty-three in all. She and Finn would be busy for a while.

“Well then,” she said to Sister Vaughn, hoping the woman had some passing skills at triage. “Who needs us first?”
The variety of ailments in Crestwood was different from what Berta was used to seeing in the refugee camp at Skyhold. Most of the Skyhold refugees were suffering from injuries or malnutrition or cold but here in Crestwood more of the townsfolk were sick. She had seen a similar pattern of disease in Africa. In the early stages after a conflict, there was little disease. Everyone too infirm or weak to flee died and so the refugees were initially healthier than the general population. Here, they had been in hiding, not driven from their homes and the normal ailments that might have killed them if they had to be on the move had merely festered, untreated.

As such, the work was a good bit more challenging than what she had been doing in the lake side camp as well, and she found herself relying on guesswork and the little Thedosian herbalism that she had learned. There was an old man with what she guessed to be end stage liver disease, given his yellow skin, spider veins and flapping hands with a belly likely swollen with fluid but she didn’t think there was much she could do for him. Back on earth, she would have sent him for a contrast enhanced CT scan of his liver and performed a paracentesis to remove the fluid from his belly and make him more comfortable but she couldn’t risk the infection that would be sure to follow and would be equally sure to be life threatening. In the end she gave him an oral dose of a mixture of elfroot and spindleweed, which she reasoned might function similarly to lactulose, and advised him to abstain from alcohol, which she then had to explain specifically as no wine or ale, given his limited understanding. There was a woman who said she was only 40, which was shocking as she looked far older than Berta herself. She was clearly suffering from diabetes, nearly blind from retinopathy and with the sour ammonia breath of renal failure. Her feet were the most shocking, ulcerated and raw, grossly infected and foul. Her son had died in the first wave of attacks on the village and she had to make all the trips herself to the well in the center of the village to get water and her shoes had rubbed her feet raw and then festered since her diabetes had dulled her sensation long ago. Berta had Finn take a look, but he confided quietly to her that while he might be able to heal one foot, the other was too far gone. He could sense that it was dead inside and that to try to heal it would be a waste of energy. Berta told him to heal the salvageable foot as best he could and then she would amputate the other. There was a young girl whose bilateral ear infections had run rampant and was now effectively deaf, a teenage boy with an ankle that he had broken running from the undead that he had been walking on without any splinting, a woman with a raging breast infection whose breastfed baby cried in her arms, and an old woman, bent with age, who seemed healthy as a horse except for the itching, ulcerated basal cell carcinoma the size of a silver dollar on the back of her hand.

Blackwall and Hugh were helpful, working with Sister Vaughn to bring clean water for washing and getting a fire going with boiling water so Berta could sterilize her surgical tools as she made ready to amputate the diabetic woman’s foot. The mayor of Crestwood being conspicuously absent, Sister Vaughn, took over the small yard adjacent to his cottage, dragging a table out from the home to create a makeshift operating theater on the far side of the building, away from the rest of the patients. Blackwall and Hugh carried the woman to the table and Sister Vaughn washed her feet. Berta shooed the two warriors away despite Blackwall’s offer to remain. There was nothing they could do to help, and Berta was inclined to not have to work with an audience. Finn took care of the left foot first, the blue glow surrounding her foot, the ulcers drying and closing, the stench of the infection abating somewhat. He looked faint following healing the woman’s foot, swaying slightly.
“Why don’t you go rest for a bit, Finn? Sister Vaughn can assist me with the surgery.”

Sister Vaughn smiled at Finn. “Take your rest, young man.”

Finn nodded weakly and disappearing inside the mayor’s cottage to rest. The diabetic woman, Gwynnie, was terrified, tears slipping down her cheeks. Berta squeezed her hand. “I’m going to do everything I can to help you.” Gwynnie sniffled and nodded.

Berta mixed a smaller dose of nettle syrup than she had for the Inquisitor, reasoning that the neuropathy the woman suffered from would protect her some from the pain and dosed her accordingly. Once Gwynnie began to doze, Berta cleaned her lower leg, above the worst of the infection with the alcohol from her kit and selected a scalpel from her boiled tools. Sister Vaughn stood at the woman’s head, holding her hands.

“Ok,” Berta said to herself as much as to Sister Vaughn. “Here we go.”

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An hour later, Berta left her makeshift operating room, tired but as pleased as she could be with having to perform an amputation. The wire saw in the kit had worked as designed, requiring far more effort than a motorized bone saw, but with the same end result, and the stump was cauterized and over sewn closed. Gwynnie was recovering, Sister Vaughn watching over her.

Berta dropped her surgical tools back into the boiling water over the fire and then sat straddling the stone wall and began to scrub her hands in bucket of water Hugh had left for her.

Blackwall leaned on the wall, not far away, his arms folded across his chest. He glanced at Berta’s arms, bloodied to above her wrists, but seemed unperturbed. “Success?”

Berta shrugged, finishing washing her hands before drying them with the rag Blackwall handed to her. “If you can call hacking someone’s foot off success. Now we’ll see if she heals. I’ll have Finn take a look at her when he’s able.” She saw Finn was back at work, bent over a man with a wheezing cough, touching his back and frowning with concentration.
Blackwall nodded to the people remaining in the square. “You’re doing well by these people, my lady. They’re grateful.”

Berta stood and took the long blacksmith tongs that Sister Vaughn had borrowed for her, fishing her tools out of the pot and setting them to cool on a clean cloth on a wooden stool by the fire. “It’s what anyone would do in my place.”

“Pardon me for saying so, but no. Too many people sit by and don’t help, even when they can.” He shifted on the wall, returning his gaze to Berta, his eyes warm as he regarded her. “I admire you for it.”

Berta found herself caught off guard by his plainspokenness. “I hardly know what to say. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, my lady.” He stood, adjusting his sword across his back. “Can I get you anything?”

Berta wanted to reply that a stiff drink might hit the spot but at that moment a skinny young man came running into the square, not more than twenty years old, out of breath, his eyes wild in a panic. He grabbed Berta’s arm, shaking her.

“Where’s Sister Vaughn?” he shouted.

Blackwall stepped forward protectively, placing his hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Calm down, lad, what are you on about?”

The man released Berta’s arm and ran his hands through his messy rust colored hair, his face pained and frightened. “The baby’s come but not. Deri’s in so much pain, there’s something wrong!”

“Alright, calm down. I’m a healer. I’ll come help.” Berta looked quickly to Finn. “Finn, with me, please.” Berta scooped her cleaned tools into her surgeon’s kit and grabbed the apothecary box.

“Hurry,” the young man said hoarsely.
The young man led them back down the center lane of the village toward the gate, coming to a small wooden cottage just inside the palisade wall. Finn hustled behind Berta, his robes flapping about his ankles and Blackwall brought up the rear, his eyes darting over the villagers, looking for trouble.

Inside the one room cottage, a girl was on the bed at one end of the room, laying on her back, her legs drawn up, her smock-like dress pulled up over her legs and belly, showing a protuberant pregnant abdomen. She screamed just as they entered, throwing her head back, her face contorted, red and sweaty, her lank brown hair sticking to her forehead, her eyes glassy. On the bed, between her legs, was a remarkable amount of blood.

“Deri, I’m Doctor Shaw, I’m a healer.” Berta dropped to the edge of the bed and placed her hand on the girl’s belly.

The girl ignored Berta and stared at Finn, her wide eyes taking in his robes. “No, no, what is he doing here? No, Jakob, no...I don’t want our baby to...oh!” She screamed again and grit her teeth, baring down. “I have to push!”

Berta saw a round thatch of dark hair appear between the girl’s labia as she grunted, straining, and then disappear back into her flesh as she relaxed. God, I hate OB, Berta thought.

“No mage,” Deri screamed. “I don’t care if...I don’t care...”

Jakob faltered and looked at Berta who in turn looked at Finn. “Why don’t you wait outside?”

Blackwall drew Finn out of the cottage, shooting a last look at Berta as they left, his face pale in the face of the girl’s screams.

Berta turned her focus back to her patient and her mate. “Jakob, hold her hand, give her back some support. Deri, I’m going to feel the baby’s head. How long have you been laboring? Is this your first child?”

“Three days,” Jakob said, nodding frantically. “It’s our first baby.”

Berta gave him a small smile. “Well, we may be here for a while. Let’s see where we are.” Berta placed her right index and middle fingers into the girl’s vagina, touching the baby’s head. She slid her fingers to the underside of the head. She could feel the eyes and the bridge of the nose, which
was good, standard occiput anterior positioning that would make for the easiest delivery. The amount of blood on the bed worried Berta. It was more than just the normal bloody show of active labor. There might be a placental abruption, the placenta peeling away from the wall of the uterus. Berta placed her left hand on the girl’s belly. She was skinny, the next contraction of the uterus easy to feel, the girl’s belly tightening beneath Berta’s hand.

“Oh, Maker,” the girl moaned.

“Take a big breath and bear down and push!” Berta coached her, counting to ten and then feeling her uterus again, still hard and tight against Berta’s fingertips. “Again, big deep breath and push!”

The head slid down again as Deri tried to push the baby into the outside world. Berta pressed downward with her fingers, stretching the tissue back and forth behind the baby’s head, trying to help make room. She sighed. They were going to be here probably for an hour or more.

“Deri, between contractions, try to rest. I’ll be right back.”

Berta stuck her head outside the cottage. Finn and Blackwall were standing there, conferring.

“I’m going to be here a while- it’s her first.” Berta stepped away from the cottage and looked at Finn. “Why doesn’t she want you to help?”

Finn shook his head. “It’s a common belief that if a mage is present at the birth of a baby, the child will grow up to be a mage as well. No one wants that.”

“That’s not really true is it?”

“No, but superstitions are strong.”

“Mage cooties,” Berta muttered to herself. “Well, why don’t you go see what you can do with the remaining patients who will let you help them. And send Sister Vaughn this way. I’m going to need some clean blankets for swaddling and a basin or something to bathe the baby.”

Finn nodded and headed back up the central lane towards the square.
“What can I do?” Blackwall asked.

Berta wanted to tell him nothing but Blackwall looked so sincere and concerned that she felt compelled to give him a task. “Can you bring me a waterskin for the mother? Birthing is thirsty work.”

“Yes, my lady.” He strode purposefully off towards the square.

Berta watched him go in the golden light of the late afternoon, the Warden casting a long shadow down the row of houses. She hoped that Deri would have her baby before dark so they could get back to Caer Bronach. She turned and went back inside.

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Sister Vaughn brought swaddling blankets and a large wooden basin for the baby and stroked Deri’s hair and said prayers over her. She lit candles in the gathering darkness of the cottage. Jakob abandoned his post beside the bed long enough to start a fire in the hearth and then returned to sit on the floor beside the bed, holding his wife’s hand, looking helpless. Berta was hungry and had a headache. Deri was progressing but it was taking too long. For every good push that brought the baby closer to the world, the head would slide back. Berta nervously felt her belly, trying to get an idea of how big the baby might be, but she had never mastered the ability to hazard a reasonable guess of fetal weight by examination alone and she wasn’t sure what she’d do with the information anyway.

Blackwall poked his head in three times, once to bring water and second time to tell Berta that Finn and Hugh had gone back to the keep and finally to see if Berta needed anything else. Berta ran through her supplies in her head. She had two lengths of string ready to tie the cord and a knife to cut it, blankets for the baby and a bucket for the placenta. All she needed now was for Deri to finally deliver. Berta was grateful that Thedosian custom didn’t exclude the men from this realm. Jakob seemed to have no expectation of leaving the women to their work and Blackwall was equally comfortable coming and going from the cottage without hesitation. It was not what Berta would have expected if she had given it any thought prior to this.

Deri pulled her legs up and back and grunted with her contraction, pushing hard with Berta’s coaching. The head moved down, further this time.

“Don’t stop, push! Almost there!” Berta grinned in excitement. This was it. She cupped her hand
over the baby’s head, controlling it, pressing with her other hand against Deri’s flesh, easing it around the baby’s head to keep her skin from tearing. And suddenly the head was there, a shock of dark hair plastered over the skull and a squished, angry purple little face.

“Don’t push, stop, pant,” Berta instructed, swiping her fingers down the baby’s nose to clear it as best she could without suction. She grabbed one of the blankets and laid it down on the bed, ready to rub the baby to stimulate it to breathe.

“One big last push, Deri, you can do it.”

The girl screamed again, a roar of pain and exhaustion as she pushed. Berta placed her hand behind the baby’s head, ready to guide it out.

But then, nothing happened.

The baby didn’t slide out, didn’t move and Deri screamed again, pushing with all her might, crying, her head thrown back. Berta felt her own breath freeze. No, this was not happening.

“Deri, pull your legs back, help me pull her legs back.” Berta pushed the girl’s right leg up, motioning for Sister Vaughn to help. The Sister grabbed the girl’s leg and Jakob mirrored her, bending Deri’s knees deeply and pressing them back to open the girl’s pelvis. Berta reached for the baby’s head, trying to get her fingers at the base of the skull so she could pull. She pulled firmly down and away, trying to get the baby to move. The seconds were ticking by and Berta had a disjointed memory from her OB rotation, standing in the corner as a medical student, terrified as the second year OB resident and the attending struggled to get a baby out. Start counting, the resident had yelled at her and Berta had obeyed not sure how that was going to help.

One, two, three...

“Push again, Deri. You’ve got to try!” Berta pulled.

Four, five, six, seven...

Berta could feel herself beginning to panic, that shaking fear causing her own heart to pound out of her chest. This baby was going to die, which meant this mother was probably going to die. She had to do something.
Ten, eleven, twelve...

A phrase flashed in her mind. Zevenelli maneuver. Push the baby back up and in and then do a C-section. That was insane, a last-ditch effort and would probably kill Deri all the same. What else? C’mon Berta, think, don’t panic, think, what else?

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen...

How long did she have until the baby had permanent brain damage? Berta made a fist and pressed on Deri’s belly, just above her pubic bone, trying to push the baby’s shoulder under the bone and out the pelvis. This had to work. She was pushing with her fist, pulling with her other hand, yelling at Deri to push, but nothing.

Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven...

At thirty seconds, Berta did the last thing she could think of and thrust her hand up the birth canal alongside the baby’s neck, her fingers searching for the baby’s collar bone. Her fingers were slippery with blood and amniotic fluid, sliding along the little body, searching for the tiny bone that was the key to the baby’s release. There, she felt it, that had to be it. She pushed hard along the clavicle, panic and fear guiding her fingers and she felt the collar bone snap. The baby’s shoulder collapsed inward and with a heave, the baby slid free onto the bed with a last gush of green meconium stained fluid and blood.

Berta pulled the blanket around the child, roughly cleaning the baby, stimulating the little purple bundle. “Hey little one, breathe for me, that’s it.”

Jakob gave a sob and grasped Deri’s hand. “We have a son,” he gasped and kissed his wife’s forehead.

“Is he alright?” Deri began to cry. “Is he alright?”

The baby boy chose that moment to begin to squall, his little face squirming in angry protest at the cold of the outside world. He was a big boy, Berta noted, easily a 10 pounder, explaining why he had been stuck so fast. Berta wiped him down with the blanket and then tied off the umbilical cord in two places close to his belly button, cutting it between the knotted twine with her knife. Sister Vaughn held a clean blanket in her hands and took the baby from Berta, passing him to his mother’s
chest. Deri and Jakob huddled over their new baby boy.

“Caudwin, after my father?” Deri asked looking to Jakob.

“Yes.” Jakob kissed his wife’s forehead again and looked at his son, tears in his eyes.

Berta smiled at the new family and turned her attention back to work, frowning at the growing rivulet of blood trailing from between Deri’s legs.

“Deri, you’re going to feel me touch,” Berta said, and she gently explored the stretched tissue, looking for a tear. She didn’t find any lacerations, the blessing of young flesh, but the bleeding was increasing. She pushed on Deri’s lower belly, feeling the top of her uterus and finding it disturbingly soft, not the normal hard uterine muscle she hoped for.

“Deri, I’d like you to try feeding your boy right away,” Berta said, trying to keep the concern out of her voice. If the baby would latch on and suckle, that would stimulate her uterus to clamp down and stop bleeding once the placenta passed.

Berta continued massaging her patient’s belly, trying to get the uterus to contract. There was a wave of blood and Deri winced as Berta gave a slow, gentle pull on the umbilical cord, the placenta sliding out onto the bed, followed by another large gush of blood. Berta laid the fleshy disc out, membrane side down so she could examine it. A third of the placenta, a crescent shaped area along one side was covered with currant jelly blood clots, showing an area of abruption where the placenta had prematurely detached from the uterus and bled. The placenta appeared otherwise intact, no missing bits left behind in the uterus to cause bleeding or infection. Hopefully, now that the placenta was out, the bleeding would subside.

Berta returned to massaging Deri’s belly, pushing hard on the uterus, frowning at how soft it was still, the flow of blood between her legs increasing.

“That hurts,” the girl protested, frowning at Berta as she continued to push on her abdomen.

“I’m sorry, Deri, but I need to check your womb to see why its bleeding. I have to reach up to feel inside. This is going to hurt but it will just be a moment.” Deri glanced at Jakob, frightened, clutching her baby to her chest. The little boy had latched on and was sucking happily at his mother’s breast. That should help, at least, Berta thought.
“Do what you need to, Healer,” Jakob said.

Berta reached up between her patient’s legs, her hand disappearing to above the wrist. Her fingers scraped the inside of the uterus, feeling the normal granular texture of the lining, and scooping out clots, but not finding any retained membranes or tissues. The uterus was disturbingly soft and flabby, not clamping down at all to stop bleeding.

Berta looked at the blankets on the bed. The pool of blood was growing. She knew it might cause a raging infection, but she thought of the spindleweed poultices Sue had taught her to use to staunch bleeding. It was worth a try. Even if it did cause endometritis, Finn could treat the infection. She needed to do something. If this bleeding kept up, Deri’s life would be in danger.

Berta wiped her hands on the blankets, and opened her apothecary kit, dumping the dried spindleweed flakes into the metal mixing bowl and adding a little elfroot powder for good measure. She drizzled a bit of water from the water skin and mixed it with her hand until she had a soft, sticky ball of herbs about the size of a goose egg. She came back to the bed and sat on the edge, frowning at the ever-growing pool of blood.

“Deri, I’m going to put some medicine in your womb. Just try to relax.”

Deri nodded sleepily, her eyes closed. One hand flopped down at her side. “I’m so tired,” she murmured.

“The Sister Vaughn, would take the baby so she can rest a bit?”

The Sister nodded mutely, and Berta could see from her expression that she knew something was not right.

Berta held the poultice in her hand and inserted it into Deri’s uterus, hoping that it would help. The uterus was still flaccid, another gush of blood and clots pouring out onto the bed as Berta withdrew her hand. She reached up to doggedly rub Deri’s belly, knowing she had run out of options. Why had she not fought Charter harder to bring at least one healing potion with her? Berta rubbed hard, trying to squeeze the uterus through Deri’s abdominal wall. It was a bad sign that the girl was no longer complaining.

Berta looked up at the girl’s face, her skin pale and eyes closed. She checked Deri’s pulse. It was rapid. Berta licked her lips. There wasn’t much else she could do. She had no IV to give her fluids to
replace what she’d lost, no pitocin to administer to make the uterus contract. She kept up rubbing her belly, pushing hard, her forehead furrowing as the uterus failed to contract and the blood continued its flow. Jakob looked at Berta and saw her concern.

“Deri?” he whispered. “Deri, my dove, you alright?”

The girl didn’t move or respond. Berta quit massaging her belly to check her pulse again and found none. Her first instinct was to start chest compressions, but this wasn’t like Sergeant Alia. Deri’s heart had stopped because her blood was on the bed and not in her body. Nothing was going to change that.

Berta took a shaky breath. “I’m so sorry, Jakob.”

The young man looked at Deri and then at Berta, his face uncomprehending. “What...Deri, wake up...”

Berta withdrew her hands and slowly wiped them on the edge of the blanket. She stood and pulled the girl’s chemise down over her legs, covering the blood and mess beneath her.

Jakob looked dumbly at his wife, blinking in disbelief. He stayed kneeling at the bedside, his mouth fixed open. “You let her die.” His voice cracked with pain, barely a whisper. “You’re a healer and you let her die.”

Berta felt sick, and she could feel a stinging in her eyes that signaled tears, but she would not let them fall. “I’m sorry. I did what.”

“Get out,” Jakob said quietly. “Get out of my house.”

Berta felt her breath catch at his heartache. She glanced at Sister Vaughn who was bouncing the baby in her arms. “Jakob, your son needs to be watched carefully. He needs to be fed.” She couldn’t easily explain the risk of hypoglycemia in a large newborn baby, but she couldn’t risk losing both the mother and the child.

Jakob stood, his hands balled into fists. “I said, get out!” he yelled. “Leave!”
Berta wavered, looking at the baby in the Sister’s arms, afraid to leave without examining him, seeing how much damage she’d done to his shoulder. Sister Vaughn closed her eyes and nodded to Berta, letting her know she would care for the baby and the father.

“I’m sorry,” Berta said again. She gathered her things and left the cottage.

It was after dark, torches glowing along the central lane of the village. Blackwall was sitting on a bench outside the cottage, whittling a bit of wood. He tossed it aside and returned his knife to his belt, looking at Berta, waiting for her to speak.

She sniffed and said nothing at first, shaking her head. Blackwall got up from the bench and came to stand in front of her, placing his hands on both her shoulders.

“I lost the mother,” she said to the ground, not able to meet his eyes.

“And the babe?”

“Alright, for now.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmured.

Berta looked up into his face, his gentle concerned eyes, the serious set of his mouth and she wanted to collapse against his chest, to tuck her head beneath his chin and feel his arms around her, to just pretend that the last few hours had never happened. She wanted to lean into him, knowing that he was there for the asking if only she would let him comfort her. But that would change nothing and so she stepped back from him and looked away.

“Here,” he said, taking her apothecary box from her. “We can sleep in the Mayor’s house since he’s not here to use it.”

Berta nodded dumbly and followed him up the lane, her steps leaden, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other and not throwing up. When they reached the mayor’s house, Blackwall indicated a bucket of water on a bench next to the door. Berta sat heavily and scrubbed her hands, rubbing the skin raw in the icy water, washing up to her elbows before going inside. Blackwall had closed the shutters and started a fire in the hearth to chase off the damp chill in the air. The covers of the bed were turned down.
Blackwall took her bag from her and set it beside her apothecary box on a table against the wall. There was a trencher with bread and cheese on the table, but Berta had no appetite. She stood in the center of the room, directionless and empty.

“Rest, my lady,” Blackwall said softly. “There’ll be more work tomorrow.”

Berta nodded and looked at him. “Where will you sleep?”

“Don’t worry about me,” he said, retreating around the dividing wall between the bed and the rest of the cottage. “I’ll be nearby. Goodnight, my lady.”

Berta took off her boots, breeches and tunic and crawled into the bed in her undershirt and small clothes. She curled up on her side, tucking her hands tightly under her head. She scrunched her eyes closed against visions of Deri’s blood and screams and willed herself to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who keeps reading. And a special shout out to whoever you are that gave this a kudo during the Game of Thrones finale. You're a rock star.
Closer

It is not time or opportunity that is to determine intimacy;-- it is disposition alone. Seven years would be insufficient to make some people acquainted with each other, and seven days are more than enough for others.

-Jane Austen

Musical accompaniment:

“It Takes a Lot to Know a Man” - Damien Rice

Sunlight was slanting through the slats of the shutters when Berta awoke the next morning. She sat up slowly, rubbing her face and blinking. She’d slept a hard, thankfully dreamless sleep and if she didn’t feel exactly refreshed, well, that was probably to be expected given the previous day’s events. Time to get up and see to the rest of the patients that still needed her.

She panicked for a moment, looking around for her clothing which she had carelessly cast onto the floor last night and not finding it immediately. She peered around the corner of the dividing wall to look for Blackwall before tip toeing into the living area of the cottage in her small clothes. She found her clothing folded neatly on a chair at the table, her boots arranged precisely beside the chair. The bread and cheese that had been on the table last night were gone and in their place was a small wooden bowl of berries and a cup of tea, still faintly steaming. There was no sign of Blackwall, but she thought she could hear his voice outside.

Berta looked at the breakfast left for her, her folded clothing and arranged shoes. Had Blackwall done this? She didn’t know who else would have. Last night he had been particularly thoughtful, the fire already stoked in the hearth and food ready for her, even if she hadn’t eaten it. He’d had a bucket of fresh water for her to wash her hands and the bed was even turned down. She was pleasantly disarmed, thinking of the big gruff man being attentive and thoughtful. She couldn’t help but smile to herself, the distinct sensation of being looked-after by someone other than her maid striking her as both sweet and novel at the same time.

She dressed quickly, ate the berries and gulped down the tea before going outside. Blackwall was standing by the Chanter’s board, talking with Sister Vaughn. A few of the patients who had been waiting yesterday had returned and their eyes all turned in unison to Berta the instant she exited the cottage. She steeled herself for the day and marched over to Blackwall and the sister.

“Good morning,” Sister Vaughn greeted her in her sing song voice. The Sister looked at Berta carefully as if trying to assess if she was functional enough to continue her work today.
Berta purposefully lightened her face and returned the greeting, falling back on her routine all-business manner. “How is the baby?”

Sister Vaughn sighed. “Fine. The father…” She trailed off. “He struggles with his faith in the Maker.”

Yeah, I bet, thought Berta. “I need to examine the baby today. If Jakob will allow me.”

“I will go speak to him.” Sister Vaughn inclined her head and took her leave, headed towards the gate, presumably going to Jakob’s home.

Berta watched her go for a moment before looking back to Blackwall. He rested his hands on his belt, as he regarded her. “Ready to work?”

“Yes. But first… I feel like I’m always thanking you.” She smiled at him before looking back at the ground. “And like I’m always apologizing. Thank you for, well, taking care of me… uh, things last night. I was pretty worthless.”

Blackwall scuffed his foot in the dust. “I imagine losing a patient is like losing a man under your command. You question every decision you made. Wonder if you could have done things differently.”

“Exactly.” She’d have to tell Dorian that for a hairy lummox the Warden was remarkably perceptive. “And do I have you to thank for breakfast this morning?”

“The tea was to your liking? Couldn’t find fresh milk for it.”

Berta waved her hand, “Well, it’s not coffee but I’ll take what I can get. Oh, I do appreciate it,” she stammered, hoping he didn’t take her longing for her morning beverage of choice as a rebuke. “I like tea. And I don’t like milk or cream in it anyway.”

“Well, good then.” Blackwall smiled as if pleased with himself. “I did something right.”
Berta laughed. “I think you do a lot of things right.” She reached out to touch his shoulder in what she intended to be friendly reassurance, but her hand seemed to linger there of its own accord. And then she looked up into his face and felt something crack open inside her at the tenderness of his gaze. She dropped her eyes and her hand at the sudden fluttering ache in her chest and took an involuntary step back. “Will Finn and Hugh be returning this morning?”

Blackwall cleared his throat and squinted in the sunlight, either not noticing or ignoring Berta’s abrupt change in demeanor. “I told them to come back this morning. They should be here soon.”

Berta nodded briskly. “I should get to work then.” She went back to the cottage to retrieve her bag and apothecary kit and set to work caring for the patients who had gathered for a second day in the small square. Only after of focusing on splinting wrists and listening for pneumonia did she permit herself a glance over at the Warden who had installed himself on the stone wall, again whittling a bit of wood. She could tell by the way he glanced around that the wood working only gave him the appearance of inattentiveness. His eyes flitted around the square, taking in everything and his sword was by his side within easy reach. He was making a show of looking relaxed, but he was quietly ready for anything. Berta watched him for a moment, wondering why a man who said he had never commanded troops could so precisely describe how it would feel to lose a soldier under his command.

Finn and Hugh arrived within the hour and Berta directed Finn to the patients for which she had done all she could. They found an efficient pattern, Berta seeing each patient first, fixing or treating as she was able, then turning the patient over to Finn to assist with diagnosis or to heal what Berta could not. The man with the liver failure, Lendell, was back, complaining of belly pain and difficulty breathing. If she could remove the fluid from his abdomen, he’d feel better, albeit only temporarily until the fluid reaccumulated. She beckoned Finn over.

“Can you take a look at Master Lendell’s belly? I’m curious what you make of his disease process and what you might be able to do for him.”

Lendell peered up at Finn, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. Finn knelt by his protuberant abdomen and reached a hand out, splaying out his fingers as he angled his palm this way and that, hovering an inch or two above the patient. He closed his eyes, the lids flickering. He withdrew his hand, frowning slightly.

Finn smiled primly at the patient. “Excuse us a moment, good serah. We must confer.” He stood and moved away out of earshot. Berta trailed behind him, wondering what he didn’t want to say in front of Lendell.

“It’s hard to describe,” Finn began, not waiting for her to ask a question. “It’s like a river blocked by a rockslide. Given enough time and lyrium and maybe more than one mage to share the burden, I
might be able to remove the rocks, but for just me? I’d be dead from exhaustion before even half the slide was gone.”

Berta tapped her lower lip with her finger, thinking. “Alright. So, when you heal someone, you’re focusing on this blockage of energy within them, you said. Can you go after parts of the blockage selectively? Say if I were to make an incision in his abdomen, you could heal the incision without having to...go deeper? To leave the larger rockslide alone?”

“Oh, yes, that’s possible,” he said. “Especially if I can see an injury, it’s very simple to selectively heal that and nothing else.”

“Alright, then,” Berta replied and explained her plan.

They moved Lendell onto a pallet atop the low stone wall, leaving him lying down but turned slightly to his right side facing the square. Berta knelt beside the wall, bringing her freshly boiled surgical tools and a wooden bucket.

“Lendell, I’m going to make a small cut in your belly to drain the fluid that’s making you so uncomfortable. Then Finn will heal the cut.”

Lendell frowned seriously, readying himself for the pain. Berta washed his right lower abdomen with a sliver of soap from her kit and fresh water and then washed her hands thoroughly as well. She made a small, no more than a centimeter cut into his skin. Lendell gritted his teeth and sweated through the pain. He had almost no fat or muscle remaining in his abdominal wall, stretched tight over his fluid-filled belly and Berta pushed with her finger into the wound she had made, popping into his abdominal cavity more easily than she anticipated. The fluid squirted out in a gush, Berta barely getting her other hand up in time to shield her face. Lendell gave a yelp, more of surprise than pain. Berta withdrew her finger slowly, pinching the hole she’d made partly closed with her other hand, trying to keep the flow of fluid at a slow but steady pace.

“If the fluid comes out too quickly,” she said to Finn, “it can cause...” She was going to say low blood pressure, but that wouldn’t mean anything to Finn. “Well, the pressure in his belly can shift too quickly and make him even worse off. Place the bucket there, please.”

Finn moved the bucket beneath the incision, the yellow-green fluid draining into it. “Are you saving the fluid for something?”
“Uh, no.” Berta looked back at the mage, feeling acutely how much she’d have to teach him to make this all make sense. “I just want to know about how much fluid I’m removing...” She trailed off again, musing that maybe it didn’t matter what volume of fluid she removed. It wasn’t like she could give him IV albumin to replace anything he’d lost. This was just about managing his symptoms temporarily.

Lendell’s belly filled the bucket with semi-fluorescent chartreuse fluid three times before Berta decided to call the procedure done, estimating that she’d removed about 6 liters. She pinched the wound together with her fingers to keep the remaining fluid from leaking and asked Finn to heal just the cut she’d made. He nodded determinedly and made short work of the small incision, leaving only the faintest of pale scars on Lendell’s abdomen.

“There, better?” Berta asked the man.

Lendell was effusive with his thanks and made to get up, but Berta kept him lying down, telling him to take it slowly, that he might feel dizzy or weak. Lendell’s neighbor, a middle-aged woman with her hair tied in a kerchief, had come along to see if he’d been healed and agreed to help him home after he’d rested a bit more.

Finn watched the man resting comfortably, smiling to himself. “It was easy to only heal the cut you made, but hard to leave everything else alone. I could feel everything wrong in his belly. But if I’d tried to heal all that, I wouldn’t have been able to help anyone else.”

Berta smiled broadly. “I think we’re a good team. Now that we’ve got a strategy.”

They worked through the next few hours, taking full advantage of their surgical and magical tag teaming. The mother with mastitis had returned as Berta had requested, only partially healed by Finn’s efforts from the day before and Berta took the opportunity to explain bacteria to Finn as she had to Fiona. Finn had more questions for Berta than Fiona, but in the end, he understood and applied his new knowledge with gusto, even diagnosing the abscess which Berta then successfully incised and drained. It bled a great deal and Berta wished she had better options for cautery, but Finn quickly healed the cavity left behind by the abscess as well as the incision Berta had made, stopping the bleeding in short order. The woman went back to her infant and other children, sore, but otherwise well. Mage and healer took a similar approach with the old woman with the skin cancer on her hand, Berta carefully resecting the tumor as Finn held her arm still, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes in pain. Berta took great care to stay superficial to the tendons, removing all the tumor that she could and then Finn healing the disconcertingly large skin defect left from the surgery. Berta struggled to describe what cancer was as Finn didn’t entirely understand the concept of a cell but in the end, they seemed to have treated the old woman’s local disease. Berta still worried about spread to her lymph nodes despite Finn’s diagnostic sense revealing no other disease in her arm.
Sister Vaughn brought a basket containing a veritable feast for lunch when the last of the patients had been seen. All the households of Crestwood had made donations and there was more for their meal than they could possibly eat. Berta gravitated to the vegetables, glad to have fresh greens and something like beets and carrots from someone’s garden, garnished with a small amount of the soft tangy cheese and black pepper. Blackwall and Finn both helped themselves to more of the Orly white bread, piled high with slices of ham and apples. Hugh gnawed on what looked like a whole chicken while teasing Berta about her diet fit for a spoiled lap nug.

After lunch, Sister Vaughn informed them that Jakob had agreed to let Berta come see the baby.

“Is he alright with me bringing Finn?” Berta asked hesitantly.

Sister Vaughn inclined her head. “I believe so. Now that the baby is born, there is no prohibition against mages.”

Berta gathered up her things before briefing Finn on what had happened after he and Hugh had gone back to the keep the day before.

“I’m sorry, Berta,” he murmured.

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” she stated flatly. “Save your pity for the father and the baby.”

“I’ll come with you,” Blackwall said, strapping his sword onto his back.

Berta wrinkled her forehead. “I don’t expect you’ll need your sword.”

Blackwall shrugged and nodded to her surgeon’s kit. “You bring your tools, I’ll bring mine.”

Berta supposed that a man who had just lost his wife might be capable of anything, but she hoped she was wrong. It couldn’t hurt to be prepared. They walked down the lane toward the gates, Sister Vaughn leading the way with Blackwall and Hugh trailing behind them, their collective armored bulk silently intimidating the villagers.

When they reached the cottage, Sister Vaughn knocked and slipped inside at Jakob’s soft call to
enter. Finn followed behind her.

Berta turned quickly to Hugh and Blackwall, her hand landing squarely in the middle of the Warden’s breast plate, bring him up short behind her.

“Please, give me just a moment. He doesn’t need armored guards barging into his home.”

Blackwall’s expression soured. “I didn’t plan on ‘ barging.’”

Berta bit her lip. “I didn’t mean it that way, I just—”

“It’s alright, m’lady,” piped up Hugh. “I understand.” He moved to stand beside the door and pulled Blackwall beside him.

“As my lady commands,” Blackwall grumbled.

Berta gave the Templar a small smile of gratitude and turned to go inside.

The interior of the cottage was dim and stuffy. Berta could still smell the faint residual metallic tang of blood in the oppressive air, but the bed had been stripped and remade. Jakob sat by the fire, holding his son, a bundle swaddled in his arms. He stared into the baby’s sleeping face, his own stoic and still.

Sister Vaughn stood behind him, reaching out to touch his shoulder. “The healer is here.”

“Jakob,” Berta whispered, afraid to break the quiet of the room.

The young man nodded without looking up and handed the baby off to the Sister. She brought the infant to Berta who placed the boy on the bed.

“Hello, little Caudwin,” she whispered.
His soft little face squinched up and a little whimper escaped his lips as she gently unswaddled him. Once the blankets were open, she could see immediately the repercussions of breaking his collar bone. There was a small area of bruising under the skin and his right arm hung limply at his side while his left arm was pulled up by his head, his hand clenched into a tiny defiant fist. Berta resisted the urge to focus on the obvious abnormality and made herself begin her exam at the top of his head and systematically work her way down. The soft fontanelle of his skull felt normal, covered with a light down of rusty brown hair. His eyes opened, and then blinked appropriately as she tapped the bridge of his nose, his globus reflex intact. He suckled her finger when she placed it in his mouth. His belly was soft, and she could press in to feel the edge of his liver though the slip of kidneys eluded her. Both testicles were where they were supposed to be, and his foreskin retracted normally. She pulled his legs down straight and then let go, his pudgy thighs springing back up to his belly. Sister Vaughn stood across the bed, observing anxiously. Finn hovered behind Berta’s shoulder, watching the examination with interest.

Berta turned the baby over scooping him up so his legs dangled on either side of her forearm, his head laying in her palm. She ran her fingers down his spine, checking for any occult spinal defect. “Has he been eating?” she asked Sister Vaughn.

Sister Vaughn nodded. “Yes, he’s-”

“Oh!” Berta said, hopping back away from the bed as urine began to stream down her arm.

Jakob looked up from staring to the fire and gave a small smile. “That’s my boy,” he murmured.

That started Berta giggling, fracturing the quiet and sorrow in the room as the laughter spread to Finn and Sister Vaughn and finally to Jakob. Blackwall burst through the front door at the sound of their laughter, mistaking it for strife. Casting about for a threat and finding none, his face relaxed as he saw Berta mopping up her arm with the rag that Sister Vaughn proffered. Berta gave Blackwall a reassuring smile, drying off the baby and laying him back on the bed.

“Feel better, little one?” Berta asked, smiling at the infant.

Caudwin blinked and the tip of his tongue protruded between his lips. Berta beckoned to Finn to come closer.

“See how he doesn’t move his right arm?” Berta asked Finn. He stepped up beside her and nodded. “I had to break his collar bone for him to squeeze out. There are nerves, tissues that tell the muscles when and how to move, that run near the bone. They may have been severed or may just be swollen or there may be bleeding that’s pushing on them or irritating them. You need to heal the nerves as
well as the bones.”

Finn nodded soberly and knelt beside the bed. He reached out with the index finger of each hand, stroking along the tiny collar bones several times. “I can feel the difference on the right from the left,” he said. “I don’t often heal babies. They feel different than adults.”

"Brand new, perhaps," Berta mused. "They haven't accumulated any damage yet."

Finn said nothing, his attention completely focused on the baby who blew a small bubble at the edge of his mouth. Jakob crept closer, coming to sit on the edge of the bed, across from the mage. His eyes flitted back and forth between Finn and his son.

Finn took a deep breath and rested his fingertips along Caudwin's tiny chest. The low hum and faint glow of healing emanated from the mage's fingers. Caudwin's eyes opened wide, his little forehead wrinkling, and he let out a mighty squall.

"You're hurting him," Jakob began, reaching out to his son.

Blackwall was by his side, faster than Berta would have thought possible, putting his hand on Jakob's shoulder. "Let them do their work, lad."

Jakob looked at the Warden looming over him and went still, his face stricken.

Finn finished quickly, the light fading from his fingers. Caudwin quit crying as the mage withdrew his hands and stepped aside for Berta. She lifted the baby from the bed, holding him in front of her and lowering him suddenly, watching both of his arms now flex and flail as he startled. Startle reflex intact and right arm working properly, she thought.

"Give him here," Jakob worried, reaching out for his son.

Berta wrapped him in the swaddling and passed the baby back to his father. Jakob held him tenderly, letting the boy suck on his finger to calm him. "Thank you," he said, not taking his eyes off his son.

Finn nodded silently and left the cottage, Sister Vaughn following. Blackwall sat on the edge of the
bed next to Jakob.

"He looks like a healthy boy," the Warden observed.

Jakob shook his head sadly and sniffed, wiping his nose on the back of his hand. "It's times like this that I know the Maker has abandoned us. We've been through too much. The Blight, both Deri's father and mine were lost in the flood, we lost our Chantry, we lost...and now I've lost everything."

Berta thought to say something sympathetic but Blackwall wasn't finished. "You can't abandon him. You can't mourn the dead and forget about the living. Your son needs you." Blackwall squeezed the young man's shoulder peering intensely into his face. "You understand?"

Jakob met his eyes and nodded. "Yes, Ser."

Blackwall nodded as if something was settled and stood to leave. "How are you feeding him?"

"Goat's milk, so far. And Sister Vaughn said Mistress Miriam would feed him too, after you healed her, m'lady," Jakob explained looking to Berta. "She's got a little one of her own, but she said she'd help."

Berta reached out to cup the baby's head. "If you need anything send word to the keep. I'll do whatever I can."

Jakob nodded and Blackwall and Berta left the cottage. Outside she turned to look at the Warden. "Advice based on experience?"

"You could say that." He shrugged not looking her in the eye. "It's a rare person in Thedas who hasn't lost someone or something. The lad is right. The Maker forgets us all."

Berta had no words of condolence for him. She didn’t believe in a deity that gave a flying fuck about human misery. This Maker seemed to perfectly fit her own preconceived notions of disinterested divinity given her experience.

Hugh stood up from his seat on the bench outside the cottage. “But the Maker will bless us again,
one day, when his praises are sung from Par Vollen to the Sunered Sea and from the Donarks to the Korcari Wilds. It will be as Andraste foretold.”

Blackwall looked askance at the Templar and shook his head. “I won’t hold my breath,” he said with rough bitterness in his voice. “Let’s round up Finn and get back to the keep.”

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The next three days passed peacefully enough, even if Berta could not quell her restless desire to return to Skyhold. The soldiers were taking far longer to butcher the dragon and prepare its leavings for transport than she had expected. She hadn’t thought that she would be away for nearly this long and she worried that the fledgling Order of the Red Cross might be foundering in her absence. She wrote a note to Fiona, cramming her words onto the tiny scroll that Charter then tied around the raven’s leg for her, asking that Fiona be sure to switch up the groups of mages and healers and to take care that no mages were assigned to a Templar that had been stationed at their prior Circle. She asked that Fiona also work with Mother Giselle to identify someone in the Orderlies to take charge of setting up care for the children of the members of the Order so they could concentrate on their duties. She reassured the Grand Enchanter that she would be back as soon as the spoils from Crestwood were packed and ready to go.

Berta spent her nights in the infirmary tent in the upper courtyard. This had the advantage of being distant from Blackwall’s bunk in the ale room which almost outweighed the disadvantage of being immediately above the very early morning breakfast preparations in the middle courtyard below. At least she would not oversleep again. She treated minor injuries and ailments amongst the keep’s garrison and a made a daily trip to the village with Finn, Blackwall and Hugh to follow up on her patients. On their second trip, Sister Vaughn approached them with a girl in tow who had a skinny, underfed look, her collar bones standing out starkly over her chemise and bodice and beneath her dirty blond braids. The Sister introduced her as Sharan and said that Sharan’s father wanted the girl to learn to be a healer.

Berta looked from Sister Vaughn to the girl. “And what do you want, Sharan?”

Sharan looked uncertainly at Sister Vaughn, who nodded encouragingly for her to answer. The girl couldn’t have been more than fourteen, her eyes big and earnest. “I want to be a healer. Old Tem already had an apprentice so he wouldn’t take me but my Da wouldn’t let me go to Denerim to train.”

Probably for the best, Berta thought, thinking about some of Sue’s more questionable Denerim-learnt skills. “But he’ll let you join the Inquisition?”
Sharan’s face took on a hard set, as she straightened and gave a precisely practiced Inquisition salute. “It’s a holy calling, Healer. My Da says that if you take me to train it’s the Maker’s will.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want to interfere with the Maker’s will,” Berta observed dryly, working hard to keep the snark out of her voice. It wasn’t the worst reason she’d ever heard to undertake medical training. “I’d like to meet with your father. And I want you to work with me here in the village. If you work hard and impress me, I’ll say yes.”

Sharan drew herself up tall and gave Berta the most serious of bows. “I will not disappoint you, Healer.”

“First instruction: you can call me Doctor Shaw or Berta. Or I suppose, Lady Shaw is fine, too.”

“Yes, Doctor Shaw,” she intoned.

“Why don’t we go and you can introduce me to your father?”

Sharan’s family lived in one of the cottages on the north side of the lane through the center of the village. It was a two-room affair with a large wood fired oven built into the outer wall of the cottage and, like most of the homes in Crestwood, a small kitchen garden and a paddock with two goats out back. Sharan’s father was pushing a tray of loaves into the stone oven with a long handled wooden pole. There were five children involved in the bakery, all girls, and all younger than Sharan. They were kneading the dough, shaping the loaves and stacking the cooled loaves on a small stall table adjacent to the cottage. Sharan’s mother appeared from the interior of the cottage, another child on the way from the appearance of her belly, and served Berta and Sister Vaughn a cup of tea and a thick slice of Orly white with berry jam while they discussed Sharan’s apprenticeship. It became quickly apparent to Berta that Sharan’s mother would have been happy to have Sharan married off, even noting that if what she heard were true, that nice young man Jakob would be needing a new wife, and quickly too better for the village if she had proper training before returning home to serve as Crestwood’s healer? He didn’t hold with sending his daughter to Denerim, though. Never knew what kind of things went on in the capital what with all the taverns and brothels and cut throats on every corner and all those dirty elves in the alienage. The Inquisition seemed a safer place.

“You don’t mind that the Inquisition is led by a ‘dirty elf?’” Berta asked unable to keep the indignation entirely out of her voice.

The baker looked confused for a moment before stammering out, “Well, she’s not like them others.
She’s from the forest not the city and blessed by Andraste besides. She’s not one of *those* elves.”

Berta pressed her lips together and gave a tight noncommittal smile. “Well, if Sharan can pull her weight, she is welcome to join us.”

Berta thanked them for their hospitality and took her leave, deciding that Sharan would learn better values than from the Order of the Red Cross than what her parents were teaching her.

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The lower courtyard of Caer Bronach slowly filled with cargo. There were the crates of books salvaged from the library and every day the piles of butchered dragon parts grew. There were baskets of scales, carefully scraped and cleaned, and wooden boxes of teeth and claws, packed with straw. There were bottles of dragon blood and vitreous humor. There was even an entire suit of armor, including a helm, a jeweled ring and a wide belt recovered from the dragon’s stomach, which Berta preferred to think the hungry dragon had mistaken for foodstuffs rather than the likely alternative. A huge bonfire burnt all night in the clearing by the ruins, keeping away scavengers and burning the last of the meat off the dragon’s bones. All of this was added to the baskets of elfroot, trussed bushels of embrium and heavy crates of obsidian, gleaned from the countryside around the keep.

Berta kept herself busy between trips to the village and working on notes for the lectures she planned to give the Red Cross on her return to Skyhold. She kept daydreaming about all the things in her car that she would be able to use once Cullen retrieved it for her. She’d have anatomy books and real needles and suture. She probably had a second stethoscope stashed in one of the boxes and she knew she had a couple of manual blood pressure cuffs she had rescued from the exam rooms when new electronic cuffs had been purchased, planning on sending the obsolete equipment on to her friends in MSF as well as boxes of expired bandages and medicine.

Sharan proved to be an attentive and enthusiastic pupil. Berta might have guessed a teenage girl would be squeamish or flighty, but Sharan showed no such tendencies much to Berta’s relief. She supposed that in Thedas the girl was very nearly a grown adult. Sharan did have a significant deficit in her education, barely being able to read, recognizing only words related to the bakery, such as flour and eggs, and knowing her numbers but not much beyond that. Berta added creation of a school to teach reading and writing to her list of things to attend to when she returned to Skyhold.

Charter announced at breakfast on the fourth day after the Inquisitor’s departure that she had received a raven from Leliana, informing them that the Haven docks had been restored and boats had been dispatched from Redcliffe to the Kinloch Hold docks to bring them back to Skyhold, cutting a whole day off the return trip. They would set off the next morning. Berta was relieved. She was eager to return to Skyhold and have Cullen retrieve her car and find out how Fiona had managed things without her.
Their last night in Crestwood, the tavern atop the large dam across the southern edge of the lake had reopened, and all the villagers flocked to the Rusty Horn. Berta walked into the tavern with Finn and Hugh and they found a table in the corner, far away enough from the blazing fire place that they wouldn't be roasted but near enough to hear the musical trio that the villagers had cobbled together of a fiddle, a drum and a singer. Most of the village seemed to have turned out for the Horn's grand reopening and Berta recognized most of the faces there. A dwarven trader coming from Denerim arrived in the village that morning, having heard word that the road to Orzammar was now clear of bandits and dragons, and he and his retinue had a rowdy table near the bar.

Hugh flagged the barmaid down and asked for an order of "wyvern wings" and tankards of ale for himself and Hugh. Berta stopped him before he could order one for her and asked for wine instead.

"All of this is on me," Berta said. "It's the least I can do for making you two tromp back and forth to the village with me."

"To Lady Berta, Healer of Renown!" Hugh said, raising his glass to her when their drinks arrived. "Chief Healer of the Inquisition!"

"Yes," chimed in Finn, "Drainer of Bellies and Deliverer of Bairns!"

"You can stop that now," Berta said tartly.

Finn grinned and toasted Hugh. "And to Ser Hugh, Warmer of Benches and Drawer of Water! Thank you for your esteemed assistance!"

Hugh laughed heartily. "Whatever I can do to help, good mage." He bent his head in a mock bow.

The barmaid circled back and plopped down the plate of wyvern wings. Finn rubbed his hands together and smacked his lips. "They're not really wyvern, of course," he said conspiratorially to Berta. "They're just chicken with Antivan spices, but every tavern from here to West Hill serves them. They're quite popular."

Berta helped herself at Finn's urging. They were almost identical to Buffalo wings, even down to the spices that made her lips burn and the creamy sauce on the side that was reminiscent of blue cheese. Berta reached for a second wing, ripping the meat off the bone with her teeth, and squirting grease down her chin in the process. She glanced up from her food to see Blackwall entering the tavern
with Captain Alia, Jaxon, Bevin and several of the other soldiers whose names she didn't know.

Finn turned his head to follow Berta's gaze. "Warden, Captain! Come join us."

Of course, Berta thought, wishing for a napkin, he walks in when I'm making a mess of myself.

Blackwall and the others skirted around the lines of dancers that had formed on the open floor, coming to join them. Blackwall sat on the open bench next to Berta, murmuring, "my lady."

"Oy, scoot over," Alia said, pushing Blackwall down the bench, just as Bevin squeezed in on the other end next to Berta.

Berta found herself pushed up against Blackwall, her hip pressed against his thigh as she slid over to make room. She didn't dare look up at him for fear that he would see how flustered she felt sitting this close to him. She didn't know what to do with her hands now that they were all greasy, so she settled for licking her fingers. Blackwall watched and chuckled at her expense. Berta glanced up at him, smiling sheepishly and wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand, laughing at herself. Finn caught her eye and mimed wiping his hands on the edge of the tablecloth. Berta nodded gratefully and wiped most of the grease on the tablecloth edge, noting that no one seemed to care so perhaps this was normal Ferelden custom.

“You missed a bit,” Blackwall observed and reached out to her face, his thumb sliding along her chin just below her lower lip, a pensive smile crooking the corner of his mouth as he looked at her. “There.”

Berta felt herself freeze at his touch, for all the world feeling like the rest of the room had fallen away in that moment, swallowing hard before recovering. She bolted up from her seat, trying to escape his proximity. Everyone around the table stopped talking and stared at her, wondering what she was doing.

“Finn, you’re from around here,” Berta blurted, grasping for a topic to cover her awkwardness. “You must know these dances. Come teach me.”

Finn turned and looked behind him to the impromptu dance floor that had formed where the trio was playing. “Oh yes, this is the Maiden’s Amble. I can teach it to you. But I’ll warn you, I’m not a very strong lead.”
“Come on,” Berta said, reaching her hand out to him and extricating herself from her seat too close to one very tempting Warden.

Finn was a somewhat hapless dance instructor, but the dances were simple and repetitive, similar to square dances or line dancing and Berta soon lost herself in spinning around the floor with the villagers watching the other women’s feet to get a clue to the moves. She glanced back at their table and saw Blackwall watching her, an amused smile on his face as he sipped his ale. Berta focused on looking elsewhere around the room. Jakob was there, little Caudwin fast asleep in a basket in a corner of the room and Mistress Miriam, the woman with mastitis Finn had healed, watching over the children. Berta saw Lendell sitting by the fireplace and noted with pleasure that he was eating but did not appear to be partaking in ale or wine. Gauld and his son were sitting on stools by the bar, both gnawing on their own plate of wyvern wings.

It was late when things finally quieted down and the villagers began to head back to their homes. The Inquisition soldiers and the Nightingale’s spies returned to Caer Bronach. Berta attached herself to Finn and Hugh, leaving the tavern before Blackwall and making it back to bathe and then collapse on her cot in the infirmary tent without bumping into him. She drifted off to sleep trying to worry about Fiona and the Order, instead of fantasizing about Blackwall's hand touching her face, letting the faint warmth of the wine she'd drunk overtake her. She could hardly wait for morning to get on the road back to Skyhold.

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In the morning, Berta dressed in her traveling clothes, donning her breeches and multiple layers beneath her jacket. She packed her things quickly, tying up her cloak with her bedroll and making sure she had all her surgical tools and her apothecary kit before heading down to the fire for breakfast. Blackwall and Jaxon were at the fire conferring with Alia, shoveling in a quick breakfast of toasted bread and dried fruit before getting on the road. Sharan arrived from the village, dressed in sturdy traveling clothes and boots, a pack on her back, accompanied by her father and Sister Vaughn. Her father bade her be a good girl and listen to Lady Shaw. Berta promised to teach her well and the baker left after giving his daughter a rough hug. Berta thought she could see tears in the man's eyes as he hustled away. Sister Vaughn said her goodbyes and wished Berta well, thanking her for taking Sharan for training.

Finn and Hugh were already in the lower courtyard where the horses were saddled, and they were ready to move out soon after breakfast. The three wagons that had come from the lyrium trading station with the supplies from Skyhold had been reloaded with all the cargo from Crestwood and secured with tarps and rope. The dragon's humongous skull, skinned and meticulously cleaned, was tied atop the last wagon, grinning in skeletal glee at their departure. Jaxon had arranged a paid wagon driver from the village, one for each cart, to take them to the Lake Calenhad docks and help load the boats that would take them across the lake and back to Skyhold.
Jaxon came up to Berta, leading Hurlock. "Warden said he didn't need me to come along. Said you and he could manage the horses."

Berta nodded. "I expect we'll be fine."

"Well, it's been a pleasure, m'lady. Travel safe." He gave Hurlock one last pat on the neck and headed back to his place in the stables.

Berta was getting ready to mount Hurlock, when she felt a hand on her arm. She turned to see Blackwall looking down at her.

“Hold a moment,” he said and dropped to one knee in front her. Berta looked down at his stance in confusion until she realized that he was holding something with leather straps in his hands. “Give us your leg, lass,” he said, tapping her right knee.

Berta stepped her right leg out toward him awkwardly. His hands reached around her thigh, buckling straps just above her knee and around her mid-thigh before he stood and looped another set of straps around the belt at her waist.

“There. Now you can wear your dagger properly.”

Berta smiled gratefully. “Thank you.” She untied her dagger from her saddle and handed it to him. He obliged her and secured the scabbard to the leg holster, leaning over Berta, fussing with it for a few moments, making adjustments until it sat perfectly alongside her right thigh, it’s handle fitting neatly into her palm with her arm relaxed at her side.

Berta smiled up at him. “It’s perfect.”

“Aye, it is. Jakob does good work.”

“Jakob made this?”

He nodded. “He said he wanted to do something to apologize for throwing you out of his house.”
Berta sighed, shaking her head. “No apology is necessary. He had good cause.” She squinted up at Blackwall and a small laugh escaped her. “You called me ‘lass.’”

He looked quizzically at her. “Is that funny?”

Berta shook her head ruefully. “I don’t think I’ve been a lass for a long time.”

He shrugged. “Take it as a term of endearment then.”

“I find ‘my lady’ quite endearing.” Berta had to admit the rumble of his voice whenever he addressed her formally gave her a little shivering thrill.

Blackwall’s lips twisted into a smile again behind his beard. “Well then, my lady, are you ready to ride?”

Berta bit back the saucy comment that leapt to mind and went with a safer reply. “Lead on, Ser Warden.”

“Let’s move out,” Blackwall called to the wagon drivers and their passengers.

"Warden Blackwall." It was Charter coming down the steps from the middle courtyard. She had a leather folio in her hands, tied with string and sealed with the crimson wax seal of the Inquisition. She handed it to Blackwall. "Please deliver this to the Nightingale. It's important."

Blackwall looked back at the elf, her face impassive, and stowed the envelope in his saddle bags without asking what was in it. Charter nodded to them both and turned to leave.

"Charter," Berta called after her. The elf turned back, her hands clasped behind her back as if impatient to be about her business. "Don't guard those healing potions too closely. Use them if you need to. Supplies can be replenished. People cannot. If you need more, write to me and I'll see that you get them."
Charter considered her words and Berta thought she could see the elf’s nostrils flare slightly. "Maker speed you on your way," she said curtly and walked up the steps towards the middle courtyard.

Berta shook her head and mounted Hurlock. She glanced at Blackwall who was settling into his saddle on his bay, a bemused look on his face.

"What?" she said, slightly defensively. "It needed to be said."

Blackwall said nothing and trotted towards the gate. "Let's ride," he called to the company.

Finn was already sitting on the seat of the lead wagon and Sharan sat next to the driver of the second, ready to go. Hugh quickly mounted his horse and the entire procession left the keep. Berta looked back over her shoulder when she reached the base of the ramp to see Bevin and Pip waving from atop the gate. She waved back.

The first part of the trip was slow going as the wagons bumped and jostled over the rocky, rough terrain as they headed south. Blackwall rode in the lead with the wagon with Finn behind him, Berta next, the second and third wagons following and Hugh bringing up the rear. Berta noted that each of the wagon drivers had daggers on their hips and there was a bow and a quiver of arrows secured alongside the driver's seat. Berta hoped the arms were only a precaution. Once they made it to the imperial highway, they made better time and the road was wide enough for Berta to ride alongside the second wagon, chatting with Sharan about her family, why she wanted to be a healer and what to expect when they reached Skyhold.

They made it to the small village at the Kinloch Hold docks just after nightfall. Berta’s previous greasing of the innkeep’s skids paid off as he hustled to prepare meals for everyone in the wagon train. Berta oversaw the provision of sleeping quarters while Blackwall strode off to the docks to look for their ships. Berta found herself sharing a room of relative comfort with Sharan on the second floor of the Spoiled Princess, equipped with a straw stuffed mattress on a rope slung frame, a crackling fire place and a large washbasin of fresh water, while the men all bunked for the night with the wagons in the stables. She offered the other room in the inn to Blackwall, who declined, and then Finn and Hugh, but Finn was reluctant to accept, not wanting to appear to be a pampered circle mage who couldn’t rough it with the rest of their party.

The morning dawned bright and clear with a crispness to the air that left no doubt that it was autumn. Blackwall wrangled the wagon drivers and the wagons down to the docks to load their cargo onto the boats while Berta, Sharan, Finn and Hugh finished a very pleasant breakfast of fried eggs and toast before heading to the docks as well. The wagons and their drivers left to return to Caer Bronach once their cargo was discharged.
Berta knew little about boats but was nonetheless surprised when she saw their transportation. Lake Calenhad was huge and she had expected a ship proportional to the lake’s size, something with a below decks and multiple sails. What was docked and loaded waiting for passengers were three smallish boats with a central mast and a single sail, each resembling a Viking long ship more than the tall ship Berta had expected. The boats were loaded with cargo with barely enough room for the horses and passengers. Blackwall directed Hugh and Finn to one boat, the three horses to another and himself, Berta and Sharan to the third. Each boat had two crew and Berta’s boat had a captain, or perhaps more correctly an admiral given his tiny fleet. He introduced himself tersely as Willem and made noises about getting a late start. As soon as his passengers were aboard, they were off.

Before they were barely out of sight of the docks, Sharan felt ill. The sloshing of the boat terrified her. She gripped the rope securing the cargo, white fisted, holding herself carefully away from the water, confessing that she had no idea how to swim when Berta asked. Before long, the sea sickness started in earnest. Berta held the girl’s braids out of her face and rubbed her back as she vomited over the side. Eventually, all of the toast and eggs of breakfast were gone, and the girl laid her head on the edge of the boat, her eyes closed, her body shaking with the occasional dry heave. Berta left her to poke through her apothecary kit to see what she had that might help. There was diced root of prophet’s laurel with its gingery smell. She mixed a bit of it with a pinch of elfroot powder and a drop of nettle syrup, which she was sure was overkill but she didn’t know what else she could offer. She gave the sticky ball of herbs to Sharan and told her to hold it under her tongue. The girl took the medicine, popping it into her mouth and laid her head back on the railing of the boat, moaning.

“Finn!” Berta hollered across the water to the mage on the other boat. “You know any spells good for sea sickness?”

Finn nodded. “Stand back, Berta. I don’t want to hit you too.”

Berta wasn’t sure that a spell that could be described as “hitting” was such a great idea, but Finn was already waving his hands in a circle, conjuring the spell, so she scuttled back out of the way. Finn threw his palms out toward Sharan, a visible rippling in the air like a shockwave flying toward her. A faint gray cloud formed around her head and Berta saw Sharan’s hand limply drop to her side.

“What did you do to her?”

Finn smiled brightly. “Sleeping spell. She’ll wake up when we get there. Not to worry.”

Berta sighed in exasperation, thinking that it would have been better to get Sharan somewhere she could lie down before zapping her, but it was too late now.
Willem frowned and looked at the girl. "The young miss can have my bunk. Provided she doesn't foul it," he added. Berta enlisted Blackwall to carry Sharan to the captain's bunk in the small canvas covered frame at the stern of the boat. The canvas walled room was small, with a short bunk built into one side and the middle of the space stacked with crates from the Caer Bronach cargo. The Warden put Sharan gently on the bunk and then moved aside to let Berta into the cramped space. Berta pulled the chamber pot, thankfully empty, from under the bunk, leaving it on the floor nearby in case Sharan needed it. Berta covered the girl with the blanket on the end of the bunk. Once Sharan was settled, Berta picked her way around the cargo to the starboard side of the boat. She found a comfortable spot along the rail, and once she had her boots off and her pants rolled up to her knees, let her toes trail in the icy water.

Blackwall came and sat beside her, his booted feet firmly inside the boat, his face looking into the morning sun. "You ought to be careful," he said, nodding to her feet. "Water grumpkins'll take off a toe."

Berta sprang back from the edge, pulling her feet up protectively. "What's a...water grumpkin? They're dangerous?"

Blackwall nodded seriously. "They infest lakes all over Ferelden. They're small and fast. Tiny teeth like needles."

“What do they look like?” Berta asked, still holding her feet up on the rail.

“Grey, slimy, little buggers,” he said, eyeing her seriously. Then he burst out with a hearty laugh. "Not really. But you should see your face."

Berta punched him in the arm. "That's not fair. You have me at a disadvantage."

Blackwall made a show of rubbing his arm where she hit him while he continued to chuckle at her. He glanced down at her feet as she extended them back to the water. "Your toes are blue."

Berta felt suddenly self-conscious. Her toenails were still painted the deep shade of sparkling midnight blue she had chosen at her last pedicure if now looking somewhat grown out and worse for wear. She submerged her feet again. "Lots of women paint their toenails in my world."

Blackwall's forehead wrinkled. "Why? When does anyone see your feet?"
Berta shrugged. "In the summer if I'm wearing sandals. Or if I'm going to the beach or the pool. Don't some women paint their toes here?"

He made an assenting grunt. "Some Orlesian ladies lacquer their fingernails, but I can't say I've seen toes."

"You've seen a lot of Orlesian ladies’ bare feet?"

He grunted again, less good naturedly this time. "Enough," he said, his brow furrowing. He stood and gave a formal inclination of his head. "My lady." He stalked away to the other side of the boat to sit alone.

Berta chewed her cheek, not sure what she'd said to make him shut down their conversation so quickly. She took a deep breath and looked out over the water and back towards the circle tower of Kinloch Hold, already receding into the distance over the lake. It was a beautiful day and she wasn't going to let a grumpy Warden ruin it for her.

A strong cold wind from out of the north carried them quickly across the water. Berta’s feet soon grew chilly, so she dried off and put her boots back on. She leaned on the crate behind her enjoying the sunshine and the breeze. She pulled her rations from her pack and ate a small lunch of bread and cheese. In the early afternoon, gray roiling clouds began to come out of the mountains. The air turned colder, and she’d barely gotten her cloak untied from around her bed roll and wrapped around her shoulders when the first raindrops began to fall. Berta could see a wall of rain, like a gray curtain, drawing across the waters of the lake towards them. Within moments, the boat was caught in the downpour. Berta hunkered down in her cloak, the hood pulled over her head. Blackwall joined their captain in checking the cargo, making sure the tarps and ropes were secure in the rising winds.

“M'lady,” Willem hollered at her. “Go get in my quarters. No sense sitting out in this.”

Berta didn’t have to be told twice. She worked her way back to the small canvas structure at the stern. Sharan was still hard asleep, and Berta was glad to see that she had not needed the chamberpot. Berta slid the crates stacked in the middle of the enclosure closer to the bunk to make room to sit on the floor as there wasn’t anywhere else. The tent flaps opened, and a gust of wind blew rain and a Grey Warden into the tent.

“Pardon, my lady” Blackwall muttered, skirting around her carefully, trying not to drip on her. He had a glass enclosed lantern with him that he set on the floor of the cabin.
Berta took off her cloak and turned it inside out, creating a dry bolster to prop against a crate to lean on as she settled onto the wooden thwarts of the floor of the cabin. She stretched her legs out before her, crossing at the ankles. Blackwall looked about his feet and at the crates, looking for a place to sit and settling for standing stiffly, leaning against the back of tent frame.

Berta looked up at him. “There’s room for both of us. Here, I can scoot over.” She moved to the outer side of the tent and patted the seat next to her.

Blackwall cleared his throat and sat on the thwart opposite her, his feet drawn up by her knees. “How’s your patient?”

“Fine. Whatever Finn did still has her out cold. I hope there won’t be any side effects when she wakes up.”

Blackwall’s mouth twisted into a frown. “Not sure. I’ve only ever seen that spell used in combat. Those who fall asleep don’t usually wake up. But only because we make sure they don’t,” he added quickly to Berta’s concerned glance in Sharan’s direction on the other side of the crates. “The ones who wake can usually fight without any ill effects.”

Berta nodded in understanding, hoping Sharan would be fine. She sighed and pressed her hands together between her knees, stretching her shoulders. “Well, I guess we’re stuck in here for however long the rain lasts.”

There was a long silence between them as the rain pattered on the canvas over their heads. Blackwall opened his mouth as if to say something but then shut it quickly again.

“What were you going to say?” Berta asked.

“Nothing. I-” He shook his head. Berta gave him an encouraging nod. “Well, I was going to ask about your world again. But then I thought that it might bother you to talk of it.”

“Not really, no.” She shrugged. “I worry about getting home but telling you about it doesn’t bother me.”

“So, tell me,” he said earnestly. “Tell me about your home, or your village or a story about your gods.”
Berta gave a small laugh. “That’s a lot to talk about. My world is a complicated place. There are 190 some odd countries spread across seven continents with thousands of spoken languages and just as many cultures and, I don’t know, at least ten major religions and hundreds more minor ones. And I’m not really an expert on any of them.”

He looked surprised. “But you’re educated. That much I can tell.” He paused, looking thoughtful. “Then tell me of your country, your land, your village.”

Berta smiled to herself. His expectations were going to take a beating. “The town I live in is called Dover. It’s near the coastline next to the Atlantic Ocean, one of the major oceans. My country is divided into states and the state where I live is called New Hampshire. My country is called the United States of America or just ‘America’ or ‘The States’ for short.” Talking about home in the broad strokes of a civics lesson was easier than drilling down into the details of her life.

“How many people live in your town?”

“Around 30,000, give or take.”

“And you call that a town? Here that would be a city.”

Berta nodded. “In our cities, the residents’ number in the millions.”

Blackwall shook his head. “That’s hard to believe.”

“I don’t much care for big cities. I grew up in one but left when I was thirteen to go off to school and I haven’t been back except for the occasional visit. I’m more of a country mouse.”

“A ‘country mouse?’”

“What we call someone who would rather live in the country than the city.”

Blackwall nodded, thinking. “I guess I am more of a country mouse, too.”
Berta smiled, finding a phrase from her world on his lips charming. “I suppose most people here are country mice by default.”

“Not Dorian.”

Berta laughed. “Yes, not Dorian.” She shifted in her seat, leaning back against the crate behind her. “And what about you? You said you grew up in Markham.”

“Not Markham proper. On a farm near there.”

“Your family were farmers?”

There was a slight tightening around his eyes before he looked at his fingers laced between his knees. “I left and became a soldier. And then a Warden.”

Berta raised an eyebrow, guessing there was a lot more to that story than those simple sentences conveyed. “Is that all I’m going to get out of you?”

His jaw clenched and then relaxed again. “When you join the Wardens, you leave your past behind. Whatever...whoever you were before gets wiped away when you pledge yourself to defeating darkspawn.”

“And now you’re pledged to Avyanna,” she said, careful to keep the unseemly curiosity and latent hope out of her voice.

“Pledged to the Inquisition,” he corrected and then looked sharply at her, realizing what she was really asking. “Oh. It’s not like that.”

“I’m sorry, I just assumed.” It was Berta’s turn to stare at her hands. “You are very devoted to her.”

“I’m devoted to the cause,” he corrected. “Corypheus killed the Divine, killed innocents by the hundreds and trampled over Haven. He’s tainted the honor of the Templars and sided with a cult of
Berta nodded in understanding. She wasn’t sure if the clarification of his relationship with Avyanna made things better or worse. Suddenly, the space between them in the cabin felt far too small.

“If I’m devoted to Avyanna, it’s because she’s willing to do what needs doing. Even if I don’t always approve of her methods. No one else could have wrangled the mages like she has. And she’ll bring the Templars to heel too, I have no doubt.” He stretched his legs out beside her, keeping his wet boots carefully away from her hip.

The rain pattered on the tent and Berta could barely make out Blackwall’s features in the gloom. Blackwall picked up the lantern and took flint from the pouch at his belt, lighting the wick and then turning it down. The yellow light of the lantern filled the cabin, creating a cozy glow, painting his cheekbones with shadows. The boat rocked gently as the silence between them grew until Berta had to say something.

“Did I say something to upset you?” she asked.

“Upset me?”

“Yes, before, when I was teasing you about Orlesian ladies’ bare feet.”

He frowned and shifted in his seat. “Perhaps I’ve been too familiar.”

“Too familiar?”

He sighed. “You don’t ask to be waited on. You’re not afraid to get your hands dirty. It’s easy to forget that you’re a noblewoman.” He gave a rueful smile. “At least until I see the pearls on your ears and the ruby at your throat and then I remember otherwise.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

He shook his head. “In Thedas, the nobles sit in their castles, fat and warm, wanting for nothing, while the common folk beg for scraps. The lords and ladies drink wine from golden goblets and send
fighting men to do their dirty work, getting good men and women killed just to prove who deserves to put their ass in the fancy chair. It’s disgusting."

His words stung, even if she knew they were not entirely directed at her. “I’m not like that.”

“Nobility aren’t like that in your world?”

“No, they are. But I’m not.” She thought about telling him the truth but stopped herself. His loyalty was to the Inquisition. She wasn’t sure what he’d do if she admitted that she had lied to them. “But I guess I’m asking you to take that on faith. You don’t really know that much about me.”

“Don’t I? I’ve watched you with the villagers. I know that you care about people. I know that you’re smart and curious and occasionally a little pig headed.”

“Occasionally?”

He smirked. “Only occasionally.”

She couldn’t help but smile in return. “Well, thank you for giving this spoiled noble the benefit of the doubt.”

“My pleasure, my lady.”

Berta felt that small flutter in her chest and pressed her lips together. “So, I’m not a very good storyteller but I can tell you about what my world is like.”

Blackwall settled back to lean on the crate behind him. “I’d like to hear that.”

And so she told him. She told him of skyscrapers and airplanes, espresso and television, ice cream and bicycles. She told him about taxi cabs and the Eiffel Tower and the secret smile of the Mona Lisa. She told him about the penguins at the New England aquarium and buttered popcorn at the movies and the Red Sox and the street performers at Faneuil Hall. He listened intently, asking few questions, seemingly content to just listen. She told him stories of Central Park and backstage at the Met, her mother’s dressing room filled with roses, her face painted as the Queen of the Night.
voice faltered then, and she fell quiet, wondering at a memory that could still have such power over her as to render her speechless.

“I’m sorry,” she said, taking a deep breath. “She got sick and died a year later.”

“You were very young?”

“I was twelve.”

“I was eleven when my sister, Liddy, died.” His eyes sought hers out. “It’s a hard thing to lose someone you love.”

“Yes, it is.” Berta looked at the floorboards, not sure why she felt that she could or should tell him all this. Something soft around his eyes and hidden behind his beard made her feel like he understood.

The tent flap flipped open and Willem’s face, lit by a lantern peeked in. “M’lady, Ser Warden, it’s stopped raining if you want to come on deck. We’re almost there.”

Berta and Blackwall both clambered up from their seats on the floor, stretching out the aches of sitting for too long. Berta turned to leave the tent but Blackwall placed a hand on her shoulder, stopping her. She looked up into his face.

“Thank you for telling me about your world. It sounds wondrous.”

Berta swallowed hard. She should not be looking into his eyes, should not be thinking about how heavy and warm his hand was on her shoulder. She should not be wondering if his lips were soft or what he would taste like. “Thank you for listening,” she managed to barely whisper.

He dropped his hand from her shoulder and gestured to the exit. “Shall we?”

Berta breathed a sigh of both disappointment and relief. She nodded and turned to exit the tent, ducking her head under the wet canvas and stepping out onto the deck. She came up short, blinking at the sight floating in the sky above her. It was the moon, but a hundred times larger than earth’s, its silver gibbous glow gilding the lake and the ship, peeking through the scuttling clouds.
“It’s incredible,” she murmured, her mind trying to fathom the huge orbiting body. Why had she not seen it before?

Blackwall looked at her carefully. “You don’t have moons on Earth?”

Berta had a hard time looking away from the celestial glow but managed to look back at Blackwall. “Moons, plural?”

“That’s the big one,” he said, nodding to the sky. “And then there’s the little one. You’ve seen it before, surely.”

Berta tried to remember if she had noticed the moon at all. In a world where candles and torches were precious resources, she was usually in bed not long after dark. The night she’d been up on the battlements she couldn’t recall seeing the moon, but yes, there had been moonlight the night she’d kept watch as Jaxon slept on the way to Caer Bronach. She hadn’t thought much about it because they’d been sheltered in the trees and the light looked just like the moon at home. She looked at the giant silver orb, just as pockmarked and cratered as Earth’s moon and wondered at the similarities and the implications for Thedas.

“I will have to get a book on astronomy when I get back to Skyhold, well, if such a thing exists,” she said. “I can hardly imagine...wait, what about the tides? They must be huge here. Unless...are the moons in the sky at the same time?”

Blackwall shook his head. “No. Never at the same time.”

Berta looked back at the moon, wondering. “Perhaps that causes a dampening effect on the tides. And what about the calendar? How many months are there in a year if there are two moons? Not to mention the effects on animal life and evolution itself. No wonder Thedas has such different creatures than Earth. Nocturnal animals would be evolved completely differently if...this is huge.” She rested her hands on her hips, looking up in the moonlight.

“And here I always thought Magnus was just pretty,” he teased, clearly delighting in her awe.

Her eyes flashed to Blackwall. “And what’s the little one called?”
“Parvus.”

“From ancient tevene,” Berta mused, returning her eyes to the sky. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Yes.” Blackwall looked at her, his eyes tracing her upturned profile in the moonlight. “Yes. It is.”
So...like, pretty much ALL the triggers: rape, abuse, death of a parent, death of a child, racism, violence, you name it, it’s probably in here. Life is tough amongst the Dalish.

The careful reader will note that the elvhen words for “green sense” and “stranger” I had created before have been changed after stumbling upon Project Elvhen and deciding that the project is the elvhen language canon we all deserve so I created some additional words that are in keeping with that vocabulary and usage. I have gone back and changed my previously created words that were merely random syllables with no hard consonants (per David Gaider’s description of elvhen). I apologize in for any confusion on the part of readers of the previous chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real.
-Cormac McCarthy

Musical Accompaniment:
“Suite for an Inquisitor”
The Edge of Night - L’Orchestra Cinematique
Forest Calling - Bill Brown
Sikiliza Kwa Wahenga - Michael Abels
Requiem: II. Dies Irae - Giuseppi Verdi
Lullaby of Woe - Ashley Serena
The Fear - The Score
Whore - In this Moment

Avyanna stands on the edge of the cliffs above the rocky beach of the Storm Coast. The rain lashes her face beneath the brim of her helm, its cold slick steaming down the back of her neck. Her breath clouds the air. The blades of her daggers are sticky with blood, the red life of the Venatori she has just slaughtered dripping into the grass at her booted feet. But she notices none of this, her eyes focused on the waves far below them. She watches the smugglers’ ship drop anchor. It bobs like a cork on the sluggishly swelling waves as its crew lowers a dinghy to row to shore to collect the toxic box of red lyrium bound for Minrathous.
Avyanna’s eyes flash across the wide gully above the beach to the cliff on the opposite side. She can see the Chargers, their grey huddled forms crouching behind boulders and bushes, the Venatori assigned to cover the smugglers’ northern flank efficiently vanquished. Krem has already lit his signal flare, its drifting arc of grey smoke dissipating in the rain.

Gatt, the little elven Viddathari contact sent by the Qun to make their case to the Inquisitor, has, so far, given them reliable intelligence with no sign of the treachery Blackwall had feared. Gatt and Bull are mockering and congratulating each other now in equal measure. Avyanna doesn’t listen to the words. The tone is simultaneously friendly and suspicious, Gatt disturbed at this new loose-limbed beast he is meeting for the first time outside Seheron and Bull pulling back, withdrawing into an armored shell that he had forgotten he had.

“Light it,” she orders Gatt, who kneels beside the fire, dropping the flare into the embers. The red spark streaks silently into the sky, a scarlet phosphorescent trail of smoke following it. Below the cliffs, the heavy timbered bulk of the signaled Qunari dreadnought crashes out of the fog and through the waves. Avyanna cannot hear the panic of the crew on the deck of the smuggling ship but she can feel it. Even through the rain she can see them scrambling, trying to raise their anchor and sails. A volley of fireballs arc from the dreadnought to the smugglers’ vessel and then the dreadnought’s cannons blast the ship, splintering the wood of the hull and breaking the mast, the sail falling into the flames that are already licking along the deck. Up on the cliff, Avyanna cannot hear the smugglers’ screams over the waves.

“Nice,” Bull chuckles beside her.

Avyanna glances at the Qunari, and then over her shoulder at Dorian and Varric. Their attention is turned inland, watching their backs, crossbow and staff at the ready.

She feels Bull tense next to her before he speaks. “Oh, shit.”

Pouring out of the fog at the south end of the beach, a wave of Venatori marches toward the Chargers’ foothold. The red and black hoods of the Tevinter enemy are turned to the low rocky promontory above them, their soldiers brandishing their swords and pointing, the mages twirling their staves, ready for combat. The Chargers position is made. They have only a few moments before they are within the enemy’s range. The dreadnought sees the mages on shore and begins its lumbering turnabout to retreat, the trajectory of their escape bringing them close to the Venatori mages on shore, some of whom split off from the main group, preparing to attack the Qunari vessel.

“There are too many of them,” Avyanna observes. The rain is cold on her face.
Gatt, the little Viddathari messenger, pleads with Iron Bull, tells him this is his last chance to redeem himself with the Ben Hassrath, his last opportunity to prove his loyalty. Sacrifice your men, let them engage with the Tevinter mages and all will be well. The dreadnought will escape. The Ben Hassrath will take you back. They will see that you are still one of them. In time, you can come home.

Avyanna can feel Bull vacillating, his quivering tension. His good eye seeks out her face. He is open to her as he rarely is, the stark reality before him laying him bare. “What do you want me to do, Boss?”

Gatt begins to plead again. Avyanna bares her teeth at him and he recoils, quieting. It is always her decision. She is the Inquisitor.

*~~~~~*~~~~~*

Her earliest memories are sunlit and green, moss and gurgling brooks and brown skin and a warm safe smell. Has she ever smelled anything like that again? There are campfires and clean spring rain, gentle creaking of the aravels and softly spoken stories from Teacher. She is a spring child and with the softening of each winter she can feel her season rising in her blood, like sap in the forest trees, the circular passage of years since her name day, always coming back to where she began. The northern Brecilian forest is safe. Humans do not come here to the realm of the Dalish often and there has been peace between the clans of the forest for many years.

On the day of Alriel’s arrival, Mother Hunter disappears into the aravel and Avyanna hears her cries of pain. Father Keeper is worried, but he takes Avyanna to swim and play in the river and then he takes her pick honey-sweet brindle berries in the glen and they eat so many her tummy aches. When they go back to the aravel Mother Hunter is tired, but she holds a new little one in her arms. He is tiny and helpless so Avyanna will have to help protect him. She solemnly promises as the baby grabs her finger in his tiny fist.

Later memories are stronger, bolder, her hands full of a bloody stag's heart as she takes a gluttonous, earthy bite of the first kill that she has brought down entirely on her own. Blood drips down her chin and she grins, her mouth a red nightmare, as Mother Hunter smooths her hair before touching her forehead to her daughter’s, a proud maternal moment. Avyanna leaves the evidence of her kill on her chin and neck for a day, long enough for everyone to see and when she bathes in the river that night, she feels the first kill’s blood give her the blessing of Andruil and claim her as the goddess’s forever. Afterwards, she makes a braided bracelet of the tanned hide of her first kill, there to remind her of the day she became a hunter.

She is young to take her vallaslin. Her feet are barely calloused enough to let her to run with the
other hunters. When her da’evune blood first comes, her father, her Keeper, says she is ready. There is a gasp when he produces the vial of color for her markings. Black as night, black as the new moons, a painful, tortuous color. The gasp around the fire tells her that her markings will be a badge of honor. Andruil’s markings are bold and dark and take hours to perform, the needles and magic dancing on her forehead, her lips, her eyelids. She does not flinch, and she does not scream.

Alriel does not follow her. He may not receive his vallaslin for many years. Where she is bold and bright, he is quiet and dark. Sun and moon, fire and shadow are the two of them. But he is her little brother and she protects him with a fierceness exceeded only by a mother’s protectiveness, an atavistic instinct that she is strong, and he is meek, younger, smaller, a little black chickadee to her great golden hawk.

Alriel does not stay in her shadow forever. He is eight summers old when magic bursts through his skin and he must fight to keep from burning everything around him. Flames lick out his fingers every time he loses concentration and the sleeves of all his clothes are tainted with ash. The clan whispers that Alriel is powerful but wild, dangerous. Perhaps he should never have been born. Alriel would be Third, but it is known that amongst the Dalish, there are no Thirds. Father Keeper and Mother Hunter argue, but there is nothing to be done, the life and leadership of the clan and the life and love of their son, heavy on both their shoulders. Alriel will leave at the next Gathering, Father Keeper says. It is not long. Until then, little bird, you need to learn to fly.

Father Keeper trains his fledgling every day. Avyanna hides in the deep shadows of the trees and watches, her eyes taking in every lesson, and when the flames threaten to overwhelm him, she disobeys her father and rushes to Alriel’s side, wrapping her arms around him and holding him tightly as he screams. Now her clothing is blackened by ash too.

Father Keeper rails at her. Alriel’s magic is too dangerous, too powerful for Avyanna to be near. She protests that he is her brother and she swore to protect him, no matter the cost. She is fierce. She is strong. Father Keeper slaps her face then, startling her. Obey your Keeper, he says. And then, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, da’len. Avyanna learns then that Father Keeper is not as strong as she had always thought.

They come to an understanding. When she is not hunting, she is guarding Alriel. His large dark eyes seek her out and when the flames threaten to overwhelm him, taking the surrounding forest with them. She can soothe the wildness in him, throw her arms around his thin shoulders, holding him and his magic both. She presses her forehead to her brother’s and whispers promises of safety and calm until his breathing slows and he rests his head on her shoulder, sobbing with relief.

The clan drifts slowly to the Gathering, through the South Reach and the Southron Hills, through the southern Brecilian Forest to the gathering place. The human settlement of Gwaren is nearby with its barking dogs and stinking streets, close enough that a few brave human traders come to replenish the clans’ supply of things they cannot craft themselves. It is as good a spot as any for trading trinkets
and trading mages, making matches and making promises.

On the third night of the Gathering, the clan’s bellies full from feasting on wild boar and heads spinning from betrothal dances and lion flower wine, an old woman comes to meet with Father Keeper. She is Keeper of her clan, her hands, gnarled with age, grasping a staff that is so polished from use, it reflects the fire light. Avyanna watches her silently, her deep brown face cracked and wrinkled with age, her coarse white hair drawn back in a hundred braids, each tied with a tiny blue bead. Avyanna has never seen one so ancient, hard like iron wood and brittle like twigs. The old Keeper tells the story of their clan. They are from far away, across the sea. They are a mountain clan, living in the foothills and valleys of the Vimmark, a land that is warm and wild, a land of few humans and wide-open spaces between the mountains and the plains that lead down to the Minanter river. Plenty of space for a young mage to grow, the old Keeper says to Father Keeper. And plentiful game, she then says to Avyanna. The kindly old Keeper looks at her with eyes soft and warm. But beside her is her First, dark of hair and dark of eye, despite their light gray. He is silent, lurking just behind his Keeper’s shoulder, watching, looking like a spider waiting to trap a butterfly in its web, the pale red marks of Falon’din on his face, like fresh scars. His hair is black as night and shaved down the sides of his head, its length twisted into a complex braid down his back. His pale eyes flash to Avyanna, taking in the child-woman before him and he smiles, an avaricious, sick thing, and she imagines she can see the blood dripping down his teeth. This one is dangerous.

The two Keepers come to an arrangement. The old Keeper’s clan, Clan Lavellan, has only two mages, the Keeper and her First, this dead-eyed elf behind her, who answers to the name Istimaethoriel. He came from far north, a clan of former slaves on the border near Tevinter. There has not been a mage born within Clan Lavellan in a generation. Without a Second to become First when the old Keeper passes back to the gods, the Clan will shrivel and perish, another heavy loss to the remnants of the children of the Dales. Alriel will go with Clan Lavellan after the Gathering to be their Second, one day First, and one day Keeper of the clan.

Avyanna feels her heart tear. She has been Alriel’s protector, her first vow, even before her vow to follow the hunter’s way and she feels her need to guard her little brother well up in her throat. She bites the inside of her cheek hard, until the pain is all she can feel, the blood in her mouth is all she can taste. She wants to volunteer to go with him, to keep him safe in a new land without forests and with this dead eyed mage to teach him. But she knows better than to blurt this out. She will ask Father Keeper after the old Keeper and her First are gone.

But then Istimaethoriel speaks, his eyes turning languidly from Avyanna to her father. From what he hears, the little fire mageling is wild and uncontrolled. “How is Clan Lavellan to train such a mage?”

And then Avyanna speaks as well, unable to stop herself. “I could go with him, Father. I could help him as I always have.”

Istimaethoriel gives a sardonic smile. “And what can you do? Why should Clan Lavellan take on
another child?"

Avyanna comes to her feet. “I wear my vallaslin. I am a woman and a hunter. I am not a child.”

Istimaethoriel pauses, his eyes trailing up her legs, over her stomach and budding breasts and finally to her face. “I see,” he finally says quietly.

Father Keeper is angry. He tells Avyanna to go to the aravel but promises they will talk later.

Avyanna goes to their dwelling, and looks down on her sleeping brother, his face so young and small in the lantern light that she wants nothing but to cradle him against her breast as if he is her own child. She kisses his forehead. I am with you, I will not leave you, brother of mine. She beds down beside him, protecting him with her body, fierce even in her sleep.

She startles awake hours later. The night is still and dark. Mother Hunter and Father Keeper are asleep in the aravel, too. She can feel their heavy dream breaths. But Alriel is gone. She reaches out to feel him, her nascent green sense, her dera’elas, pricking her ears and bringing her to her feet to seek him out. She creeps from the aravel, silent and swift, looking for where her little brother has gone. The camp is quiet, the night growing old, pressing towards morning but with no light yet in the sky. She finds him standing in the creek bed, cold water flowing around his ankles, his arms stretched out to his sides, looking up to the sheltering branches of the trees and the night sky. Da’evune is in the sky, the moonlight making the stream sparkle and Alriel’s black hair shine.

“Come, listen, sister,” he whispers. “Listen to what the Evanuris say.”

Avyanna stops on the edge of the creek. “I hear nothing, little brother.”

“Can you not hear Her? Mythal sings to me, protects me. Dirthamen speaks to me, tells me of secrets and knowledge, faith and loyalty. Ghilan’nain speaks of family. Sylaise gives me fire.” Small flames lick along his fingers as he holds his hand out for her to see.

Avyanna feels a chill come over her. She has prayed to Andruil, she knows the goddess has chosen her. She knows the goddess in the heat of the hunt, the flash of the blood of her prey, but She does not speak to her. “Come back to bed, little brother.”

Alriel shakes his head and begins to cry as he closes his fist to extinguish the flames. “She said I must
come to the river. Only here would I be safe. Mother Hunter and Father Keeper are lost.”

Then Avyanna hears it, the barking of dogs, not far off, and heavy armored footsteps, nearing the camp. She turns to look toward the sounds and sees the light of a thousand flaming arrows streaking through the trees, alighting on aravels and tents. There is screaming as the camp comes awake, panic and terror as sharpened blades and snarling mabari stream between the trees, leaving blood in their wake. She hears the men’s war cries, “For Gwaren! For Loghain MacTir!”

Avyanna grabs her brother’s hand, pulls him through the camp, her breath coming hard in fear, no thought but making it back to the aravel, to her daggers, to her only means to protect herself. Alriel is crying, stumbling after her, begging to go back to the stream. She runs through a gauntlet of horrors back to the aravel, elven throats slit, elven bodies run through, elven faces mauled by dogs. Avyanna hides her little brother beneath the aravel’s steps, telling him to stay quiet, to stay hidden. She grabs her daggers from their home on the wall by her bed, and sees the aravel is empty, Mother Hunter and Father Keeper gone to protect the clan.

Avyanna fights. If she thought killing a human being would be harder than killing an animal, she will find that she is wrong. It is easy, too easy to kill the loud and plodding humans with their heavy swords and slow limbs. But as easy as it may be, there are too many. She prepares herself to die defending her clan.

There is an explosion of light and fire behind her and Avyanna turns to see the aravel, her aravel thrown straight up into the air, wheels and planks and sails burning with an ungodly fire, disintegrating as they travel upward, then fragments raining down on the camp, spreading destruction and flame. Alriel is standing where the aravel had stood, his feet planted on the ground, his head thrown back, his mouth pouring flame in a silent roar of hate and pain. The heat and fire pulse off his body, from his eyes, his mouth, his hands, off his skin, waves of destruction blasting armed men, dogs and elves alike, consuming them with flame. Avyanna throws herself to the ground, the waves singing her hair and making her clothing smoke. She screams her brother’s name and begins to crawl toward him. She screams again as another wave of flame blasts her face and she smells her hair and skin begin to burn. She frantically slaps at the flames and screams her brother’s name again and again, until his fiery eyes turn on her and she stops breathing, suddenly certain that her death will come at his hands, not at the hands of the soldiers of Loghain. But through the flames Alriel recognizes her and grasps the hand she reaches out to him, pulling his sister to her feet, grabbing desperatly on to her and she holds him back, stroking his hair as the fire dies, leaving their corner of the forest dark and smoking. Her arms are blistered and red, her tears stinging the raw skin of her cheeks.

Alriel guides her back to the stream and lays her down in its shallow, moonlit waters, the cold soothing her skin and washing away the blood and soot. He cradles his sister’s head in his lap, sitting in the water, stroking the last remaining bits of her ruined hair, the brittle, burnt strands coming off her scalp in his fingers. Alriel draws on his magic again, reaching a deeper, calmer place than the flames, a quiet, soft place, a faint deep blue light running off his fingers tips and dripping over Avyanna’s skin, rivulets of soothing, healing light, as heavy and liquid as quicksilver, washing over
her with the water of the stream. She breathes deeply as the light runs down her throat, into her chest, smoothing the sharp rasp of her breathing, the acidic burn in her lungs.

“Ma serannas, Alriel,” she whispers. “Thank you for saving me.”

And that is how Istimaethoriel finds them, brother and sister, having saved each other.

*N~*~*~*~*~*~*

Nolathari is the old Keeper’s name and she gathers any willing remnants of the clans left behind after the massacre at Gwaren and leads them north. They are all Clan Lavellan now. They will return to the mountains of the Vimmark. It was folly to come into the southern lords’ lands.

There is no time to say goodbye, no time to weep. Mother Hunter and Father Keeper are gone, dead, in her past, best forgotten if she is to listen to her new First. But sometimes at night she cannot get the image of Father Keeper’s blackened staff out of her mind and she cannot help but imagine Mother Hunter’s screams as her body was defiled by Loghain’s men. Avyanna does not understand why Mythal would fail to protect Mother Keeper, the twining branches of the goddess’s protection gracing her mother’s face, clear even in death. Nolathari says that the ways of the gods are hard to understand but that Avyanna must trust them. Avyanna tries to be good but a small, smoldering core of rage and doubt has been planted in her chest and every time she sees the vallaslin of Mythal gracing an elf’s face it flares to life again. The vallaslin of Mythal is a lie. She keeps this thought to herself.

Avyanna’s hair begins to regrow, coarser and lighter than it was before, nearly white now, and an arc of skin along her hairline and over her left ear remains stubbornly bald. Her fingertips seek out the blank, smooth flesh and worry over it when she thinks no one can see. Alriel sees, of course, and apologizes for not healing her completely, making her whole. Avyanna gives her little brother a sad smile. It is not my hair that would make me whole.

The ragged clan makes its way slowly north. They must go into the city of Amaranthine to find passage back across the sea to their home. The humans of Amaranthine stink, like unwashed dogs, packed into the cramped buildings behind high walls with no air and no green, the town and the people in it all drab and brown, teeming with distrust and lascivious fascination for the women and some of the men of their clan. For the first time, Avyanna understands how desperate Nolathari was to make this crossing to find a mage for her dying clan. There is no game this close to the city, the stench and the people scaring away all but the vermin. Rats have very little meat on their bones.

The traders in the marketplace spit on her when Nolathari sends Avyanna to buy food. She finally
finds an old woman who will take her money, but then the crone accuses her of stealing it and calls the city guard. Avyanna flees and hides in the Chantry, the first open building she finds. She has never been indoors other than the comforting confines of an aravel and she is awestruck. The space is cavernous and quiet, the air heavy with a fragrance stronger than the potent perfume of a thousand nightflowers, the light warm and soft from a thousand candles. Avyanna stands inside the door, her panicked breath loud in the divine stillness. She looks about, taking in the bowed heads of the few scattered humans in the long pews and slips around the edge of the room, her bare feet silent on the stone, finding a private alcove to the side, candlelit and dim, a small golden statue of a women holding a flaming sword on an ornately carved wooden stand, polished to glow in the flickering light. She hears the door to the chantry creak open, so she quickly kneels before the statue and pulls her hood over her head. She glances at the humans behind her and sees they clasp their hands before them. She does the same. A woman in a gold and rust red robe hustles by, her skirts swishing in the quiet.

“And what can Our Lady the Redeemer do for you fine gentlemen?” a firm female voice asks. Avyanna risks a glance to see the woman in the robe halting the two guards who try to look around her. Avyanna doesn’t hear their reply, but their voices are angry. The woman is unyielding and after a brief exchange the two city guards reluctantly leave, giving one last look around the chantry. Avyanna closes her eyes and takes a slow deep breath. She thinks to offer a prayer of thanks to Mythal but then catches herself. The words are empty, and she cannot speak them, even in her head. She stays kneeling, listening carefully to the swishing robes of the woman, waiting for her to leave so she can make her escape. The soft rustle of fabric does not fade, though, and comes closer until the woman is kneeling beside Avyanna. Avyanna goes still, not sure what to make of the woman’s actions, but the woman is calm. There is no threat, just a quiet curiosity in her presence. Avyanna risks a glance at her. She sees that the woman is of middling age, her face clear and kind with a faint crinkling of the skin around her eyes as she smiles, her graying russet hair pulled back from her face. She reaches out a hand and rests it lightly on Avyanna’s wrist, her palm and fingertips smooth and soft, unlike any hand Avyanna has ever felt. “I won't hurt you,” she whispers. “Come with me.”

Avyanna is not sure what it is about the woman that makes her trust her. The woman moves slowly and carefully, as if Avyanna is a wild animal that might attack if cornered. She takes her from the huge space of the main hall of the Chantry, leading her into a narrow hallway behind the altar and down a flight of darkened stairs to a dimly lit, low ceilinged room redolent of spices and herbs, a large black pot over the fire in the hearth and an unplucked cache of birds piled on the table, baskets of onions and potatoes beside them. Avyanna’s first thought is that the woman has brought her here to cook her and eat her. But then she stops and tries to listen to her words.

The woman has kept up a steady stream of talk since they reached the bottom of the stairs. “Those two are trouble,” she says, no longer whispering. “If they’re after you, you’re in bigger trouble than anything you could have possibly done. And if you stole from Ol’ Macie you’re desperate, the garbage she pulls out of the refuse heaps and tries to pass off as garden grown.” She has a few more choice words for the other denizens of the market, one or two in particular, and for the city guards, all in general.

“She took my money,” Avyanna says quietly.
“Fat sow,” the woman says and grabs a ceramic bowl off the shelf and ladles something into it from the pot on the fire, but her voice still sounds kind as she says it, as if she is merely observing the state of things rather than hurling insults. She pats the table where she places the bowl. Avyanna watches her, not sure what she is to do.

The woman looks back at her. “Sit, eat, it’s not poison. I made it, not Sister Renee. Of course, it will be better tomorrow, but beggars can’t be choosers. Not that you’re a beggar,” she adds.

Avyanna hesitates and then sits, picks up the bowl with both hands and drinks the broth hungrily, some of it spilling down her chin in her haste to fill her belly. It is good, rich and hot, with big chunks of vegetables and bits of meat in the dregs which she scoops up into her mouth with her fingers. The woman looks pleased.

“My clan...we need a ship to Ostwick,” Avyanna blurts out and then looks at her hands. She is ashamed to ask for help from the shem woman.

The woman sits in the chair beside her and looks at her carefully. She pats Avyanna’s hand before she can flinch away. “Let Andraste and I see what we can do.”

For the next three days, while Nolathari searches vainly for the same captain who brought them from Ostwick, the only captain who would take them on, Avyanna visits the back door of the Chantry and brings the woman, Sister Leanne, the coins meant for the market place and gets bread and meat in exchange. She does not tell Nolathari or even Alriel where she gets the food. She whispers to Nolathari that she heard of a ship in the harbor that might take them on as passengers.

The Keeper looks at her with curiosity but does not ask where she came by the information. “Good girl,” she says. Avyanna beams with pride.

On the fourth day, Avyanna is leaving the back door of the chantry, pleased with the sack of loaves and fruit Sister Leanne had for her, munching on a crisp apple as she walks down the alley. The blow takes her completely by surprise, the guard’s sharp laugh harsh in her ears that were dulled by complacency, by a mistaken belief in the safety of the Chantry, of the beneficence of Sister Leanne, that her goodness might be a protective shield. Avyanna realizes too late that she was wrong, that she should have been on her guard, that nowhere in the city is safe. The bag of food is spilled on the stone cobbles and her daggers clatter beside it, knocked from her hands before she can even pull them fully from her scabbards. The attack is fast and brutal, and the two guards dump her unconscious body in an alcove off the alley when they’re done, her face bloodied and her breeches torn.
Avyanna awakes suddenly when she feels rain on her face and she struggles to sit up, to extract her body from the refuse in the alcove, stinking of rot and sewage. She gags at the smell and vomits onto the cobbles before turning her face up to the rain, letting it wash the blood from her face, the foulness from her lips.

“You are not dead,” says a voice.

She looks up to see Istimaethorial standing beyond the entrance to the alcove, the hood of his cloak up against the darkness and the rain. She can barely see his face, but she can feel that it is him, the anger and barely concealed malevolence pulsing off him in waves.

“You have been very foolish, da’len.”

Avyanna struggles up from the filth, staggering. She pulls her soiled breeches up to her waist, feeling Istimaethorial’s eyes on her nakedness. She fumbles for her daggers. She cannot find them. Her First throws her daggers at her feet, splashing in the foul puddles of the gutter.

“What are you going to do?” she croaks.

“Nothing,” he says, and walks away. “If you birth a human, the clan will shun you,” he throws back over his shoulder as he disappears down the alley in the rain.

Avyanna waits for him to be gone before she falls to her knees in shame, striking her fists on the cobbles in self-condemnation. She fumbles for the daggers, wiping them clean on her tunic before replacing them in their sheaths. She slowly stands, feeling the hate flow through her limbs, anger that the shems should make her feel this humiliation. She folds the torn waist of her breeches under her belt, cinching her daggers in place. She knows what she must do.

It is not hard to find the guard house. The streets have been emptied by the rain and the guards circulate in pairs. She can still smell the odor of the two shems on her and she will know when she finds the right ones. She kills two sets of guards anyway, because she can, because they are in her way and because it seems fitting to her to answer random acts of violence in kind. When she finds the two she seeks, on patrol in the market, she drops onto one from the roof of the shack from where she stalks them, her dagger finding its home at the base of his neck, where it joins the shoulder, thrust into the soft flesh to the hilt, blood immediately pouring from his mouth. The second guard is made of sturdier stuff and takes longer for her to fell but in the end, he is whimpering, begging for his life after she has taken both his eyes. She then cuts his throat. She rips into the dead guards’ breeches
with her dagger and hacks off their genitals, leaving them on Ol’ Macie’s stall in the market. The old woman should know what she has done.

At midnight, when the tide is high, Clan Lavellan boards the ship that will take them to Ostwick. When they are at the mouth of the harbor, Avyanna stands on the ship deck, washed and healed by Alriel, looking back toward the city as the bells ring in the night. Alriel stands beside her, fingers laced between hers. She has told him nothing, nor does he ask. He peers into her face. “Yes, lethallan,” he murmurs, “Elgar’nan knows you are strong. He is pleased.”

The trip across the Waking Sea from Amaranthine to Ostwick is terrible. Avyanna is sick the entire way, her stomach churned by the roiling waves. She spends the trip vomiting into a bucket, Alriel rubbing her back and staying by her side. She is thankful when her da’evune blood comes. The idea of a human growing in her womb makes her sick with dread. The captain of the ship is a man of his word, honoring their coin and his contract to take the clan safely across the sea. She would not have thought it possible given his menacing face and crew, all studded and tattooed Rivainis.

Ostwick is only slightly better than Amaranthine, the warmer climate of the north leading to open spaces, gardens and greens within the city walls, small spots of fresh life where the air is free, even if the flowers and grass are tamed. But the looks of the humans are the same, vile and lustful and Avyanna’s hands twitch to grab her daggers and show the shems the justice they deserve at every turn. At least in the Free Marches, there are not so many dogs.

They do not linger is this city. They leave quickly, setting out to the north and west, traveling by foot until the clan reaches their home territory in the foothills of the Vimmark mountains. Half of Clan Lavellan has stayed behind, tending the aravels and protecting the children, the other half undertaking the long journey to the gathering and to return. There are gleeful reunions and happy embraces as well as tears for those who did not come home. Istimaethoriel greets Mirhanni, his bonded, quietly, his kiss perfunctory. She is beautiful, her raven black hair twisted into long braids behind her head, the deep brown skin of her face nearly covered with rich gold vallaslin that Avyanna recognizes as Elgar’nan’s. The woman’s large dark eyes take in all the newcomers, searching for something, until her gaze settles on Avyanna. The older woman’s face is hard as she measures Avyanna with her eyes and then stalks away after her mate.

The slopes of their winter home are grassy and green extending out in a vast expanse to the languid width of the Minanter river far to the north. The grasses are full of game birds and rabbits and herds of halla grace the plains. The tributaries of the Minanter flood in the spring, the alluvial soil rich and dark, from which burst feral crops of onion mallow and sweet root, tubers of hungerbane and shoots of meadow balm. The plains offer a feast for the clan that lasts all season. In high summer, when the plains become dry and parched, they will head into the mountains following the water and bask in the cool breezes off the glaciers on the peaks, hunting the small fleet footed mountain harts and gathering the cone nuts and sweet sap of the spice pines.
Alriel earns his vallaslin. Nolathari gives him a choice. She sees the marks of Mythal in him, his magic protecting the clan at the Gathering, but she also sees the fire of the hearth of Sylaise. But Alriel chooses neither. He pledges himself to Dirthamen, the god who speaks to him most, whispering secrets in his ears, teaching him more than Nolathari and Istimaethoriel combined. Nolathari frowns when he tells her this, but acquiesces, producing a vial of pearl-gray pigment, light and faint on Alriel’s pale skin. He is still dangerous, unstable when Avyanna is not there to temper his impulses, to whisper to him and block out the words of the Evanuris that he hears. Half the clan think he is some kind of prophet, sent to bring the clan to greatness, to a closer communion with their gods. The other half whisper that he is dangerous, call him Sa Ehn Dala behind his back, The One Who Destroys, that Nolathari made a foolish choice and now they will have to live with it until Alriel brings the eyes of Fen-Harel upon them and with them, their destruction.

Avyanna hunts with the clan, following Mirhanni, their lead hunter. She is not like Mother Hunter. Where Mother was warm, inspiring loyalty and love, Mirhanni is cold, inspiring only obligation and fear. She is harsh and unjust, giving Avyanna the most difficult tasks, the hardest work, and when she fails Mirhanni drives her even harder. Avyanna bristles against the rules of Mirhanni and finally disobeys. She takes Illassan, a young man the same age as Avyanna but who has not yet received his vallaslin and two other youngling hunters, to make up her pack of four, her vhen’eth. They bring down a great bear that Avyanna has tracked to its cave in the mountains. The youngest hunter is severely injured, but they make it back to camp with the field dressed hide and baskets of bear meat and twenty great claws. Mirhanni is furious. She screams at Avyanna and demands that Keeper Nolathari punish her. Nolathari agrees and lets Mirhanni chose. Avyanna is whipped across her back in front of the clan, Mirhanni wielding the weapon herself, and Alriel is not allowed to heal her for three days. Alriel whispers to Avyanna that Elgar’nan is angry with her, that she should make an offering to Him and an apology to Mirhanni and the god of vengeance will be appeased. Illassan and the others avoid her, unwilling to test Mirhanni again.

Life in the clan goes on. Seasons pass. Alriel is Istimaethoriel’s shadow, leaning on the older mage, learning more, elements of water and air bending to his will, but his power is still more chaos than control. He still cleaves to Avyanna’s side when they are both in camp and sleeps beside her and the other unbonded around the central fire. Perhaps if Avyanna or Alriel can earn a favor from a crafter pledged to June, or bond to one, they will have their own aravel, but Alriel has his eye on a quiet fair girl named Lialle, another southerner who wears the swirling vallaslin of Sylaise. Avyanna cannot stomach to even think of such things. She fulfills her hunter’s role. She passes time with the other hunters, learns to follow her dera’elas, and learns to lean on her vhen’eth, especially Illassan once he earns his vallaslin, until the day he tries to kiss her and Avyanna strikes his Mythal-bearing countenance and tells him to never do that again. She does not like to be touched. Avyanna does not want to ever bond, unless perhaps she could be bonded in the way Istimaethoriel and Mirhanni are. They do not share an aravel. She sits by his side when the Clan feasts and is always near when her Isti leads them in ritual and prayer, serving as the mate of a First should. Avyanna thinks it is fortunate that they have no little ones.

One winter’s morning, Nolathari does not wake. The old Keeper has passed back to the Evanuris. The hearth keepers of Sylaise wash her body, remove her jewelry, and shave her hair so she may return to the gods as she came into the world. They wrap her in homespun and the clan carries her to the burial grounds, at the highest point they can reach on the mountain. There they bury her beneath heavy stones, beside six generations of their Keepers. Keeper Istimaethoriel speaks the prayers to
Falon’din over Nolathari’s grave and Avyanna murmurs the proper responses, her heart aching in her chest. The old woman was fair and warm and later Avyanna will let tears fall for Nolathari and for herself. Alriel is First now and Avyanna feels between them a new, subtle and impassable distance.

That evening in camp, there is a funeral feast to honor Nolathari. Everyone tells stories of the old Keeper, her wisdom, her leadership and her faith in the Evanuris. Later that night, in her bed roll by the fire, sleeping beside all the other unbonded of the clan, Avyanna fingers the long gray braid she has kept, the blue bead still attached. She drifts off to sleep, holding the braid like a talisman, against what, she is not sure.

She is deep in the Beyond when Istimaethoriel finds her. She is wandering, unfocused, distractedly tracking prey, but what she is tracking she cannot remember, and the other three hunters of her pack are suddenly gone, though this seems unremarkable in the confused logic of the dream. She turns to look at him when Istimaethoriel calls to her. She does not know why he is there. She starts to run away, suddenly terrified of his dark presence, but he is on her quickly, hands grabbing her and mouth consuming her, and Avyanna tries to scream for Alriel but Istimaethoriel’s harsh voice tells her that her brother cannot help her here. Here everything is his and she will belong to him as well. Her daggers are gone and Istimaethoriel is too strong for her. He is only slightly more gentle than the Amaranthine guards.

Avyanna wakes in a panic, feeling his body invading hers and she covers her mouth with both her hands to keep from screaming. But all is warmth and quiet around the fire, except for Illassan’s faint snoring across the banked coals, the gentle breaths of the other sleeping unbonded youths of the clan. It is late but she cannot, will not let herself fall asleep again. She knows he will be waiting for her there. She realizes that the only thing that protected her in her dreams was the benevolent presence of Nolathari. Istimaethoriel was waiting for her all this time.

Nightly she fights battles in a never-ending war. Her limbs and mind need sleep, cannot go without it. She struggles to keep up with the other hunters. Her eyes are red, and her face drawn. Mirhanni torments her, makes her run the scouting parties for game, tiring her further. The other hunters avoid her, as if her exhaustion is a contagious illness. Mirhanni silently watches her mate’s eyes follow Avyanna through the camp, the older woman’s jaw clenched, saying nothing. It is not hard to avoid Istimaethoriel during the day, his duties as keeper and Avyanna’s duties as hunter forming a wall between them.

Avyanna begins to sleep away from the fire and the other unbonded, afraid that she will cry out during her dreams, wanting to keep her helplessness at Istimaethoriel’s hands hidden. The shame settles deep in her body when it takes less than a fortnight for him to break her and she folds to him in her dream, coming to him, not willingly, but without resistance. She tells herself that she cannot be blamed. She cannot control her dreams the way she could if she were a mage.

That night, Istimaethoriel does not take her immediately. He smiles, that dark, predatory smile and
takes her by the wrist, leading her through the landscape of the Beyond. She follows listlessly, a dead weight pulled along in his wake. She finds them standing on a hill, looking into a small dusty valley surrounded by grassland, a brightly burning campfire in its center, a kill roasting, a tent pitched for shelter, filled with soft furs. Alriel sits by the fire, ice dancing between his hands, followed in quick succession by arcing lightening, then flame, then a purple-black void that he drops into the fire, making it crackle and pop, an amused smile on his face. But Avyanna can hardly watch her mage brother at play, her fear rising in her throat as she sees what her brother does not, the horde of demons hovering outside the firelight, swarming around the glade. Her breath catches at their lurking malevolence their forms shimmering, breaking and reforming in the darkness. She wants to scream out to Alriel to be careful, to run, but she knows that there is no escaping demons in the Beyond. But then she sees the three concentric circles drawn in the dust around her brother’s campsite.

“He is quite safe,” Istimaethoriel whispers, his lips brushing against her ear. “He cannot see beyond the barrier. The demons cannot pass.” His hands come to her shoulders and then up to the base of her neck. “Nolathari kept him safe thus, and I suspect your father would have had to do something similar. His magic is a beacon to them. It calls to them from every corner of the Beyond. He makes them hungry.”

Avyanna shudders as Istimaethoriel’s hand slides up her throat to her chin, gripping her jaw tightly, pulling her back against him. “Of course, I can destroy the barrier with a word.”

“No, please...” she whimpers and immediately feels sick at the weakness in her voice, the pathetic plea that shivers her lower lip with fear.

Istimaethoriel chuckles darkly. “You needn’t beg, da’len.” He releases her suddenly and turns her to face him, tipping her head up to look at him with a single finger under chin. She wants to close her eyes, but she keeps them open, staring into his pale gray irises. “You only need do what I ask. You can do that, can’t you, what I ask?”

She can’t speak without her voice breaking so she infinitesimally nods her head.

Istimaethoriel smiles warmly. “Good. Now I’m going to let you sleep. No dreams. Just remember this: Alriel is safe as long as you do everything I ask.”

Istimaethoriel gives Avyanna a night of deep, dreamless sleep, but the next day is just as horrible, the constant tension, leading her to sweat with anxiety and the other hunters wrinkle their noses at her, smelling the sour scent of fear on her skin. Istimaethoriel has not asked for anything, yet, and it is that “yet,” that twists her stomach and makes her heart race. She leaves their camp early, before anyone else has awoken, before she must look at her brother and lie to him. She hunts the small game in the long grass, alone, her dera-elas sharply focusing on her breath, her prey and she lets the rest of the world fall away in those moments, calm until she must return to camp.
After her third night of undisturbed sleep, Istimaethoriel comes to her again. “I have a task for you, da’len.” His voice reverberates inside her skull, blacking out the rest of her dreams. She feels the weight of his body pressing her down into a deep, black place where she cannot breathe and cannot move, where his previous violations feel numb and distant by comparison. He is inside her body and her mind, his command shattering any urge she might still have to resist. “Mirhanni must die.”

Avyanna wakes with a gasp, sitting up on her sleeping pallet, soaked with sweat, her pulse pounding in her ears. Once her breath stills, she lays back down on her blankets and stares at the stars in the sky above her, focuses on her breathing the way Mother Hunter taught her. In and out, she counts the stars until her mind is clear. She cannot fathom why Istimaethoriel wants his bonded dead. Avyanna knows that if she is to follow his command, she must make her kill away from the other hunters where she can make Mirhanni’s death appear accidental. No one would believe that Mirhanni could die in her sleep and Avyanna knows nothing of poisons. How can she be considering this? She has spilled the blood of prey, taken life to nourish her body and her clan, taken human life to answer Elgar’nan’s demands, but to kill an elf, one of the people, even one that stirs her hatred like Mirhanni, is unspeakable. How can the Evanuris allow this?

The next day, Mirhanni sends Avyanna with Illassan to scout for the wild druffalo herd whose tracks were seen the day before. They return with the news that the herd is hundreds strong and lingering at one of the watering holes that remain on the early summer plains. The next day Mirhanni declares a day of rest, a day for sharpening their blades and relfecthing arrows, a day to offer sacrifices to Andruil at the fire, to prepare for the great hunt. All the hunters of the clan, even those without their vallaslin will go. Avyanna takes her place around the fire for the ritual sacrifices of bundles of blood lotus tied with druffalo hide, hears Istimaethoriel speak the prayers. She repeats the words without hearing them. She drinks from the communal bowl of halla milk, boiled with rashvine flowers. Andruil surely cannot bless a hunt in which one of Her hunters will die. The younger hunters flutter with excitement and have difficulty entering the Beyond that night. Avyanna too lies awake, again listening to her own breathing and counting the stars.

The hunters set out early the next morning. Illassan leads them to the trail, wide and easy to follow, a thousand hooves pounding the grassland to bare earth. The smell of the herd is just as strong, a perfume of manure and dense, coarse, sun-warmed fur. They spread out and attack, dera’elas locking the hunters into formation. They efficiently separate the young from their mothers, stampeding the bulk of the herd away so they may pick off the old and weak. Avyanna follows Mirhanni closely, breaking with her vhen’eth, watching for when the time is right. Mirhanni nimbly leaps aside and swings onto the back of a charging female, angry at the loss of her calf. Mirhanni stabs her daggers deep into the beast’s neck, through the rough hide, and it brays in pain, bucking to through her off. Avyanna freezes, recognizing the moment for the opportunity it is. She holds her dagger in her hand, measures its weight, its hilt, fitted perfectly to her palm, knows that she can kill the lead hunter. Her dera’elas lets her see her dagger fly to its target, knocking Mirhanni from her hold, the druffalo doing the rest, trampling her under its great hooves, crushing Mirhanni’s body into the ground with its horns.

“Avyanna, behind you!” Mirhanni yells.
Avyanna spins, ripping herself out of her reverie, bringing her daggers up to defend herself, dancing aside, but not fast enough, the charging druffalo behind her ramming her solidly in the shoulder with its thick, bony horn and she feels her collar bone shatter. She is knocked off her feet, landing hard and taking in a mouth full of dust as she rolls to her side to escape the swinging head of the enraged beast. She springs to her feet and slices her blade just above its eye, blinding it with its own blood. Then Illassan is there on the beast’s back, stabbing his dagger into the other eye, only the hilt stopping its trajectory. The druffalo falls, heavily, hard, a cloud of dust raising and then settling around it. Avyanna stares at it stupidly, swallowing her humiliation, her failure at her task and her failure as a hunter making her shake. Her shoulder throbs.

“What is wrong with you?” screams Mirhanni. She grabs the daggers out of Avyanna’s hands and throws them to the ground. “You do not leave your vhen’eth. You do not!” She strikes Avyanna across the face and Avyanna lets her, does not defend herself against her fists. She falls to the ground and Mirhanni kicks her until Illassan grabs Mirhanni’s arm.

“Please, hahren,” he whispers.

Mirhanni looks up to see the hunt is over. Dead druffalo litter the plain around them and the other hunters are still, watching her standing over Avyanna. Mirhanni grunts in disgust. “Get up. Help your vhen’eth dress their kill.” She stalks off, returning to her own carcass. Avyanna slowly gets to her feet, ignoring Illassan’s offered hand.

“You don’t want to touch me,” she says to him. She wipes the dirt and sweat and blood from her face with her good arm and picks up her daggers before helping him field dress his kill to take back to camp, the ache of her broken bone inadequate punishment for her folly.

When they return to the plains camp, Istimaethoriel greets them with the news that the season has changed and it is time to ready to head to the mountains. Alriel heals his sister as he always has, the bone knitting together beneath his hands, even as her pride and peace of mind remain fractured. The days pass quickly with tasks comforting and banal, the fleshing of druffalo hides to prepare them for tanning, packing baskets of dried roots and herbs, drying the strips of druffalo meat and packing the rest in salt rushes to cure. Avyanna readies her bag of belongings, her eating knife, Nolathari’s braid, her best whetstone, her blankets. She is tying her blankets to her pack when Istimaethoriel drops beside her, his hand tight on her wrist and he says, “I give you until da’evune rises again.” Avyanna shivers involuntarily and pulls her wrist away. Her Keeper stands and calls to the clan that it is time to go.

When they reach the mountain camp, feast preparations begin at once, while Istimaethoriel and Alriel bless the camp in the names of the Evanuris with protective wards and spells. The feast will be in Sylaise’s honor, to bless their summer home, and will coincide with the rising of da’evune, a good
omen. The clan chatter and sing, taking pleasure in the seasonal change, the feast preparations, their joy in each other. Avyanna passes another restless night.

Mirthanni startles Avyanna awake the next morning, shaking her shoulder, her inscrutable face poised above her, large dark eyes boring into her. The rest of the camp is still and quiet. Avyanna freezes under her blanket, a horrible certainty in the pit of her stomach. She knows.

Mirthanni says that today the two of them will climb to the cliffs where the snow terns roost to collect eggs for the feast. “Gather your rope,” Mirthanni commands her.

Avyanna slows her breathing, counts her pulses in her ears as she rises and gathers herself. She goes to the supply aravel to get the rope they will need, and she sees Mirthanni at the doorway of Istimaethoriel’s aravel. He is leaning out from behind the curtain, rumpled and bleary eyed with sleep. Mirthanni cradles his face in her hands. He appears startled, off kilter, as Avyanna has never seen him. Mirthanni kisses him then on his forehead, his left eye, and his right and then his lips. It is a tender gesture, a sweet benediction. Avyanna looks away and makes sure her daggers are secure in their scabbards.

They head up the mountain, towards the snow tern cliffs. It is the start of summer, but there are still patches of melting snow in the shade of trees and rocks and water streams from the peaks in a million little rivulets and streams, forming pools and small ponds where they stop to fill their water skins. Avyanna notes the blood berry bushes, their berries still a pale pink, not yet ripe and catalogs that information for later foraging trips and then startles herself with the realization that after today there may be no further foraging for her. She suppresses a shiver and checks her daggers again.

Mirthanni glances back at her over her shoulder, her eyes flitting over Avyanna’s hand on her dagger hilt. She frowns. “Keep up.”

They reach the top of the cliffs by midday, the sun high in the sky, the jagged gray stone falling sharply away below them. Avyanna looks out to the horizon, the grasslands sweeping out as far as the eye can see, but it is a clear day and she thinks she can see the spires of the city of Starkhaven to the north. She looks down the dizzying height, the snow terns soaring below them on the wind and then turns to begin securing the rope that they will use to scale the cliffs to collect the eggs. She is almost shaking, tense as a bow string, but going through the motions of preparing the rope because she does not know what else to do. Mirthanni sits on a rock, her knees bent up to her chest, her face hard and distant, looking out to the horizon.

“Did he ask you to kill me?”
Avyanna turns to face Mirhanni, her daggers in her hands in a blur, ready to defend herself, but Mirhanni remains sitting, her hands clasped together in front of her knees, as if she had not spoken. Her face is implacable. Her golden vallaslin shimmers against her deep brown skin in the sunlight.

“Do you want to know why?” Her tone is soft and reasonable, as if they are having a pleasant conversation about the best way to skin a rabbit. Avyanna is frozen in her defensive stance, uncertain how else to face this accusation. Mirhanni glances at Avyanna and then away, as if she is not the least bit interested in what happens next.

“When I and I were young, we...” she trails off, her voice catching. “I loved him. He came to be our second from a clan in the mountains north of here. He was an escaped slave from Tevinter, from Qarinnus. He had come far, alone. He learned much from watching his shem master. Maybe too much.”

Avyanna slowly lowers her guard but keeps her daggers in her hands. She says nothing, as if to speak would break their sudden unexpected truce.

“Our First died from a blood fever that even Nolathari could not cure.” Mirhanni looks at her hands and then out to the horizon again, as if what she seeks is there. “We were bonded at midsummer. I wanted to be a hunter and a mother, a good partner to my First. There were many times I had a new life growing within me. But each time I felt the life quickening...it would end.”

Mirhanni takes a deep breath and her facade cracks the tiniest bit, heartache seeping from around her eyes. “Isti took them from me, because they would not grow to be mages, he said. Because he could not keep the clan safe unless his first and his second would be his loyal children. I could not give him the mage child he wanted.”

Avyanna feels the revulsion rise in her throat quickly followed by a shiver of fear. Istimaethoriel is a monster. “How many?” she asks softly.

“Nine.” Mirhanni slowly stands and walks to Avyanna, places her hands on the younger woman’s shoulders. “Your father was a mage; your brother is a mage. You will give him the children he wants.” Avyanna tries to break away from her, from the truth of what Istimaethoriel wants from her. “No!” Mirhanni yells at her, holding her shoulders fast. “Listen to me. You are strong and I have made you stronger. You can end him.”

Avyanna looks at the older woman in disbelief. “How? He has my brother.”
Mirhanni nods slowly. “You must raise your child to be loyal to you. Your child will challenge Isti. Your brother is lost.”

Avyanna shakes her head violently, the beginning of tears pooling in her eyes. “No,” she moans. “He will let my brother be taken by demons if I give birth to a mage. I can’t.”

Mirhanni slaps her hard across the face and hisses in disgust. “You are stronger than this. The clan ends without a Keeper. But raise a new First, a better First, and the clan will survive.”

Avyanna’s head drops in despair. “There must be another way.”

“There is no other way.” Mirhanni releases her. “You must be stronger than him, da’len. You must fight for your clan, for yourself.”

Avyanna returns her daggers to their sheaths. Mirhanni is safe from her blades. “What will you do?”

Mirhanni looks over the cliffs again, out to the horizon, looking for something distant and beyond it. “I will return to my children. They call to me. They want me to join them with the Evanuris.”

Avyanna reaches for Mirhanni. “No, you can run away. I will tell him I killed you and buried you on the mountain, you can-”

“No.” Mirhanni smiles at her then. “We are hunters. We do not run away.” She holds Avyanna’s face in her deep brown hands and Avyanna can feel their warmth, their callouses, their strength. “The rope I brought is frayed. Tell Isti that you gave it to me, and I fell.” She touches her forehead to Avyanna’s. “Dareth shiral, da’len.”

Mirhanni releases Avyanna a final time. She takes her knife and cuts a braid from her head and presses it into Avyanna’s hands and smiles. “Ma ghilana mir din’an,” she whispers to her children, guide me into death. She sprints to the cliff edge, throwing her body out into space, and Avyanna sees her there, arms outstretched to her children and, for a moment, Avyanna believes that she will fly, but then she falls.
Istimaethoriel and Avyanna are bonded after the nine seasons of mourning, one for each elven god of the Evanuris, pass for the Keeper. They speak their vows before the clan and before their gods and Avyanna knows for certain now that the Evanuris cannot hear her because they would not tolerate the lies that pass her lips as she vows to be always faithful to her bond, to her mate. After the bonding feast, she moves her few belongings to Istimaethoriel’s aravel. He takes her to his bed then and Avyanna repeats Mirhanni’s words to her over and over while Istimaethoriel uses her body: You are strong and I have made you stronger. She fears to carry a child, fears for her brother, fears for herself, for how can she remain pliant and silent and not lose herself? She is relieved to find that Istimaethoriel may be a monster but in the world outside the Beyond he is merely a man and he can do no worse to her body than has already been done.

It is a season for pairings because soon after Avyanna and Istimaethoriel’s bonding, Alriel and Lialle tie their hands and hearts together under the light of mor’evune. Avyanna fears for her brother again, and fears for his bonded. She does not know what Istimaethoriel will do if Lialle carries a mageling. There are times, usually in the dark of the aravel after Istimaethoriel is done with her that she lies awake, that she fears that the fear is all she has, all she is. She touches her talisman then, the bracelet made of stag’s leather binding the braid of Nolathari, and the braid of Mirhanni. I am strong and you have made me stronger.

Istimaethoriel proclaims Avyanna to be the clan’s lead hunter. There are congratulations and blessings but Avyanna does not think she deserves them. The other hunters could hardly have someone other than the Keeper’s bonded to lead them and there are whispers that she is a poor choice to lead Anduril’s chosen. She must prove them wrong. She recalls the lessons of Mother Hunter, and tempers her mother’s encouragement and warmth with Mirhanni’s demand and drive, and somehow brings the strength of the two women together to make the other hunters respect her, strive to please her, some to love her and others to fear her. She learns that a little fear can be a useful thing.

The next winter is long and harsh, foraging poor and the game scarce. There are days that Avyanna feels hunger gnaw at her ribs and the fingers that grasp her daggers are shockingly, skeletally thin. Falon’din comes to the clan. Lialle is the first to fall to the blood fever. It rages through her in three days and she is gone. There are others who succumb but for Avyanna, Lialle’s death is the hardest as she sees Alriel despair. He speaks with Falon’din, he says, asking him why, why she of all people, his bonded, the mother of his unborn child had to be taken? Falon’din offers no answers but Ghilin’nain tells him to instruct the clan to paint their aravels with the blood of a pregnant halla, that this will end the plague on them. Avyanna obeys Alriel’s instructions, even though she doubts the existence of the goddess they come from. The first pregnant halla of the spring is sacrificed. The blood fever stops. Alriel will mourn for nine seasons, but he says he will never bond again. In the candlelight of their aravel, Avyanna watches Istimaethoriel drink from a cup of lion flower wine and sees that he is pleased.

Life in the clan goes on, leaving the dead behind. Avyanna’s soul slowly reawakens to sing in the spring again. She learns to find solace in the hunt, her vhen’eth, her kills. She learns to lead, to corral the upstart, over eager youth of Anduril and veteran, measured bowmen alike. She learns that Istimaethoriel will not touch her when her da’evune blood comes. She has been lucky so far. No life
A vhen’eth of four travelers from Clan Sabrae arrives one winter morning when there is still frost on the grass. They bring news that there is a Blight in the South, across the Waking Sea, and Dalish and shem alike are streaming across the water, fleeing north. They caution against speaking with shems, even those who only want to trade because they may harbor Blight sickness. Istimaethoriel listens carefully to their news and tells Avyanna to send out her hunters to keep their homeland safe. He does not specify further; he does not have to. Any shems coming into their territory will get justice for their trespassing. Alriel and Avyanna stay around the fire until moonrise, speaking with the travelers. They are also from the south and for a little while she listens to their accents and looks at their southern clothing and customs and feels a deep tug in her chest that, for all her years with Clan Lavellan, echoes with longing for warmth and home. The travelers leave the next day and Avyanna feels hollow after they have gone.

The Long Hunts are successful, each vhen’eth returning with their dera’elas binding them tighter and their will hardened by their journeys far afield. They encounter long trains of travelers heading north, turned away from the gates of Kirkwall and Ostwick and Markham, heading overland to Starkhaven, hoping for a river barge to take them upriver to Tantervale or downright to Ansburg. The wagon trains are large, hundreds of foul, desperate shems, and while not well armed, they have numbers on their side. The hunters pick off stragglers and those who wander off alone. Fear keeps the wagon trains moving out of their territory.

Seasons pass and word comes again from Clan Sabrae that the Blight is over, ended by a flat ear from an alienage. The name Merilal Tabris is on the lips of everyone from Denerim to Jader and the word is that the new King of Ferelden has given Tabris the city of Amaranthine. Avyanna dismisses this story for what it must be, a fabrication, but silently hopes that this Tabris will burn Amaranthine to the ground rather than rule it.

Avyanna awakes one morning in their mountain camp, pulled out of the Beyond by an unpleasant twisting in her stomach. She barely escapes the aravel in time to vomit in behind its wheels. The camp is already awake and two followers of Sylaise kneel by the fire, cooking strips of mountain hart meat and snow tern eggs in druffalo fat and the smell assaults Avyanna’s nostrils. She closes her eyes and moans, bending to vomit again behind the aravel, her stomach straining against its emptiness. Istimaethoriel hears her and climbs from the aravel, his gray eyes bright with hope. He grabs Avyanna’s wrist and turns her to face him, his other hand splayed out, hovering low over her belly.
for a moment. He closes his eyes and a smile curves the corner of his mouth. “Vhenan,” he whispers. “You have done well.”

Avyanna is numb with shock and sick with dread but manages to return a smile to him. “Thank you, hahren,” she says and folds her hands over her belly, feeling the need to protect her unborn child from him. “I think I must rest.” Istimaethoriel sends her back to bed and has one of the hearth keepers bring her cold water and fresh bread. Talowyn comes to see her, bubbling over with excitement for her, thrilled that her suggestions worked, that her Keeper and his bonded will have a child. Avyanna gives her a beaded leather bracelet that Istimaethoriel had given her as a bonding gift that she has never worn and gives her thanks. Someone should wear it.

In the dark of the aravel, finally alone, Avyanna lets her tears fall, tears for Mother Hunter and Father Keeper, tears for Nolathari and Mirhanni, for Alriel, for Lialle, for herself and for her child. When Istimaethoriel comes to see her, she pretends to be asleep. She hides in the aravel the whole day, cocooning herself in her furs, wishing she was not a hunter, that she had the resolve of Mirhanni to end her torture or the cowardice to run away. But in the end, she is a hunter and she is strong, and she knows that her courage will not let her do anything less than survive. Her devotion to brother and to clan will sustain her, must sustain her.

The next morning when she leaves her aravel, she seeks out Alriel to share her news. He has climbed the mountainside above the camp, a little away from the rest of the clan, his preferred place to commune with the Evanuris. As Avyanna approaches, she can hear him speaking, half of a conversation with a being a world away. She pauses, listening.

“I will always love you,” she hears him say. “And I love Ashilora, too. She would have golden hair like yours and dark eyes like me. I can see her so clearly. I wish you could return to me, ma vhenan.” And then a long pause. “I know. Avyanna’s anger is strong but she is learning. I listen to you only, my love.” Another pause. “And Isti, of course. He teaches me so much.”

Avyanna freezes at these words. No mage has the power to speak to the dead. Suddenly she knows the truth of what her brother hears. He is not communing with the gods. He is communing with demons. And some of those demons answer to Istimaethoriel.

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Avyanna and Istimaethoriel’s child is born during a thunderstorm, lightning crackling and rain pounding the grasslands into submission. It is fitting that her child will also enter the world in the spring and Avyanna feels the thread of maternal love thicken and strengthen at the thought, just as it bloomed into existence when she first felt her child quickening inside her. Her labor is not long as labors go and Talowyn and Istimaethoriel fret over her until the little girl enters the world, pink and protesting, louder even than the thunder outside the aravel.
After Talowyn leaves the aravel, declaring mother and child well, Istimaethoriel showers Avyanna with praise. She has done everything he asked, given him everything he could desire.

Avyanna does not look at him but holds and studies her daughter, her tiny fingers, her soft pursed lips, the nearly bald little head, her left ear folded over from her position in the womb. Avyanna caresses her ear, rubs it to help it straighten. “I name her Mirahari.”

Istimaethoriel begins to object but Avyanna looks at him fiercely. “I have done everything you asked. You can give this to me.”

Istimaethoriel may not agree but he does not fight it further. Even a powerful Keeper must sometimes give in to his bonded’s demands.

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“Mama, look!” Mirahari laughs delightedly and chases the bright butterfly through the long grass. Avyanna’s daughter is tall for her age, tall for an elf, all gangly arms and legs going every which way like a knock kneed halla fawn. Her hair is Istimaethoriel’s, black as obsidian and straight as river rushes, falling from her head in a long waterfall. But her eyes are Avyanna’s, yellow-green and narrow, making her look like she is always fiercely concentrating, judging, weighing everyone’s words. She gives up chasing the butterfly and comes to sit on the woven blanket on the grass, under the branches of a lone prairie clove tree, the sweet, spicy smell of spring flowers wafting down on them in the cool shade.

This is Mirahari’s seventh spring and her magic has not yet manifested, but Avyanna knows that it will. Otherwise Istimaethoriel would not have allowed her to exist, like the other three children Avyanna carried after her but never bore. She is mournful and grateful, happy in her daughter and sad for her future all at once. She breathes in deep the smell of the clove flowers above them and wishes that this moment could last forever, that they need not ever return to the clan, that Avyanna need never dread the day when the magic bursts forth from Mirahari and the demons come for Alriel.

“Mama, when will Alriel come with us? He never wants to leave camp,” Mirahari complains.

Avyanna sighs and pulls her daughter into her lap, smoothing her hair back over her shoulders. “He does not like to be away from your father, and a Keeper’s place is with his people.”
“Mama, when can I have braids? Will you braid my hair?” Mirahari fidgets and gets up from Avyanna’s lap to pick up fallen clove flowers from their blanket, crushing them in her fingers to release their sweet scent.

“You have southern hair, da’len. But I can ask Talowyn or Namanni to braid your hair if you like.”

“I do like. I think braids are pretty.” And she sees another butterfly to chase and Avyanna feels her heart actually throb and ache with love for her daughter.

“If you ask your uncle, maybe he will come with us next time.” Alriel dotes on his little niece and her desires may sway him where Avyanna’s do not.

They fold their blanket and Mirahari carries their water skins and checks to make sure her small dagger is in its sheath. She may grow to be a mage, but Avyanna has made sure that she can defend herself until then. They hold hands as they walk through the golden light of evening back to camp.

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It is evening on a Long Hunt when Avyanna and her vhen’eth stop to make camp. They are far to the west of the clan’s winter home, close to the trading route between Wildervale and Kirkwall and Avyanna thinks that perhaps they will come across a shem that will have useful things to trade, sea salt or steel or maybe even lyrium potions, and she has two tanned, soft wolf skins in her pack with which to barter.

The sun is setting, the western sky painted a brilliant orange, the faint clouds streaked purple and red. The breeze blows softly across the grass and Avyanna, Illassan and their two apprentice hunters, their young faces bare, light a small fire, roast their rabbits and eat. They are eating in silence when Avyanna feels her dera’elas shimmer. She locks eyes with Illassan and sees that he feels it too. The two young hunters are tearing into their food, oblivious. Avyanna clicks her tongue, the two younglings set down their food and grab their weapons. Avyanna holds her hand low to the ground. Stay here.

She rises from her seat, stretches as if she senses nothing and rests her hand on her dagger hilt as she strolls away from the firelight. There is a gasp and a whisper of something moving through the grass. It is not stealthy.

“Come out. We know you are there,” she says in common. Avyanna keeps her hand on her dagger
but she feels no threat from whatever is hidden in the grass, only fear.

A face without *vallaslin* peeks out from its hiding place. At first, Avyanna thinks it is an elf child but then as he stands to his full height, she realizes that he is an adult, almost as tall as she is. His hair is russet red, cropped short and pushed behind his pointed ears and his large eyes blink rapidly at her. He wears a heavy robe, dirty and tattered at the hem and leather slippers on his feet.

“Please,” he says, opening his hands to show that they are empty. “Please, I lost my staff in the river. I mean you no harm.”

Avyanna cannot help but bark out a sharp laugh at this because the man is obviously no threat, unarmed, clumsy in trying to hide in the dry grass, unable to move quickly in his heavy robe, standing with no connection to the earth in his leather shoes. He startles at Avyanna’s laughter and looks from her to the other hunters and then gives a large open smile, grinning like an idiot.

“You’re Dalish,” he observes looking between them. “Oh, thank the Maker. I’m so hungry. I have money,” he says, reaching into the pouch at his waist. “I could buy food from you, if you have it to sell?” He looks at the last rabbit, roasting over the fire and nervously licks his lips. He holds his hand out to Avyanna and she sees a coin between his fingers, its metal glinting in the firelight.

“What good is coin to us?” Illassan scoffs at the money as he comes to his feet.

The man sputters in confusion and looks back at Avyanna, and smiles sheepishly, returning the coin to his purse. “I don’t have anything else of value...”

“What alienage are you from?” asks Avyanna.

“Oh, I’m not from an alienage, well, not recently, anyway. I’m from the Gallows, uh, the mage Circle in Kirkwall. Well, not anymore. I’ve escaped.” He looks very proud of himself. “I’m going north to Tevinter.”

Now Avyanna knows for certain that if he is not stupid, he is naive. “Elves are slaves in Tevinter.”

He blinks rapidly and looks between Avyanna and the other hunters. “Well, I’ve heard that...but I’m a mage so...” He looks back to the fire as the juices drip from the roasting rabbit to sizzle in the coals.
Avyanna’s eyes narrow as she looks at the helpless flat ear, thinking what this elf’s presence means before deciding quickly what to do. “Andaran atish’an, alin. We would be honored to share our fire with you.”

Illassan looks sharply at her. “Ma sul’ema alin’gonun?” You would give him guest right? The two apprentice hunters share an uncertain glance at each other, waiting to see how this goes between their elders.

“Sul mala.” For now, Avyanna says sharply, daring Illassan to cross her. He inclines his head and sits back down. Avyanna smiles at the stranger and gestures to a log by the fire. She spears the rabbit with her eating knife and removes it from the spit, handing the hilt to the flat ear who begins to tear into the meat with his teeth, gorging himself on the tender flesh.

“Oh, thank you,” he gets out between mouthfuls. “This is delicious.”

The two apprentices are gawking at him as he eats like a child, struggling with the eating knife and getting grease all over his fingers and dripping onto his robe. The predators will smell him a league away.

Avyanna questions him, getting her answers between gulps of rabbit meat. His name is Caden and he escaped the Gallows in Kirkwall, aided by a mage on the outside who had escaped himself and now helps others. Avyanna thinks that these Circles must be poor prisons to allow one such as this to escape. He has lived almost his whole life within the Circle’s walls, having been turned over to the Gallows by his parents when he was six. He warns the vhen’eth of the band of men calling themselves Templars, shems wearing metal armor, carrying heavy swords and searching for mages they brand apostates. Caden is an apostate now, on the run, traceable by his blood in a vial that the templars hold, an item he calls a phylactery. Caden thinks he may be far enough ahead that they cannot track him.

Avyanna nods at his hope while recognizing it for the fantasy that it is. Without vallaslin, he looks like a child to her, a child playing at being an adult. He cannot hunt, he has lost his weapon, and Avyanna suspects that he will be captured by the templars far sooner than he thinks. She keeps asking questions, though, until she understands what is driving his foolish attempt. She comes to understand that there will be other escaped mages, and other templars, and she sees the danger that this brings to her clan. Templars would kill Alriel for the danger he is if they crossed his path. Avyanna does not think Istimaethoriel would accept an elven apostate into their clan, but Avyanna does not want one near enough to test her certainty. Another mage, especially one indebted to Istimaethoriel for survival, could lead to Alriel’s possession all the sooner, or even supplant Mirathari if she questions her father. Avyanna will not allow either of those things to happen. The Clan must be kept safe.
Avyanna commands the apprentices to bank the fire and clean up the leavings of their meal. She tells the apostate to rest and that they will see him on his way in the morning. She gives him her blanket and says she will take first watch. Illassan is unhappy with her but says nothing.

“Melena, lethallin,” she tells him. Just wait. Avyanna sits alone in the night, looking at the starlight on the grass, watching the breeze caress the plains. She decides what needs to be done.

In the morning, Avyanna sends Illassan and their two apprentices back towards the clan, telling them to take care to hide their tracks. They do not want these templars to follow them. She tells Caden to show her back the way he came so she can help him hide his trail. Caden’s face lights up, his delight at Avyanna’s help bringing a huge smile to his face. The two groups go their separate ways. Caden takes Avyanna back the way he thinks he came, but he is not even sure, having stumbled along in the dark, afraid to stop. Avyanna can follow his thrashing, hurried trail easily enough and she leads them, telling him that they are doubling back before striking off in a different direction, that she will help him elude the templars. His thanks are so genuine and effusive that Avyanna feels a small lump of pity in her throat.

When they have gone far enough from their camp the night before, Avyanna decides that it is time. They stop to rest and Avyanna waits for Caden to sit heavily, cross legged in the grass. She steps behind him and rests a hand on his shoulder.

“Ir abelas.” I am sorry, she says, and efficiently slits his throat.

He falls back in the grass, his hands clutching at the blood pouring forth from his neck. His eyes are large in his face blinking up at her in confusion as his mouth opens and closes like a fish, blood frothing from his lips. Avyanna waits until he is dead before searching his body, taking his coins and a ring he wears on his finger. She wants the templars to believe that he was killed for his valuables, something a Dalish would never do. She wipes her blade on his robes and leaves him staring up at the sky. Avyanna heads towards home, taking care to leave no trace behind her.

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The Long Hunts continue. Avyanna leads them sometimes, enjoying the freedom of running beside her vhen’eth, stalking her prey. They cross paths with shems more often now, occasionally harmless traders traveling between Markham and Starkhaven, but more and more often the bands of Templars searching for apostates in their blundering heavy-handed way. The vhen’eth find the apostates too, never more than a small group of two or three, more often a single desperate soul, hungry, shivering and afraid. If the mage is weak, the vhen’eth kill them, leaving their body to be found by the humans hunting them, steering them away from the clan’s territory. All the hunters follow Avyanna’s
command. No mage is to come near Clan Lavellan.

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It is spring again, and Avyanna sits under the clove tree with Alriel, watching Mirahari pick feather flowers. Her daughter has grown in the last year and sometimes Avyanna must remind herself that her daughter is only ten springs old, her wise eyes appearing so much older. Avyanna is resting, back in camp between Long Hunts, unable to completely avoid her duties to her bonded. She has lost another child and she feels the toll it takes on her in her bones. She has sent two *vhen’eths* of hunters out to the east, and they have returned, telling of war in Kirkwall, first with Qunari and then between the templars and mages. The shems’ holy building, the Chantry, has been destroyed and rebellion has flooded out of the cities. Refugees have streamed from the cities as well and the hunters come across them as they head for the northern cities of the Free Marches, trying to escape the violence of the templars and mages. Some refugees even make for northern Orlais, at least until word comes that civil war is raging in southern empire and then the refugees turn to toward Antiva instead. But on a clear, spring day, under the cloudless blue sky, the troubles of the shems and flat ears seem very far away. Alriel is quiet. He keeps nervously glancing back towards their camp as if by looking in that direction he can be sure it is still there even though it is beyond the horizon.

“It is good for you to leave camp,” Avyanna says. He is under the watchful eye of Istimatheriel always.

Alriel frowns. “I do not like to leave Isti.”

Avyanna says nothing, watching her daughter’s long evening shadow dance across the grass. Mirahari has made herself a crown of flowers, the ethereal pink petals perched atop her head, resting on her long braids. She is singing, a spring song about Ghilan’nain and a halla who fell in love with an elven crafter. Avyanna listens to the words, knowing that the story does not have a happy ending but loving the sound of her daughter’s child’s voice anyway, her words sweet and innocent on the wind, accompanied by the soft susurrations of the long grass.

Her *dera’elas* prickles and Avyanna flies to her feet, her daggers in her hands as she spins to look around them. They are surrounded, six shems materializing out of the long grass, each wearing full armor and helms, their swords drawn. Mirathari yelps and springs away from them, running to place her back against Avyanna’s, drawing her dagger, brandishing it with the fierceness her mother taught her. Alriel sprongs to his feet, his face a stern mask as he twirls his staff once, holding it defensively before him in both hands.

“Calm, *lethallin,*” Avyanna whispers to him. They are outnumbered and her *dera’elas* tells her that these men are no ordinary soldiers. They are skilled to have gotten so close before she knew they were there, doubly so in their heavy armor. She knows that her daggers will not penetrate their plate.
The soldier in front of Avyanna, holds his hand out to the ground, a calming gesture, even as he still brandishes his sword at the ready in his other hand. “We don’t want to hurt you,” he says to Avyanna. He is a large, even for a shem, all broad shoulders and heavy feet in his boots. He has the wind worn face of a veteran. “I am Knight-Captain Verneill. We only want the mage.”

Avyanna bristles, baring her teeth at the shem. “We are Dalish. We do not answer to you.”

Another soldier behind her takes a step closer and Avyanna feels the ripple of heat flow off Alriel’s skin. She grabs Mirathari and throws her to the ground, covering her with her body, protecting her against the blast of flame that surges outward from Alriel. The blast is so powerful and fast that it catches the soldiers by surprise. Suddenly, their opponents are down to three.

The lead soldier is still on his feet, the grass burning around him, and he yells something that sounds like a battle cry and white light crashes down on them. The soldier swings his sword at her brother. Alriel defends himself, holding his staff out to block the blow and it cracks in half, the wood splintering in his hands. Alriel leaps back, dropping the broken fragments of his staff to the ground. He looks around them at the other two advancing templars and then down at Avyanna and Mirathari cowering beneath her mother. He brings his hands together, fingers locking to bind a spell but when he releases his hands, nothing happens, no fire, no heat, the white light the Templar conjured still sparkling on the ground around them. He crouches and places his hand on Avyanna’s shoulder.

“Ir abelas, sister.”

Before Avyanna can ask what he is sorry for, he rises up, his hands clenched into fists above his head and he transforms before her eyes, his elven body exploding, in a blast of fire and heat, leaving a monstrous form behind, a snarling, menacing creature, a being of pure rage, a pulsating column of hatred that lunges and grabs the throat of the closest Templar in its claws, the soldier's armor melting as he screams. Avyanna cries out, knowing in that moment that Alriel is gone forever. The demon lunges toward the Knight-Captain, hissing with rage.

The lead Templar attacks her demon-brother, more words from his mouth shielding him in light and it is over quickly, too quickly for Avyanna to even fully understand what she is seeing, the templar’s sword cleaving the demon in two, the demon sinking into the ground, its echoing roar reverberating in the earth even after it is gone. Avyanna is frozen for a moment, looking at the smoking black scar on the grass where Alriel stood and the burning branches of the clove tree above them. She is shaking, rising slowly to her feet. She helps Mirathari up beside her and holds her daughter close against her, her hands resting on the girl’s shaking shoulders. The Knight-Captain is breathing hard but holds a steadying hand out to the soldier beside him, telling the much younger man to stay his blade. The younger Templar looks wild eyed at the elves before him and holds his sword at the ready.
The Knight-Captain sheaths his weapon and removes his helm. “I am sorry he wouldn’t come willingly,” he says. “There was no need for this.”

Mirahari looks at the scorched circle on the ground marking Alriel’s death, the inert templars lying around them, then at the burning branches of the clove tree, and finally at her mother. Avyanna’s face is hard with anger, staring at the Templar. She slowly reaches for her daggers, picking them up off the ground, and sheaths them. She cannot kill the two templars and protect her daughter at the same time. Mirahari begins to cry.

“Mama…he killed Alriel,” she says to Avyanna.

Aivyanna kneels and turns Mirahari towards her, holds her by her frail shoulders. “Shhh, little one. We must go.”

But Mirahari turns to study the Templar through her tears. She holds her dagger in her hand as her yellow eyes narrow. “He killed Alriel,” she says again.

Aivyanna’s dera’elas flickers, but this time the ripples center around Mirahari. “Mirahari, no, da’len...”

“He killed Alriel,” Mirahari screams at the Templar. “He killed him.”

Aivyanna reaches for her daughter, knowing what is coming but unable to stop it as Mirathari’s magic manifests, catching the Templar by surprise as her entire body shivers, the cold blowing off her like a northern winter gale. She throws her free hand toward the soldier, ice blasting from her palm, knocking the Templar commander back and freezing his body in place, ice crystals crackling and glinting on every surface of his armor. Aivyanna is thrown backward by the wave of cold, bringing her hand up to shield her face as everything around her is coated in ice. Mirathari is crying, screaming at the Templar, a raging blizzard encircling him. Aivyanna fumbles for her daggers but her fingers are clumsy with cold and her dera’elas distorts in the blast of magic from Mirathari. Her daughter hefts her dagger and throws it, as precisely as her mother taught her, its blade landing solidly in the templar’s throat with a crack. It sticks there for a moment and then the Knight-Captain shatters, fragments of ice and flesh exploding.

The younger Templar staggers to his feet and rushes forward, driving his blade into Mirathari’s narrow chest, the hilt driving against her breastbone and her eyes go wide as she collapses to the ground. Aivyanna launches herself at the young soldier, screaming, pushing him back and away from
her daughter. He falls back, pulling his blade with him, but Avyanna lands crouched with her feet on his arms and she drives her dagger through the eye of his helm, pushing it home until his body is twitching beneath her. She crawls back to Mirathari, drawing the girl up in her arms, pressing her hand vainly against the chest wound, cradling her, speaking her name again and again, her voice swelling in agony, but Mirahari is already gone, a bloody hollow shell, her crown of flowers crushed beneath the Templars’ feet. Above them, the clove tree burns, half of its branches smoldering and the other half breaking under the weight of the coating of ice.

The walk back to camp is a blur. Avyanna holds her daughter’s body in her arms, the weight so heavy that she feels crushed beneath it, while at the same time so light that she cannot believe that just a little while ago this inert flesh contained her daughter that lived and breathed and sang and loved her. Tears run down her cheeks, dripping onto her daughter’s face. She holds Mirahari tightly, crushing her to her chest, She has failed, utterly failed, lost her brother, broken the first vow she had ever taken, to keep him safe, and failed to protect her daughter, the one who was to save her entire clan. Her feet move one after the other towards home, blind with grief, only her dera-elas showing her the way. She is alone in the world, Alriel and Mirahari both taken from her, beyond her reach. She has failed them both.

Avyanna finally stumbles back into their encampment, falling to her knees just inside the ring of firelight, as her clan runs to surround her, to ask what happened, to cry and hold her and her daughter. Someone alerts Istimaethoriel and the clan parts as he steps forward, father and Keeper taking Mirathari from Avyanna and giving her to the hearth keepers to bathe her body and prepare her for burial. Avyanna releases the body, feeling her heart taken from her too. She tells the clan that Alriel is lost also, lost to his flames with no body to bury, but she does not tell them what he became at the end. She will take that with her to her grave. Istimaethoriel pulls Avyanna to her feet and takes her to their aravel. He says nothing as he strips her of her soiled clothing and throws her a blanket to sleep on the floor. He is furious with her for letting his precious SEcon’s be killed. He is furious at the loss of Alriel too and Avyanna sees the subtle flicker of fear in Istimaethoriel’s face that he no longer has a hold over his bonded. In the Beyond that night he punishes Avyanna where no one in the clan can hear or see, beating her, crushing her soul, his anger terrible as Avyanna is buffeted by his rage. She cannot resist and does not want to. She did not protect her brother as she had sworn. She did not protect her daughter as a mother should. She craves the punishment that Istimaethoriel gives her. Her heart is dead forever.

The next day, before they climb the mountain to take Mirathari to her rest, Avyanna cuts a braid from her daughter’s head and weaves it with the leather and the other two braids at her wrist. She cannot cry. All her tears have been shed. There are none left.

The clan is gentle with her, even if Istimaethoriel is not, and they respect, even if they do not understand, her desire to withdraw. To lose her daughter and brother both is terrible. They understand that she may be broken for a time.

One morning, nine days after Mirathari is in the ground, Avyanna gathers her vhen’eth, Illassan and two other veteran bowmen. She says they are going on a Long Hunt and may not return to the clan
for a season. The hunters look at each other, wondering if Istimaethoriel has sanctioned this, if he does not want the comfort of his bonded when he has lost his only child. Avyanna tells them not to question and they set out at dawn, headed east.

They travel along the foothills towards the trade route between Markham and Starkhaven. When they see travelers on the road, they lay in wait, though what they are waiting for, Illassan and the others are not sure. On the third day of their waiting, lurking in the grass along the road, Avyanna sees what she seeks, a ragged group of seven templars, their uniforms having seen better days. Perhaps they are loyalists, cut off from their chain of command, or perhaps they are rogue soldiers, wreaking their bloody havoc on the countryside against mage and non-mage alike. Avyanna doesn’t care. They have flaming swords on their breast plates and that is enough for her. She, Illassan and her bowmen make short work of them, the bowmen picking them off from a distance and Avyanna and Illassan going in to finish the job with their daggers. Avyanna says to leave the bodies on the road. She wants everyone to see what happens to templars who stray from their cities.

They turn north, heading towards Starkhaven. The templars that hail from that city are better armed and more disciplined, but they fall just the same. With each kill, her heart hurts a little less, becomes a little more numb.

Illassan and the bowmen whisper to each other when their Long Hunt continues from da’evune to mor’evune. When will they go back to camp? When will Elgar’nan let Avyanna rest? The Long Hunt does not end.

At night, Istimaethoriel reaches into Avyanna’s dreams. He screams at her, orders her to return home. He torments her with Alriel’s transformation to a demon again and again, shows her Mirathari’s blood on her hands, violates her body and mind, but all his threats are empty now. He can take nothing from her that she has not already lost. She cares nothing for her own body or soul now that all she cared about in this world is gone.

They come upon two templars as they sit around their campfire. Illassan hears their talk, that the templars of Starkhaven are seeking out the scourge of the plains, looking for the demon or mage who keeps slaying their brethren. Avyanna charges in without waiting for her vhen’eth, slaughtering the two men as they sit down for their evening meal. She kneels over them, cleaning her daggers on their clothing, leaving their bodies lying in the grass. She never looks at their faces.

When da’evune turns to mor’evune again, Istimaethoriel comes to Illassan’s dreams. Bring her home, he commands. Do what you must. This campaign against the templars is foolish and dangerous. They will seek to destroy our clan if they find you. Illassan awakes, shivering. He will do what his Keeper asks.

Illassan first tries to reason with her. He tells her that surely Elgar’nan has been appeased, that it must
be time for them to return to camp, that she should pass the rest of her seasons of mourning at her bonded’s side. She is not old. She can have other children. But Avyanna will not hear him and in the end, it takes all three of them to subdue her, to strip her of her daggers, bind her wrists and tie a rope around her neck to drag her home, kicking and spitting with rage.

Istimaethoriel does not release her when they arrive. If she cannot obey him, he will keep her bound, leashed like a dog. Even a mabari follows its master’s commands. Her clan is afraid of her, her unfettered rage and her disloyalty to their Keeper who has always kept them safe. Each evening, Istimaethoriel asks her if she can obey him, and each evening Avyanna remains silent, and spends another night tied to the wheel of Istimaethoriel’s aravel.

Avyanna does not know how many cycles of the moon have passed, sitting in her own filth, tied by the neck to the aravel in rain and blistering sun when Talowyn comes to her and gently cleans her and brushes her hair and releases her and gives her clean clothes. The healer rubs a salve on her neck and wrists where the ropes have rubbed her skin raw. She whispers to Avyanna that her clan needs her. The clans of the north have begun to arrive for a Gathering, and she must sit beside Istimaethoriel as his bonded. The Gathering has come to them, clans from the northeast, traveling from Antiva, the Green Dales and the Weyrs, from the Eastern Coastlands and from the west, clans journeying from Nevarra and northern Orlais. There has not been a Gathering like it in many generations, but the Keepers can read the signs and heed the Evanuris, their warning that all Thedas is in danger. It may not be a Blight, but something just as dark and unsettling is moving across the land. The destruction of the shems’ holy site in Kirkwall was just the beginning.

The Gathering should bring a little light to Avyanna’s heart, but it does not. There are dances and stories, bonding ceremonies, wine and feasts. Clan Sabrae has disappeared from their camp outside Kirkwall, and rumors whisper that a demon was to blame. Illassan bonds with a pale southern girl from Northern Orlais, a weaver whose fabrics are intricate and beautiful and Istimaethoriel graciously accepts the blanket that she has made for her new Keeper and his bonded. Istimaethoriel takes the youngest daughter of Clan Sethrel’s Keeper to be his new First. She is young and pretty with raven black hair and skin the color of strong honeyed tea, graced by the twin feathered wings of Mythal on her cheeks, the ink the same color as her emerald green eyes. Avyanna almost feels sorry for her until she sees the girl’s eyes follow Istimaethoriel with a brazen, blatant hunger. Then she thinks that perhaps they will deserve each other. Avyanna wonders how Istimaethoriel plans to rid himself of his troublesome bonded, if his new First will be the weapon he yields. She hopes he acts soon.

Three days into the Gathering, there is a meeting of the Keepers. Each Keeper, their First and Second come to the central fire of the camp, to share a meal and share news, to discuss what is happening in the realm of the shems, how their wars and their strife bubble over to the clans, as human affairs always do. Avyanna accompanies Istimaethoriel and his new First as Clan Lavellan has no second. Each clan takes its turn, telling of the evil that has come to their lands. Some of the clans report attacks by Templars, lyrium crazed men demanding that the clan give up their mages, while other say that it is the rogue mages that are worse, killing at random, stealing food and supplies. The Keeper of Clan Venen, whose home range is near Val Chevin, speaks of a hope for peace between the mages and templars, that the Divine of the southern Chantry has called a conclave, a meeting between the warring factions to bring them to heel and end the bloodshed.
Avyanna barely listens. This shem war has nothing to do with her.

But then Istimaethoriel speaks. He says that the Dalish have always been outside the world of men. Perhaps it is time to take part. Send a *vhen'eth* to this conclave. See what the Divine plans. Perhaps the Dalish can protect themselves by learning what is to come.

There is grumbling around the fire, murmurs of assent and dismissal. Avyanna glances at her Keeper and sees the look that passes between him and his new First, the glimmer of conspiracy. Avyanna sees a way out.

"I will go," Avyanna announces.

The circle of elves around the fire quiets and Avyanna sees the shock on Istimaethoriel's face, a flash of surprise before he recovers and gives her a nod. "I trust my mate to go in my stead," he intones. "Who will go with her?"

In the end, the elders decide to send two *vhen'eths*, one of hunters and one of mages. They will leave in three days' time, head southwest to Cumberland, avoiding the disaster that is Kirkwall and book passage on a ship to Jader. From there they can be at the conclave in Haven within a fortnight. Avyanna closes her eyes and nods. In less than a turning of *da'evune*, it will be over.

That night, in the privacy of his aravel, Istimaethoriel turns to Avyanna, and asks her what she is thinking. "Do you think these Templars will be merciful when they find out who you are? What you’ve done?"

Avyanna settles on her blanket on the floor and turns her back to him. "No. That’s what I’m counting on."

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Avyanna stands on the deck of the ship as it crashes through the waves of the Waking Sea. The Free Marches are behind her, the South ahead. Her stomach churns almost as much as the last time she made this passage, so she stays above deck, breathing deep of the sea air and keeping her eyes on the horizon. She is dressed in unfamiliar clothing, trading out her hunter's leathers for a padded gambeson and metal pauldrons, more fitting for the mercenaries she and her fellow Dalish are claiming to be than Dalish wanderers. The boots are the most difficult thing to get used to, her feet hot and cramped in the heavy leather. She fingers the braids and leather of her bracelet and thinks that she will wear it always, even as she asks the Divine for justice for her brother and daughter. She does not expect that a human, no matter how holy, can grant what she seeks, but if she cannot,
Avyanna will reveal her role in the death of so many Templars and in so doing, end her pain. One way or another, it will soon be over.

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Gatt and Bull are still, frozen in anticipation, awaiting her word.

"Order the retreat," Avyanna commands.

Gatt begins to sputter a protest. Avyanna moves quickly, backhanding him across the face. He stumbles with the blow but manages to remain standing, glaring at Avyanna in barely contained fury and for a moment she understands where his nickname, after the explosive gaatlok of the Qunari, originates. Bull signals Krem and the Chargers hasten their retreat, abandoning their post on the cliffs, disappearing to high ground in the trees and fog. The Venatori on the beach turn their attention to the Qunari dreadnought, fireballs arcing from the shore to the lumbering vessel, and it goes down beneath the waves, and with it, any hope of an Inquisition alliance with the Qunari.

That night, in camp, the Chargers fill their cups with Chasind sack mead, toasting to being alive, to taking out a few of the Venatori bastards. Avyanna sits apart with Dorian, Varric and Bull, drinking from their own bottle, crouched around the firelight in the hissing drizzle, discussing what comes next. Avyanna informs them that she will take her newly acquired zealots, the Blades of Hessarian, with them to the beach tomorrow to rout out the last of the Venatori and locate the red lyrium shipment and destroy it. They should have attacked in force before instead of listening to the Viddathari messenger. Gatt is gone, returning to his Qunari masters to let them know of the failure of their mission with the Inquisition. Bull is quiet, contained, the knowledge that he can never go home again settling in his face.

Varric, for once, has nothing to say except goodnight and heads for the tent he shares with the Inquisitor.

Dorian pleads fatigue and stands. He begins to walk to his tent before he stops and places a hand on Bull's shoulder. Bull glances at his hand and then at the mage, as if surprised at the gentleness of the gesture. "I know what it is to be an outcast from your countrymen," Dorian says softly. "I'm here if you want to talk."

Bull nods and pats Dorian's hand but says nothing. The Tevinter mage leaves them by the fire. Avyanna hunches under her cloak, staring into the flames.
"Why did you save my men?" Bull looks at her. "You gave up an alliance with an entire nation for one group of mercenaries. Why?"

Avyanna looks over at the Chargers. "I spoke with Gatt while we waited for the ship. He was your friend, but he is weak minded. He escaped slavery and then turned himself over to the Qun to be a slave again."

Bull shakes his head. "It sounds more like you've been talking to Dorian."

Avyanna pours herself another cup of mead. "Tevinter has many evils. But so does your Qun."

"So that's it? You don't like Gatt, so you throw away everything?"

"No." She takes a deep drink of her mead and turns her face up into the misting rain, closing her eyes. "The Inquisition is my clan now. I will fight for my clan, whatever the cost. No one in my clan will owe a debt of loyalty to anyone but me."

Bull squints at her in the firelight. "How do you know I will be loyal?"

Avyanna rises from her seat, tosses back the last of her mead and looks down at Bull. "I see you with your Chargers. You care more for them than your precious Qun. You owe me now. And I do not think you are the type of man to let a debt go unpaid."

She leaves the Qunari alone by the fire with his thoughts and settles into her bedroll in her tent. Beside her Varric has already begun to snore. The Inquisitor closes her eyes. She sleeps soundly, without dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Elvhen words and phrases:
alin- stranger
alin'gonun- guest right, hospitality extended to strangers or other Dalish ensuring welcome and protection
andaran atish'an- a formal greeting, literally "enter this place in peace"
da'evune- little moon, the Dalish word for Parvus
da’len- little one, young one
dareth shiral- farewell, literally "safe journey"
dera’elas- green sense, literally "to touch earth"
hahren- honored one, a term for an elder or leader
lethal/lethallin- clanmate, cousin, close relative (fem./masc.)
Ma ghilana mir din’an – “Guide me into death.”
ma serannas- thank you
mor'evune- big moon, the Dalish word for Magnus
Sa ehn dala- the one who destroys
vallaslin- the sacred tattoos of the gods which the Dalish apply as part of their adulthood ritual, literally "blood writing"
vhen'eth- the groups of four in which Dalish hunt or travel, literally "people of safety"

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