Embrace Your Purpose

by helygen2017

Summary

The Qun states that by embracing your purpose, your role, you will find peace. For Eluned Treherne, her purpose is drowning in blood and pain. All alone in a strange land, with power at her fingertips that she is wholly unprepared for, she struggles under the yoke placed upon her in her quest to survive. Do you embrace your purpose and find peace, or do you fight?
Transference

Chapter Summary

Transference

Noun: the action of transferring something or the process of being transferred

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eluned stopped at the mouth of the cave, lifting the damp hair from the back of her neck. She twisted the long, wavy caramel-brown hair up into a thick ponytail and secured the escaped tendrils back into the hair clip. “Really need to get this cut sometime soon,” she thought. Even though she had left the parking lot close to dawn to hike to the cave before the worst of the day’s heat arrived, the morning was quickly heating up and the sweat prickled along the edge of her hairline. She took a drink from her water bottle and reattached its carabiner to her small backpack that held a few items for her day trip into the cave. She had wanted to explore the cave for years as it was supposed to have some of the prettiest mineral formations on the West Coast, but never managed to find the time to get away to do so. After a grueling eighteen months of working as a project lead on a big media project, she finally had a bit of downtime and took immediate advantage to treat herself to this trip. Fortunately, it was an easy hike for tourists, or for someone that just spent a year and a half sedentary in front of a computer, to explore without needing any advanced hiking or spelunking skills. She hoped that coming earlier in the day would allow her to explore before more tourists descended on the site.

The mouth of the cave was open and inviting. The early sun streamed in toward the back of the entrance of the cave reflecting off various stalactites and stalagmites that glittered in morning light. She followed the easy path as it meandered around the cave twining between the mineral formations. Towards the back of the cave the path branched off in two directions, both looked well used. She referenced her map to see that one went to a small gallery with a pond, but the other went deeper into the cave system to a spectacular gallery called the Cathedral. She turned, taking the path to the Cathedral, following it as it started to descend deeper and deeper into the earth. She pulled on her long sleeve shirt as she continued to walk, the air in the cave having become cool and humid sending goosebumps along her bared arms. When the path became dark, she pulled out her flashlight to light the way. The cave was silent except for the crunch of the gravel beneath her shoes but soon she could hear falling water ahead.

After ten minutes of walking along the snaking path, she could see a glimmer of light before her. The path opened onto a balcony that overlooked the huge gallery lit by the sunlight through a crack in the ceiling high above the cave floor. From that same crack poured a stream of water that created a mist of rainbows scattered throughout the cavern in the sunlight. She followed a path that wrapped around the edge of the space taking her to the Cathedral floor.

She wandered around the bottom of the cavern marvelling at the space. Stalactites and stalagmites joined creating soaring columns that glittered with the shifting light and moisture in the air. At the top of the cavern, swallows and other little birds flitted in and out of the mist, singing the whole time. She walked around to the far side of the cavern and felt an odd sensation, almost like a sub-auditory hum settling deep in her bones. Looking around, she spotted what looked like a huge sheet of quartz that
flickered with light even though it was shaded by vines and a rocky overhang. Curiosity compelled
her to step closer; the vibration within her bones became stronger the closer she got to the sheet of
stone. The light on the stone flickered and pulsed brighter almost if the stone was a smoked sheet of
glass with a different scene on the other side. Warmth radiated from the stone surface. Eluned
reached out her fingertips to touch the surface. There was a crackle, like the discharge of static
electricity that arched over her hand, and before she could withdraw, a force grasped her wrist and
yanked her palm against the stone surface. Her body jerked as a brilliant light flared, blinding her,
and she knew nothing else.

Eluned groaned as she woke up. Her head was pounding and the bright sunlight flickering through
the tree branches wasn’t helping. “Wait. There are tree branches?” she thought to herself. “Maybe I
got disoriented and left the cave.” Sheltering her eyes from the sun and rolling over onto her knees,
she looked around. She wasn’t in the cave but outside under trees that looked more like banana and
palm trees than the arbutus and pine that should have been there.

She stood up brushing the mulch and dirt off her bare knees. Behind her was a tall rock face that
looked similar to the big quartz sheet she had touch before, but this time it was just a dull whitish
chunk of stone. She tentatively reached out and touched it. Nothing. She slapped both her palms
against it and pushed, but nothing happened. She didn’t know where she was.

Taking deep breathes to stave off the rising panic, she made herself think. She was lost. She needed
to find the closest road to wave down some help. Suddenly she realised, her cell phone. It had GPS
and a map app she could use to figure out where she was and how to get to the nearest road. Feeling
a bit more confident, she looked around and located her pack in some shrubs. The phone powered on
and started scanning for a signal. No luck. Picking up her pack, she decided to walk away from the
stone; perhaps mineral deposits in the stone were interfering with the signal. She started walking,
keeping one eye on the phone and another on her path. The last thing she needed was to fall into a
ravine or something and get hurt.

After nearly twenty minutes of walking, her phone was still giving her the no signal message. Panic
started to grip her again. It just wasn’t possible. The cave wasn’t that far from the parking lot or
adjacent road, and she should have come across some road, path, or other indication of civilization.
She was about to shout for help when she heard some voices. With a wash of relief, she started to
hurry towards them. She stepped out of the bushes startling the three men who immediately pointed
swords at her. “Swords? What the hell?” she thought to herself. “Um, hello? Can you help me? I
seem to have gotten lost.”

The men looked at her and then each other, which was when she noticed that one of them had long
pointed ears and elaborate tattoos on his face. “Are you guys doing some cosplay thing?” she asked,
feeling confused and finally noticing some other odd things about their clothing.

A snap of a twig behind her had her spinning around to come face to chest with a mountain of
muscle. She looked up, and up, and up until she was looking into the face of someone that was
decidedly not human. His skin was a curious shade of grey and he had horns; great big horns that
swept back and curled around like those of a Bighorn Sheep. Minotaurs aren’t real. Eluned
stumbled back from him and crashed into one of the men behind her as grey man watched her
impassively. He barked out a question in some guttural language that she didn’t understand.

“Karasaad asked who you are and where you came from,” the elf said in a thickly-accented, bored
voice when she didn’t respond.

“What?”
“Oh good, you do speak. Who are you and where did you come from?” the elf repeated.

“I’m Eluned. Um, I was hiking in a cave but uh, I got lost and now I’m here? What – what is he?”

One of the human men snickered but silenced himself immediately and stood up straight when the grey man barked something at him.

“He’s a qunari, and you’re lying. There aren’t any caves around Kont-arr,” the elf stated, his gaze become suspicious and hard like ice, starring into her own green eyes, watching for deception.

“Cant – where?” Eluned asked faintly. “I was in the Cathedral cave and… and I touched a stone. It was humming. But then I blacked out…” she trailed off.

The man who laughed at her earlier reached out and moved her bangs from her face. “She does appear to have taken a blow to the head, perhaps she is having problems with her mind as a result.”

She flinched at his touch and reached up herself to find a stinging cut on her forehead. “I don’t… I’m not…” Light started to flicker in her peripheral view as she started to feel cold. She shivered and glanced at the men before looking up at the big grey one. She staggered to the side and darkness rushed in as she fainted.

Chapter End Notes

Please say hello to Eluned Treherne:

Love to hear from you - comments, questions, or even kudos! Hope you all enjoy!
Eluned wrinkled her nose as she started to wake up. The air around her smelled like a mixture of stale, musty sweat, and sharp greenness of astringent herbs. She rolled her head slightly and listened to the bed filling crackle under her unlike any hospital bed she had ever laid in. She opened her eyes, her head throbbed in response to the light. She really needed to stop the whole fainting – passing out thing. She never fainted before and she had done it at least twice that day. Something tugged at her skin, she reached up and gently prodded at the wound on her head. It had been stitched and there was some kind of ointment or poultice sticking to it.

“Good, you’re awake,” a qunari, Eluned thought it was a woman, commented from the corner of the room. They strode over to the door and barked out a command.

“Where am I?” she asked sitting up.

“You were brought in to the Viddathlok in Kont-arr to recover after you were found in the forest by the Ashaad.”

“Vidda-what where?”

“The Viddathlok. In Kont-arr.” The woman grunted. “The tamassran has questions for you. You will go with this one,” she indicated to the tall grey man, a different one than before, that stood waiting at the doorway.

Eluned stood up, giving herself a moment to let her head to stop spinning. Spotting her pack under the edge of the bed, she grabbed the strap and slung it over her shoulder and followed the male out of the room. She blinked at the bright sunlight that filtered through the leaves high above her head. The road was cobbled in sandy coloured stone and the heat rose in waves from the ground. The buildings were stone built with heavy wooden doors and open windows without any sort of glass or glazing. She slowed down and watched as the people of the area, humans, elves, and qunari, went about their daily business. The qunari she was following stopped when he realised that she was no longer with him. He barked something at her and when she didn’t respond, he huffed, “you follow.”

They walked for a few more minutes until they got to a large three storey building. Statues carved to look like the horned people stood either side of the wide entranceway which opened onto a central atrium. Eluned gawked like a tourist, twisting her head this way and that, none of this looked remotely familiar to her. The architecture, the climate; hell, the people, weren’t consistent with home. Minotaurs were Greek mythology, elves were Tolkien-esque fantasy… She was having a very “Alice in Wonderland” experience but didn’t think that these gruff warrior-like people were going to look too kindly on her “through the rabbit hole” explanation for her presence. She thought frantically
about what she could tell them and then realised that one of the scouts that found her had given her an alibi.

People hurried back and forth between the different parts of the building going about their business. It all looked very bureaucratic. At a door, two qunari stood at attention and stopped their advance. One of the guards said something to her guide, who responded in kind, none of which she could understand but the guard apparently accepted what was said and opened the door, waving them through.

She was so busy looking around that she failed to notice that her guide had stopped until she ran into the back of him. “Oof, sorry,” she muttered, blushing with embarrassment. A human stood at a table to the side of them and looked her over, unimpressed. He was dressed in long robes that draped across his shoulders and hung down the front and back, leaving his arms bared. Around his right bicep, a cuff with geometric shapes were etched into the metal. His head was partially shaved along the sides with the long hair at the top gathered into a long, segmented ponytail falling down the back. His dark eyes were also lined with heavy application of kohl.

Before them, sat a female qunari on a slightly raised dais, who also quietly studied Eluned. This qunari was almost bronze in colour unlike the grey she had seen thus far. The woman’s horns were shorter and swept along the line of her skull and were decorated with delicate metal and chains. Her golden eyes bore into Eluned, who struggled to hold her gaze, but felt like she should.

“Who are you?” the human asked Eluned, snapping her attention from the woman before her.

“Eluned… I’m Eluned Treherne.”

“A-loon-head?” he repeated slowly.

“No, El-EE-net,” she corrected the pronunciation.

“Come here, write it down,” he demanded, holding out a quill to her.

With a quick glance at the woman on the dais, she stepped over beside the man and awkwardly scratched her name on a piece of parchment. She hadn’t written with a proper calligraphy pen with a nib since grade school and her effort on the parchment looked like it. She stepped back to her guide after the man grunted at her and nodded his head, dismissing her from his table.

“How did you come to be here?”

“I was hiking. Exploring a cave and I, uh. I’m not sure what happened. I woke up here.”

He frowned at her. “Why were you exploring the cave? What were you looking for?” The suspicion heavy in his questions.

“Nothing. I wasn’t looking for anything specifically. The cave was just supposed to be pretty.”

He looked at her like she was an idiot. “What happened in the cave?”

“I, um. I looked around. And, um, I’m not sure what happened,” she fumbled with her answer as the woman shifted in her seat. “I woke up in the trees. I banged my head.” His eyes followed her hand as she reached up and gingerly touched the wound on her forehead.

“Where do you come from?”

“I, uh… I don’t remember,” she said. His eyes flicked back up the wound on her head.
“Pouvez-vous comprendre d'autres langues?” he asked suddenly.

Eluned answered in kind, “je peux lire, écrire et parler en français.” She flushed as she realised what she had just done.


She shook her head, baffled. “I don’t know what you are saying.”

The man turned his back on her and spoke with the qunari woman in the guttural language before he turned back to Eluned. “The Tamassran has said you may leave or you may stay.”

“I… I don’t have anywhere to go until I can remember…” Eluned said cautiously.

“Just so,” he nodded. “If you stay, you will contribute to the Qun. You have knowledge of the Orlesian language, as atrocious as your pronunciation is, this could be of use. All viddathari are required to learn the philosophy of the Qun and the language. You will take lessons with the one of the priests daily. You are also required to take military training.” Eluned opened her mouth to protest, but he held his hand up to stall her. “Your role will be determined based on your aptitude. In return for fulfilling your role within the Qun, you will be fed, clothed, and housed by the Qun.” Eluned pressed her lips together then nodded in agreement. “Good. You will be shown to the barracks where you can get settled. Your training begins tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” Eluned flicked her eyes towards the qunari woman, who remained silent and returned the gaze.

“Welcome to the Qun, Eluned,” the man said then waved his hand dismissing her.

Her guide led her out of the building and through a warren of narrow streets and alleyways. Merchants displayed their wares; clothing, personal items, food stuffs, all very utilitarian, on rough wooden benches covered with colourful canopies of fabric lending them some shade from the increasing heat. As they moved through the busy market, Eluned’s stomach gave a loud growl as she smelled the heady fragrance of spices and fresh bread. The guide looked at her and she blushed under his gaze.

She shrugged, “sorry. I don’t remember how long it’s been since I ate anything.” He grunted and strode over to one of the vendors. After a brief conversation, he walked back over to Eluned and slapped a pastry into her hand and continued walking. “Thank you,” she called at her guide. He didn’t respond but continued walking.

The pastry was hot and flaky and smelled delicious. She took a little nibble to test it as she hurried along behind him. She was surprised to find it stuffed with meat and gravy, and a starchy type of vegetable; it reminded her very much like the pasties her mother used to make. She suddenly had a pang of homesickness but pushed down the lump in her throat and finished the pastry even though the taste had turned to ashes in her mouth.

Eluned looked around as they walked. The people seemed happy enough. Everyone looked decently fed, and if not dressed in the same level of finery as she saw in the administrative area, no one looked as if they were poorly off.

“How much farther is it?” she asked, hurrying to keep pace with her much taller guide.

He turned his head and looked at her briefly. Without saying anything, he turned back and continued walking.
She huffed. “Chatty fellow, aren’t you?” she commented under her breath.

They left the market area and into another neighbourhood that certainly looked more military in nature. There was a huge open area surrounded on all sides by long, low buildings that looked very much like old style barracks found back on Earth. The sound of metal hitting metal could be heard from a short distance away, and a mixture of people were sparring in some of the rings to one side. He turned away from the soldiers and pushed open the door on one of the barracks buildings. He waved her inside with a grunt. Eluned slipped past him into the shadowy building and the door closed behind her. She jumped and whirled around, but he was gone.

Unsure what to do, she wandered a little way into the building. It was one long building with beds sticking out from the walls on either side. Beside each bed was a crate, and at the foot a wooden chest. Most of the beds were made but there were a couple that had bed linens piled on the top, still folded, waiting for the next occupant. She sat down on one vacant bed. It crinkled and crunched under her but no critters or other things escaped when she disturbed it so that was a good sign.

The door she came through opened and shut again with a bang. She couldn’t really see the person’s features in the dark but after a moment for their eyes to adjust from the harsh light outside, they spotted her and walked directly to her. She recognised them as the elf she had run into in the forest.

“Ah, the foundling has arrived! Vasheth said that you were here and I came right over.”

“Vasheth? You mean the…”

“Yes. Very friendly, isn’t he?” the elf teased. Eluned couldn’t help giggle. “Oh good, you have a sense of humour. It’s very trying to have a bed mate who’s all doom and gloom,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Excuse me?” she sputtered, slowly getting up from the bed.

“Relax da’len, I was only teasing you! It is a good choice of bed, though. Any further down in the barracks and you’d be close to Richo and he farts and snores all night something terrible! At least here, we’re upwind!” Eluned burst out laughing. “So my little foundling, what’s your name?”

“It’s Eluned Treherne,” she replied holding out her hand.

He raised a brow and grasped her wrist, “El-ooo-ned?”

She shook her head with a smile, “no, El-EE-net. Maybe just call me Ellie.”

“Well met, Ellie. I’m Gelasan.” He let go of her arm and looked at her pack on the bed. “Well, why don’t you stick your bag in the chest, we’ll whip up this bed so no one else claims it, then we’ll go get your allotment of clothing and armour.” He looked at her critically while she put her backpack away. “You don’t look like a two-hander, so are you a stick and board, duel, or a plucker?”

“What?” her forehead pinched in confusion.

Gelasan slapped the heel of his hand to his forehead. Huh, that was a universal – or multi-versal expression. “Creators! They did send me a da’len! Please tell me that you at least know how to wipe your own bum?”

She flushed with embarrassment and at the same time was endlessly grateful that she had in fact done some travelling in countries where wads of toilet paper were not the norm. “Yes, thank you,” she replied indignantly.
“Oh good. That’ll spare us both an awkward conversation. I was asking about your preferred fighting style; sword and shield, duel-wield daggers, or bow?”

“Uh, I’ve never fought before, but I have used a bow. At least, briefly many years ago.”

“Well, you are greener than elfroot, but no matter,” he said throwing his arm around her shoulders to guide her to the door, “we’ll get you whipped into shape in no time.”

“Elfroot?”

Gelasan laughed, “you don’t know the joys of elfroot? Oh, we are going to have fun with you!”

Chapter End Notes

Translations
For the purposes of this fic, I'm assigning languages for the different countries using the most commonly accepted equivalents being French for Orlais, Latin for Tevinter, Italian for Antiva, and Spanish for Nevarra. If any of my translations are incredibly wrong, Google Translate can only do so much, I would certainly be open to a correction from my dear readers.

Pouvez-vous comprendre d'autres langues - (Fr) Do you understand other languages?
Je peux lire, écrire et parler en français – (Fr) I can read, write, and speak in French
Tevene intelligere potes? – (Lat) Do you understand Tevene
Che mi dici di Ativan? – (It) What about Antivan?
Cualquier palabra de Nevarran? – (Sp) Any words of Nevarran?

Updates will likely not be at the same frequency as this but will get posted as I finish and edit them. A random surprise notification if you are a subscriber :)
Eluned was exhausted, but as she lay in her new bed, sleep eluded her. All around her were the sounds of more than a dozen strangers sleeping, snoring, moving around, and if she was not mistaken, at least one couple trying to discretely have sex. She hadn’t shared a sleep area with so many people since she went camping as a Brownie when she was ten years old. She rolled over onto her side and gave a soft gasp in surprise to see a pair of eyes gleaming in the dark, like cat’s eyes, looking back at her.

“Da’len, I can hear your eyes rolling around in your head from here. It would be easier to sleep if you closed your eyes.”

“I’m trying,” she whispered in reply. She closed her eyes. In a few seconds they popped back open as she heard someone shifting in their bed across the barracks from her.

A few moments passed. “Da’len. Your eyes are still open.”

She grumbled and closed them again, resisting the urge to open them to every sound she heard. It seemed that no sooner than she finally fell asleep, someone was shaking her shoulder to wake her up. “Come on, da’len! Get yourself dressed, we’re all out for a run.”

“What? Before breakfast?” she asked confused. She tried on multiple occasions to do that couch to 5K program and failed every time. “I’m really not a runner.”

Gelasan laughed, “you’re going to be a runner now, and you really don’t want to be breaking your fast beforehand. Trust me.” He pulled on his armour and Ellie’s eyes popped open when she considered the extra weight. “Don’t bother with your armour just yet. Don’t need to kill you by making you carry that yet, but you will later like the rest of us.”

She grumbled as she kicked the blanket off her legs and rummaged around in her chest to find her clothing for the day and headed out with everyone else.

Running was hell. The first fifteen minutes were okay, but her sedentary life for the past year and half quickly made itself known as she started to drop back from the group. The morning started to heat up and she soon found herself sweating heavily and feeling nauseous. Another couple were also starting to lag from the group. Suddenly she swerved into the brush alongside the path and threw up.

“And that’s why we run before breakfast,” Gelasan said from behind her. “Gonna live, da’len?”

“Doesn’t feel like it right now,” she complained, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth.
He laughed at her. “Don’t worry, it gets better. Merilie was sick for about a week but she’s over it now. Come on, we’re nearly done.”

They were the last to arrive back at the barracks. Most had already left to get food but a few people were still present.

“Ah, good. Merilie, Reinhard – come on over,” he waved to an elven woman and human man. “I’d like to introduce you to our newest convert. This is Ellie.” Merilie was a tiny woman with palest, white hair that Eluned had ever seen that didn’t come from extensive chemical processing. She had brilliant blue eyes that continually sought out Reinhard. Reinhard was a burly type with a mop of curly brown hair and warm brown eyes. “Merilie and Reinhard joined us a few weeks ago.”

Gelason led them to the communal dining hall. All the tables had large pots of what appeared to be porridge, platters of fresh bread, sliced meats, and fruit. “Eat up,” Gelason prompted. “There won’t be more until the evening meal. Merilie, Reinhard, Ellie will be taking lessons with the priests with you. Please show her around and make sure she makes it back in one piece.” He winked at Eluned.

Merilie nodded, “of course, hahren.” Gelason finished up his meal and left Eluned with the couple. “We should get you a piece of cloth so you can take a bit of food with you from breakfast, but I can take it for today,” Merilie offered softly. Eluned started to protest, but the elf waved off her protests. “You get used to eating twice a day, but there is always extra at the first meal to take for midday.”

“We should go,” Reinhard interrupted. “The priests don’t like it when you’re late. They consider it very disrespectful.”

Merilie slipped her hand into Reinhard’s and the couple led Eluned out of the gates she had entered the day before.

“That name you called Gelasan; hah-ren or…”

“Hah-ren,” Merilie answered, correcting her pronunciation. “It’s elven. It’s a term of respect for someone older or in a position of authority.”.

“Ah. Um, what about ‘dallen’?”

Reinhard smiled. “Da’len means child or little one,” Merilie replied. She saw the expression forming on Ellie’s face. “Don’t be offended,” she hurried to say, “he doesn’t call you that to be insulting. Others might, but he doesn’t.”

They continued their brisk walk into a new area of the city that Eluned hadn’t seen previously. Like the administrative area, the building surrounded a central atrium, but she immediately noticed the different feel of the place. It wasn’t harried like the other buildings but instead a large water fountain stood in the center gurgling merrily and the spray provided some relief from the heat. Huge bronze statues carved in the image of the Qunari stood over the area, male figures holding spears and female figures holding metal censers that smoldered with a sweet odour. Large fabric banners hung from the columns decorated with a geometric symbol on the burgundy fabric.

Eluned followed the couple down a hallway into one of the rooms that was laid out with woven grass mats organized into tidy rows. Several people were already taking their place. “Find us a place and I’ll take Ellie to the priest,” Reinhard told Merilie. “Come on,” he waved his hand at Eluned guiding her to the priest. A wizened man who wore similar robes as the administrator she met the other day, but in a different colour and more sumptuously decorated. His head was completely shaved, and again, he wore heavy kohl on his eyes.
He gave Eluned a once over, and asked, “can you read?”

“Um, yes?” she replied tentatively.

He gave her an exasperated look. “Do you not know if you can or can not read?”

“I… I had a head injury not long ago and forget some things,” she replied. *The head injury explanation seemed like a good story to stick to,* she thought. “Perhaps if I can see a sample of the writing, I would remember.”

The priest grumbled as he dug into a chest pulling out a bound sheaf of parchment and handed it to her. “Read this.”

She gingerly opened the crude book and was relieved to see that she could read the text. “Long ago, the Ashkaari lived in a great city by the sea,” she read aloud. “Wealth and prosperity shone upon the city like sunlight, and still its people grumbled in discontent. The Ashkaari…”

“Yes, yes, good enough. Take your seat,” the priest said.

Eluned followed Reinhard back to the mats that Merilie had procured for them and sat down, cross-legged, curious as to what the lessons would entail.

The sun slowly crept across the floor of the temple over the course of the morning as the priest alternated the lessons with philosophy and history of the Qun. Eluned always had enjoyed history when she was in school, and now having the opportunity to learn a civilization’s history in an entirely new world was utterly fascinating to her. It seemed all too soon, the priest was dismissing them for a break.

“Let’s go. We’ll sit out by the fountain for a bit and eat,” Merilie told her. Reinhard led them to a quiet spot out of the direct sun and went to fetch a pitcher of water for them all. Merilie unwrapped the bundle she had made up a breakfast for them to share, passing out bread, cheese, and bits of fruit while Reinhard poured tin mugs of water for each.

Eluned looked at the couple, they sat side by side and naturally leaned towards each other. “Gelasan said that you hadn’t been in Kont’arr for that long. What brought you to here?”

Merilie looked at Reinhard, who answered, “we were rejected by both our families for our love for each other. My parents were merchants, but they were ambitious for our family. They wanted me to marry the daughter of another merchant that had a well-established trade caravan so that the combined business elements would have gained our families a seat in the merchant guild. I had no interest in the business or the girl even before I met Merilie in the Alienage.”

Eluned’s brow pinched in question.

“An alienage is where all the elves in a city are forced to live. A cramped dark place where everyone practically lives on top of each other. The Alienage is surrounded by walls, to protect us from the humans, but really it’s just to keep us in,” Merilie answered. “I had been betrothed to a neighbour’s boy from the day I was born. It was more important that I gave birth to more elves than be happy.” She turned back to Reinhard when he took her hand and kissed her knuckles. “We were married in secret before we came.”

Eluned smiled at the gesture.

“The Qun doesn’t care what race you are or who you are with so long as you fulfill your purpose. Here we can be together,” Reinhard concluded. “Come, it’s time to go back for the next session.”
They resumed their places on the mats in time for a new priest, an actual horned qunari this time, to arrive and instruct them in the language. More experienced students paired off with less experienced students to parrot words and phrases back and forth.

Eluned found the language confusing. It didn’t seem to have a rhythm that she could figure out, it didn’t have a uniform conjugations or tenses; it almost seemed like the language was conceptual or based on metaphor. She quickly had to stifle a giggle as an errant thought crossed her mind, “Temba, his arms wide! Darmok and Jelad at Tenagra.”

“Shanedan, hello. Panahedan, good-bye. Saam, yes. Raas, no. Vat, fire. Tic, cold.” They recited words and phrases for hours. She was relieved when the priest called a halt to the lesson for the day, she was developing a headache and had become confused with all the nonsensical words floating around in her head. Gathering up the books she had been given; the Canto give to her in the morning by the priest that taught the philosophy and history, and a beginner level primer with simple words and phrases by the second priest, she asked Reinhard if they were done for the day.

He laughed, “no. Now we go back to the barracks for weapons training.”

Eluned’s brows rose. “I thought Gelasan was joking about that.”

“No, he wasn’t.” He gave her shoulder an encouraging squeeze as they walked back to the barracks. “Don’t worry about it too much. Training is done with wooden weapons, you won’t get injured beyond some bumps and bruises. In any case, the Qun does not believe in women fighters so they aren’t going to press you into the army in that role, but you are expected to learn how to defend yourself. You never know, they might assign you as support to the army or even a trade caravan. Kont-arr is a walled city so it is pretty safe, but outside the walls there are still the dangers of bandits, slavers, and Tal-Vashoth.”

“So, do we do this everyday?”

“Yes, the schedule differs for the different groups of newcomers,” he replied. “There are three groups and we spend our days rotating between learning with the priests, learning the language, and weapons training. You might have noticed other groups coming into the temple during the day and when we left?” She nodded. “The Qun is highly efficient at keeping us organized.”

When they arrived, they headed to the barracks to drop off Eluned’s books and gather their training armour. The couple headed out before her at her urging while she struggled with a bit of armour. Finally giving up, she just gave the last lace a quick tie and hurried out of the barracks to the field.

“Well! The foundling didn’t disappear over the walls, after all,” Gelasan’s cheery voice called out to her.

She flushed as all eyes turned to her as she walked over briskly, still struggling with getting her armour to lay in some semblance of order that would be comfortable. Someone snickered at her difficulty. “Hey, no laughing. Most of you lot didn’t know how to put the armour on either. Richo, start the blade drills. Arruns, help the archers.” He turned back to Eluned, “now, let’s get you organized.” He undid the haphazardly secured cuirass and handed it to her. “Scarf goes on first to protect your neck from the edge of the cuirass. This is more important on metal armour, but you’ll appreciate it all the same with leather. Then the cuirass. Leather should sit evenly front to back. Tighten each side gradually until firm so that it stays centered and in place. Not unlike a corset, actually.”

“Um, I’ve never worn a corset.”
“Never worn…? Curious place you must have come from,” he speculated. She gave a little shrug. “Vambraces,” he said tapping a fingernail on them, “should be done up on the inside, unless you are using a bow, in which case, any lacings or buckles should be on the outside. But with these simple sleeves, it’s of no matter. If you had greaves, they are done up to the back or outside of the leg so not to hinder your movement.” He appraised her. “How are you doing?”

“I think my head is going to explode with all the information today. Other than the brain leakage, I’m good.”

He burst out laughing, “by the Creators, that’s the most colourful way I’ve ever heard anyone say that they were doing all right. Come on, let’s get you swinging a blade.”

Gelasan walked her through how to use a sword; how to hold it, how to swing it, how to defend with it, and how to move with it. After getting the different moves sorted out, he had her take swings at a training dummy while he watched and corrected her. If she thought that the run in the morning was bad, the weapons training was a whole new physical regime that she was woefully unprepared for. All too soon, the sweat was running down her sides as her muscles struggled with the unfamiliar motions. Finally, Gelasan took pity on her when her last swing of the wooden sword completely missed the training dummy and instead spun her off balance and onto her ass in the dirt.

“All right, da’len. No one becomes a master in one day, nor by sitting in the dirt. That’s enough for you.” He scanned the field for a moment. “Merilie! You’re done as well. Can you please show Ellie where the baths are? I’m sure she’d appreciate the chance to clean up before dinner.”

Ellie panted to catch her breath and nodded her head, unable to get a word out.

Gelasan chuckled and gave her a pat on the shoulder. “Well done da’len. Don’t worry, it gets easier.”

Merilie led Eluned to the bath house after instructing her to leave her armour behind and to gather a clean change of clothing. She ducked into the large stone building that had large pools set in the floor. Eluned balked as Merilie shrugged off her clothing, leaving it in a pile on a bench. Merilie noticed her hesitation, “don’t worry. There are only women in here. The men have their own bath house.”

Eluned has always been a very private person, never liked disrobing or showering in the school locker rooms growing up, always feeling self-conscious about her weight and shape, but she needed to get over that. She kept her back turned to the room as she got undressed then quickly slipped into the pool keeping her eyes averted from everyone else.

Merilie handed her a little tub of unguent. “For your hair. Makes it nice and shiny. Do you need any help?”

“Thank you, no,” she squeaked in reply. *Yup, there were a lot of things she was going to need to get used to and fast.*

Chapter End Notes

For those of you have have subscribed to my story (thank you!), you may have received a notice about changes to the first two chapters. I’ve just altered the titles and chapter summaries now that I have figured out the theme of my chapters going forward.
How are you enjoying the story so far? Any questions or anything confusing that I should expand on?
Eluned was utterly exhausted. On the plus side, she was so tired at the end of every day that sleeping was no longer much of a problem. She was simply too tired to notice or even care about the sounds the other people in the barracks made. For the last eight days, it had been a constant routine of learning and hard physical exercise; she was beginning to wonder if she could survive it as her body protested constantly.

She grumbled and turned over as a hand shook her shoulder. She held on to her blanket with an increasingly firm grip as someone tried to pull it off her. She rolled back over to face them and cracked open an eye. Gelasan stood over her with a big grin, “out of bed, Ellie. We’ve something new for you today.”

She yanked the blanket from his hands and pulled it up over her head. *Out of sight, out of mind – works for ostriches, right?* Gelasan chuckled. “Da’len suits you better than I had initially imagined.”

She threw back the blanket and shot him a scowl. “I am not a child, hahren!”

He chortled, “oh, look who’s been learning Elven too! Up, up! You’ll like this, I promise.”

She got up and joined everyone for the morning routine of running and then breakfast. After eating, she started the get up from the table to head to the temple when she realised that no one else was making any moves to go anywhere. She slowly sat back down and looked at Gelasan expectantly. He smiled at her, “today is our ‘ten-day’.”

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

“In the Qun, every tenth day,” he explained, “is given as a rest day. Each group is on a different rotation for their ten-day so that there are always people available to do the jobs needed to keep things running smoothly. Today is our ten-day, there are no classes, no language lessons, no sparring.”

“So you’re telling me,” she questioned slowly, “that every tenth day I can go back to bed after breakfast?”

Gelasan laughed, “I’ve never met anyone that liked to sleep as much as you do, da’len.” He shook his head, “at least once you started sleeping,” he amended. “You could do that, but we thought we’d show you more of the city.”

“Oh, yes please!” Eluned was eager to see more of the place other than the same route to and from the temple she had been taking with Merilie and Reinhard every day.
Gelasan led her, Merilie and Reinhard, and Arruns, who invited himself to join them, out of the compound, into the city. They followed the path through the market that Eluned vaguely remembered taking in reverse with Vasheth on that first day when she woke up in the healing center. Before they reached the administrative buildings; however, he turned a different way and the city started to head downhill. Smaller buildings than the barracks, homes for merchants and craftsmen lined the streets. Tidy wooden structures, most often built to sit above the ground on short stilts to avoid the wet during rainy, sat in orderly rows with wooden paths leading between them off the main throughway.

The sound of chains on metal brought them to an abrupt halt as Gelasan put a hand out before the group, stopping them in their tracks. Before them, a group of qunari bound in chains and masks, were being led on leashes by other qunari. Eluned leaned forward and whispered in Gelasan’s ear, “what…?”

He put his hand up sharply, “shhh. Not now, I’ll tell you after.”

They waited until the strange group had passed them by before continuing their way. They got some food; crispy whole fish on skewers, spicy rice, warm flat bread, and slabs of a juicy fruit very similar to pineapple, then settled under some trees on top of a hill that overlooked the harbour. Reinhard, who disappeared briefly, had reappeared with a pitcher of an alcoholic drink that Eluned could have sworn was sangria.

It seemed very surreal to Eluned to see the ships in the harbour. Just weeks ago, she had been out on a harbour filled with yachts and fishing boats worth millions of dollars, and now she sat above a very different harbour filled with the equivalent of caravels and other ancient ships she didn’t know the names of.

“So those… people we saw earlier in chains… Are they prisoners?” Eluned asked.

“They are saarebas,” Gelasan replied.

Arruns spat into the grass, “fucking mages. Should just kill them all.”

Eluned’s brows rose. “Mages? Like hocus-pocus, bippity-boppity-boo magic? You’re kidding?”

Arruns gave her a dirty look and yanked up his sleeves showing long scars cut into his arms. “No, like blood mages that slice open their slaves to draw on their blood for more power.” He got up and stomped away to the edge of the hill and looked over the harbour.

“Don’t mind him, da’len,” Gelasan said to her, patting her hand. “Arruns was indentured in Tevinter, a country ruled by mages. In Tevinter, mages are celebrated, and blood magic is practiced, if not officially approved. In the rest of southern Thedas, mages are less welcomed and blood magic is strictly forbidden. The Chantry holds that magic must not rule man; therefore, all mages are required to live in their Circles under the watch of the Templars, religious soldiers that protect the people and the mages from each other. The Dalish do not fear magic and the keeper of the clan is a strong mage. The Chantry turns a blind eye there. The Qun is stricter. Any mage, or saarebas as the Qun calls them, are bound and guarded by an arvaarad. They sew their mouths shut so that the saarebas can not corrupt others with their words and are collared to control their magic. It’s a harsh existence, but the Qun does not waste any resource.”

“That’s... barbaric. There were only qunari among those mages that we saw.”

“Yes. No free human or elven mage would dare come near the qunari; they’d be killed immediately.”
She shuddered. “Perhaps a change of subject is required? How did you come to join the Qun, hahren?”

He barked out a laugh, “I thought you wanted to change the subject, da’len? I was caught by Tevinter slavers.” She flushed with embarrassed. “It’s all right, you couldn’t have known. I was out hunting for my clan when I had the misfortune to get cornered by a large group of slavers employed by some magisters. I managed to get the others in my hunting party away from them but got caught in the end. Part way to Tevinter, a qunari ashaad fell on them and freed us. Those that had homes to return to did, and the rest of us, joined the Qun.”

They fell silent for a few minutes, no one sure what to say to each other so instead they watched the activity down on the harbour.

“Now, now! We didn’t come out here to be glum,” Gelasan tried to cheer them up. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of cloth. “Our friend, Ellie, doesn’t know about elfroot.” Arruns turned around and grinned, much to Eluned’s surprise. He set the cloth on his lap and rolled the plant into a bundle then lit it and passed it around the group. Eluned giggled to herself; even in a completely different world, people still found a way to find a buzz.

Eluned settled into the routine of the barracks over the following weeks and enjoyed exploring the city with Merilie and Reinhard, or the whole group on their regular days off. She and Merilie, who had a talent for plants, started growing their own little plots of elfroot and few other medicinal herbs to supplement their resources. Gelasan would occasionally share his knowledge of plants gained from his years with the Dalish, his mother having been knowledgeable about all manner of green things as well as the darker uses of the same.

Some evenings they would sit around sharing stories, the elves would tell stories about their pantheon, Arruns would tell gleeful stories about magisters humiliating themselves, and Eluned would tell them fairy tales. Other evenings, they played cards; gambling with bits of copper, trinkets, and little things they had on hands of Wicked Grace.

Gelasan sat down at the table while Eluned was teaching Merilie how to play gin rummy. “The tamassrans will start conducting their evaluations tomorrow,” he told them quietly.

Eluned put her cards down and turned to him. “So what does that mean?” she asked with concern.

He patted her hand, “none of you have anything to worry about. They are just coming to make their observations and make decisions about further training and specialisations. You have all been progressing well with your training. You and Merilie will not be asked to continue weapons training beyond the ability for self defense because the Qunari do not belief in females becoming warriors.”

“That’s… rather sexist. Females are just as capable.” He gave her an amused smile. “Not that I have any personal interest in fighting or killing,” she backpedalled.

“Don’t worry, da’len. I’m sure they’ll be more interested in your knowledge of the Orlesian language although you have shown talent with the bow.”

She snorted a laugh. “That… administrator… said my accent was atrocious.”

“Perhaps, but you still understand the language and it could be valuable to the Ben-Hassrath.”

“Ben-Hassrath?”

“Yes, they are…” Gelasan pondered how to explain so not to frighten them. “The Ben-Hassrath are
part of the Ariqun, the priesthood. There are three branches within that deal with intelligence, enforcement, and education. With your knowledge of that language, you would be useful for intelligence gathering. You are human so are better equipped to move within the human and elven peoples of Orlais. It would give you an opportunity to travel which I think you would enjoy.”

“What about Merilie and Reinhard?” Eluned asked looking to her worried friend.

“They won’t separate us, will they?” Merilie fretted, picking at the cards in her hand nervously.

“I wouldn’t worry too much there either. You have a great aptitude for herbs and potions, Reinhard has experience as a merchant. You will both be well suited for roles together.” He stood up from the bench, cast a smile to Merilie and gave Eluned’s shoulder a squeeze. “I don’t want either of you to dwell on it, I just wanted to let you know that they were coming so you wouldn’t be surprised and worried that something was wrong. It’s all going to be fine.”

There was indeed an increased observation by members of the priesthood over the course of the next tenday. Eluned noticed that there were a pair of priests that watched and took notes over a three-day period, then a different two took over for their allotted three days, and then a final pair for the last three-day period. The priests watched everyone and how they performed when instructed on the Qun’s philosophy, their ability understand and speak Qunlat, and their ability with the physical training.

The priests didn’t interact with them at all, ask them questions about their likes or dislikes, their own thought about their strengths and weaknesses, and while Eluned understood that this was how their society worked and had functioned, seemly successfully, for centuries, it still rubbed her the wrong way that these people would be deciding the course of her life based on a few hours of observation. Unfortunately, she wasn’t sure what her alternative was at that point; she didn’t know anything else about the world she had been dropped into other than what the Qun had taught her about it, and she had no contacts outside. Truly, the best she could hope for was Gelasan’s prediction that she’d be tapped for the Ben-Hassrath. At least that would afford an opportunity to see the greater world and perhaps an means to make her own way in the world, especially since she had no idea of how to possibly return to her own.

“Ellie,” Gelasan called her from her archery training. “The tamassrans would like to have a word with you.” She cast a look at the elf who gave her an encouraging smile in return before he walked away, leaving her with the two.

“You are the one called El-oo-ned?” one of the qunari asked, glancing at a parchment. Eluned dubbed her Tama One.

“El-ee-net,” Eluned replied, correcting the pronunciation. “Yes.”

“Have you had any further recollection how you came to be here?” the other asked her.

“No. Nothing beyond what I told the first priest I met with my first day here.”

“You hold no allegiance to Tevinter, Orlais, or another country?”

“Um, no,” she answered, trying not to be nervous about where the line of questioning was headed.

“And yet you can speak and understand Orlesian. How is this so?” Tama One snapped at her.

Eluned looked at her and decided that sticking with as close to the truth as possible was the safest option. “I learned the language later, as an adult, but I have no recollection of Orlais. I don’t know how or why I would have learned Orlesian.” She did learn French as an adult, and well, never had
been to Orlais or even knew where to point to it on their maps so it was all *technically* true.

Tama One grunted, seemingly dissatisfied with the answer but had no cause to doubt it; Eluned had been careful not to reveal anything about her life before arriving so there shouldn’t be any way that they would know that she was from another world entirely.

“You’ve shown a strong proficiency for the bow. You’ve used it before?” Tama Two asked her.

“It feels familiar to me, but I don’t have any memories of using one and certainly didn’t have the calluses or physical strength to have used one,” she replied showing her hands which were only now after twelve weeks of training beginning to harden to use of the bowstring.

“You will continue your instruction in Qunlat and will commence lessons to improve your Orlesian. You will also be assigned to an ashaad to gain experience in the field. If you show an aptitude in this area with further training, you will be assigned a role within the Ben-Hassrath.”

“As you say, tamassran,” Eluned bowed her head to the two qunari as they left.
Emergence

Chapter Summary

Emergence

*noun:* the process of coming into view or becoming exposed after being concealed

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: GRAPHIC DEPICTION OF VIOLENCE (torture, execution). We're getting into the realm of magic within the Qun; the Qun is brutal on mages and that's where we are going. Be warned.

I’m sorry…

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Venhedis! Futuo vos vacui ad!” Arruns snapped at Eluned, startling as she slid down the embankment to the ledge he and Gelasan were perched on.

“Rude. I wouldn’t do that with you, to the Void or elsewhere,” she shot back. Gelasan bit back a smile.

The man grumbled and left to do his circuit. “What’s his problem?” she asked Gelasan as she settled into position next to him.

“Don’t worry about him, da’len. His anger isn’t with you, but with me.”

“Why is he upset with you, hahren?”

“I discontinued our relationship. He thinks you are the reason although I’ve told him otherwise.”

“I’m sorry. Is he going to be a problem for you?”

“Don’t worry about him, the Karasaad will consider my words with greater weight than Arruns’. Go on now and do your last circuit before the next watch takes over.”

When Eluned reported in at the end of her watch, she noticed that double the number of scouts were going out on the next. She dropped off her armour at the barracks and headed to the baths to clean up before supper. She was just settling into one of the baths at the back of the bathing house when Merilie slipped in. The elven woman was quiet and looked upset.

“Merilie, are you alright? Has something happened?”

“Oh,” she said with surprise. “I’m sorry lethallan, I was distracted.” She glanced around the bathing house to the other women present. “Can we speak after?”
"Of course," Eluned nodded, keeping a close eye on her nonetheless.

After their bath, they walked around the compound taking the route past Merilie’s little garden on the way to the barracks. “Merilie – you are not yourself.”

Merilie looked around like she was afraid of someone overhearing her. She pulled Eluned down on the pretense of looking after the plants. “Reinhard has been assigned to the karataam, the army. They’re sending him to Seheron!”

“When? What about you?”

“We don’t know yet, it will be soon. I have been assigned as an apprentice to one of the apothecaries here. And…” Merilie stopped abruptly as she burst into tears.

Eluned pulled her into a hug. “Shhh. There’s something else isn’t there?” she coaxed from the elven woman.

Merilie sniffed. “Yes, I’m pregnant.”

“Oh sweetie, that’s wonderful news!” The elf sniffed harder. “Isn’t it?”

“They take children away from their parents!”

“With the qunari, yes, I’ve heard that. But surely not with the viddatharti, the converts?”

Merilie pulled back a bit from Eluned’s grasp, “there was a woman in the next barracks over that had a baby. The tamassrans took it from her the moment it was born.” She started crying again, “the mother killed herself.”

Eluned pulled her back into a hug, “how far along are you? Have you told anyone besides Reinhard and myself?”

“I’m a little less than three months. You can’t tell anyone about this, not even Gelasan.”

“I won’t but I think you would be safe telling Gelasan – he would help, I know he would. What are you going to do?”

Merilie pulled back again and wiped her eyes. She glanced around quickly. “We’re going to leave,” she whispered. “We don’t want to be separated and we don’t want our child growing up under the Qun. Reinhard overheard the quartermaster down on the docks when he was on duty yesterday. There is a ship arriving in five days time, on our ten-day. Reinhard recognized the captain’s name. We’re going to get on the ship when it leaves to head back to Wycome.”

“That’s risky, going by ship.”

The elf nodded, “we know. But it’s a better chance than trying to go across land and having to deal with the Tal-Vashoth, as well as bandits and slavers, especially if there is only two… or three of us,” she added, looking at Eluned hopefully. “Come with us?”

She nodded slowly, having her own doubts about her place within the Qun. “Okay, yes, I’ll go with you. Now let’s get you cleaned up,” she said brushing her thumbs across Merilie’s cheeks to wipe away the tears. “You don’t need anyone to know that there is something going on.” She gave her a quick hug, “come on. It’ll be okay.”

Eluned and Gelasan sat in their lookout location at the head of the valley. A simple road ran the
length of the valley below them towards Kont-aar and was surrounded by tall trees on either side. It was a good location to watch the traffic in and out of the walled city. The scouting parties had been doubled and Gelasan took her, as the newest scout, with him for their patrol. “Hahren, what is going on?”

He scanned the woods around them for a few moments, then answered her quietly, “the Vints and the Tal-Vashoth are increasing their activity since word has gotten out that the Arishok has been shipwrecked with his kaartaam in Kirkwall. Word is that he won’t leave until he has the Tome of Koslun back and the Qun’s enemies are taking advantage of his absence.”

“Ah, so that’s the reason for the increased patrols.”

“Yes,” he flicked his eyes toward her, “that why Reinhard is being sent to Seheron as well. The insurgents are stepping up their efforts there as well.”

“Merilie told me he had received orders.”

Gelasan nodded. He continued to study Eluned for a few moments before coming to a decision. “You should leave. I’ve told them to go. The Qun isn’t the place for them, and I fear it isn’t for you either, da’len.”

“I… uh…”

“You should go with them. Get to Antiva or the Free Marches, even the southern part of Rivain would be good. Just get away from the Qun.”

“But what about you? You could – ”

Suddenly Gelasan held his hand up, silencing her. He drew her attention to some movement at the end of the valley from their vantage point. “Tal-Vashoth,” he said pointing out the half dozen qunari wearing a mixed assortment of armours and weapons. “Stay here and out of sight. I’m going to circle around to the other side. If they turn back, we’ll do nothing. If they advance, I’ll attack. They’ll turn to face me when I start firing on them, so you can hit them from behind.”

She nodded her head nervously, gripping and re-gripping her bow reflexively. “Don’t worry da’len. You’ve been trained well, and you have Andruil’s own gift with that bow. You’ll be fine.” She nodded again.

She ducked her head down low, peering over the side of the ledge as Gelasan disappeared. It seemed like ages as the Tal-Vashoth entered the valley cautiously. They looked up into the trees, their weapons held at the ready, scanning side to side as they advanced. Suddenly the lead held up a massive fist and everyone stopped behind him. He tipped his head as if scenting the air. He slowly turned his head in her direction and she froze. Shit, he couldn’t possibly know that she was there, she thought frantically.

She kept absolutely still waiting to see if they made any move in her direction, advanced further into the valley, or retreated. The Tal-Vashoth swung his head slowly side to side, like the proverbial bull looking for the matador, scanning the valley walls looking for the ambush. His head tipped to her direction once more briefly before the group started to retreat from their location.

Eluned breathed a sigh of relief when she heard a twig snap behind her. She looked over her shoulder expecting to see Gelasan, although in retrospect, he never would have made that mistake. She squealed in surprise and rolled to the side, desperately trying to avoid the war hammer swinging down at her. The hammer slammed into the ground beside her sending dirt and shards of stone
flying into the air. She pushed away to get enough distance to at least get off a shot with the bow. Her attacker, a qunari that had cut off his horns, snarled at her and brought his hammer down at her again catching the end of the bow, ripping it from her hands. Eluned lost her balance and slid off the edge of the stone outcropping she had been on, sliding down the side of the valley wall. She twisted around, trying to control her descent as the leaves, twigs, and pebbles skidding down before her.

She hit the bottom of the hill and was thrown forward onto her hands and knees on impact. She scrambled forward as she heard the qunari come sliding down behind her and the others of the group hurried towards her location from the valley road they had initially retreated down. She whipped her head around to look for Gelasan but feared calling out to him and giving away his position. The Tal-Vashoth were stalking her, no longer rushing headlong, but brazen in their confidence against the lone, unarmed human. Eluned realised that she was going to die.

She backed away from them until she found her back against a boulder. There was nowhere to go. One of the Tal-Vashoth, the leader she saw earlier, drew his sword and bared his teeth to her in a grin. She closed her eyes holding her hands out in defense when she felt a surge of energy and she pushed it away from her. There was a ferocious roar and she opened her eyes to take a peek at whatever had arrived to save her. Fire whipped before her like great snakes, twisting and snagging at the Tal-Vashoth as they tried to flee. The qunari with the sword and the one that followed her down the hill lay dead where they had stood, smoldering corpses that collapsed into qunari-shaped piles of ash and blew away in the hot currents of air from the still burning fire. The others were not so lucky, the ropes of fire chased them and wrapped around them like living tendrils, crushing and burning until they too were nothing but piles of ash.

They were all dead, the fire sputtered and died in her hands.

Eluned stood shaking, staring at her hands in horror. The acrid smell of burnt hair, fabric, and scorched meat rolled over her making her gag. What had she just done? She jumped when a hand grasped her shoulder, spinning her around.

“Da’len, you must run,” Gelasan urged her desperately. “You are mage. They will kill you.” Eluned shook her head in denial and started to cry. “Hush now, we must hurry. Here,” he handed her one of the fire grenades from his belt, “hide this. I’ll tell them that the fire was from one of these and you died in it.”

Eluned carefully carried the grenade to a dead tree trunk at the edge of the burnt area and tucked it in the hollow, out of sight. She hurried back.

“Take my waterskin, and the extra rations,” he said to her as he tucked the supplies into her own gear. “Head south. Keep clear of the roads. The Riviani are friendly to mages, keep heading south will take you to Dairsmuid. There is a circle there, you can learn how to use your magic safely. Whatever you do, stay away from Tevinter and avoid the slavers.”

Eluned was openly sobbing by this point. She grasped his arms, “come with me, Gelasan. Please.”

He pulled her into a hug and kissed the side of her head. “I can’t da’len. It would look suspicious if I was gone as well, and they would hunt us. This way I can cover your trail. Besides, you’re human. You have a better chance finding help than you would with a Dalish elf at your side, even if the Riviani are tolerant of my kind.” He gave her a gentle shove away from him. “Go with the Creators, da’len. Go.”

She stumbled away from him, sniffling wetly. At the edge of the treeline, she turned back and weakly raised her hand to wave to her friend. He stood pinching the bridge of his nose but lowered his hand and nodded to her. He turned away and headed back towards their post to report the
incident, Eluned turned into the forest moving south as he had instructed her.

Neither one saw the dark set of eyes that had watched the whole thing and retrieved the grenade from the tree.

Eluned’s eyes burned, she cried off and on as she tried to carefully make her way through the woods. She knew the circuit that the scouts kept to having followed the same route herself, she stayed away from the outpost locations slipping through the trees. She didn’t understand what she had done. She kept glancing at her hands as if to find some mark or some indicator there as to how she could have possibly cast fire from them.

Magic. She was a mage.

She had scoffed at the idea of magic, that day with the others, but now here she was running for her life and terrified of herself. There were no magic words to call forth what she did, there was just that feeling of energy which she attributes to the magic and surrounded her constantly now, swirling around and through, and she was badly frightened.

As the adrenaline started to leave her body, she felt her legs drag with fatigue. She pulled herself under an outcropping away from any of the paths the scouts took and sat down. Pulling the stop from the water skin, she took a drink and considered her options. There is no way that she could find her way back to where she originally came into Thedas; she has absolutely no idea where that wall of stone was, and it would likely require her to double back closer to Kont-aar which was not safe. Merilie and Reinhard were going to head to Wycome; she hoped that they would have no troubles getting away. If she headed south to Dairsmuid as Gelasan suggested, she could be there in about two weeks since she was not going to travel openly on the road. After getting some instruction on how to handle her magic – *gawd, that was a surreal thought* – she could take a ship across Rialto Bay to Wycome and find them. It couldn’t be that hard to find to find them, could it?

When the two moons crested the edge of the trees, Eluned climbed out of the little depression under the rocks and skirted the edge of the forest as she followed the road by moonlight. She debated whether to keep her armour or leave it behind, in the end she decided to abandon it. It marked her as being part of the Qun so it was ultimately safer to discard that part of her identity. Most merchants and other travellers didn’t move about by night so anyone on the road would be military in nature and she made a wide berth around them.

She rested by day, travelled by night. Sleep eluded her. Her dreams had suddenly become disturbing; the smoldering corpses keep trying to drag themselves across the ground to her where she sat frozen against the boulder. Something *terrifying* taunted her, stalked her from the edge of her dreams disappearing whenever she looked around and she woke up shaking and exhausted.

She carefully rationed the few bits of food that Gelasan had given her, but water was becoming an issue. There were no major rivers, waterways or lakes in that part of Rivain. On the eve of the fifth day on the road, she came across a small village. At the center, was a community well much as she had seen in Kont-aar within the merchant and craftsman communities. Eluned sat at the edge of the village and watched the activity of the residents. There were no qunari present in the village and she watched for any humans or elves wearing any type of armour similar to that distributed to the viddatharti, like herself.

She sat in the trees chewing on the edge of her thumb debating the risk of going into the village for water. Not confident as to when she’ll come across the next town or the next opportunity for water, she settled down until nightfall and watches for any guards on duty in the village. Once satisfied that there is no one watching the well, she carefully worked her way to the well keeping close to the
shadows cast by the buildings. She paused at the edge of a house and examined the shadows around the square, once more checking for any movement or signs of guards.

Carefully, she crept to the well and lowered the bucket all the while glancing over her shoulder and into the shadows jumping at every creak, crackle, and chirp. Eluned chuckled to herself as she pushed the waterskin into the bucket to refill it, at the rate she was going she’d scare herself into prematurely aging.

“Saarebas shoh!” a gruff voice barked from the shadows.

Fuck! She immediately ducked down alongside the well so she wasn’t silhouetted in the moonlight, as she cast about trying to find the source of the voice. She heard a faint creak from the far side from the well moving around behind and to her left. She bolted for the gap in the houses straight in front of her. She felt a sting as something hit her shoulder, but she immediately brushed it away with her hand. She staggered, feeling woozy, as energy that had been flowing around her for the last few days suddenly vanished. She gave her head a shake and pushed her legs harder ducking between the houses only to collide with a solid form.

Eluned gasped, hitting the ground and knocking the wind out of herself, as she scrambled back on her rear end pushing herself away from the large qunari that stepped out of the shadows before her. “Help!” she screamed. She hissed as another wave of dizziness washed over her. The qunari stepped over her, leaning down to grab her; she kicked at his groin, but he blocked the attempt. She sunk her teeth into his hand as he reached to grasp her face.

“Vashedan!” He dropped his weight onto her pinning her to the ground.

“Help me!” she screamed again.

The qunari held her down, taking hold of her head by grasping her jaw and pinning her nose shut while another poured a foul-tasting potion in her mouth when she gasped for breath. He covered her mouth and nose with a single hand holding her stationary while she struggled; she had three options, she could suffocate, drown on the potion, or swallow it. She swallowed the potion, after a moment the qunari released her mouth and nose as her eyes drift out of focus and she lost consciousness.

Eluned jerked awake as the sharp odour of smelling salts were waved under her nose. Her eyes watered, and she moved to wipe the tears away only to find that her hands are bound behind her back where she was sitting against a wall. A heavy weight sat around her neck, and she couldn’t feel her magic. She blinked repeatedly and the qunari in front of her came into focus.

“Ast. Up,” he said grabbing her arm and hauling her to her feet. “We go to the sentencing.”

“Sentencing?” she protested. “I didn’t get a trial!”

“A trial is not necessary. You are guilty of being saarebas.”

She tried to dig in her heels but the qunari simply dragged her along whether she wanted to walk or not. He pulled her down a corridor and out into a courtyard. Several other qunari are present, including the tamassran that had evaluated her and mentioned training for becoming Ben-Hassrath agent just a few weeks earlier.

They dragged her over to a wooden post with a training dummy propped against it. “Show us your magic,” the tamassran ordered her and she felt her magic flow back into her.

She shook her head, “I don’t know how I did it.”
“Show us.”

“I’m telling you that I don’t know how!” Suddenly she screamed as a strong shock jolted through her body from the collar.

“Show us, or you will be punished.”

“It only happened the once!” she protested. “I don’t know how it happened.”

“Again,” the tamassran barks.

Eluned screamed and fell to her knees as she is wracked by pain from the collar. “Please stop,” she cried.

“Get the others,” the tamassran ordered the guard.

Eluned’s eyes widened and she shook her head in denial as Merilie and Reinhard are led out before her. “Noooo…”

“Show us, or they will pay the price.”

Eluned stared at Merilie who looked terrified and confused, “please don’t hurt them! I don’t know how I did it.”

There is a loud crack and Reinhard screamed as he stumbled to his knees, his jaw clenched and eyes screwed shut. Merilie started crying hysterically.

Eluned sobbed, “please…” She turned to the training dummy and held her hands out, concentrating hard trying to make something happen. After a few minutes, she dropped her hands panting at the effort.

Merilie started to whimper and shrieked as another crack echoed around the area.

Eluned whipped her head around to see the elven woman gone white with shock and pain. “Leave them alone,” she screamed in rage, flames igniting along her hands. Pain extinguished the flames on her hands and her magic vanished as the collar activated.

“It is confirmed, it is saarebas. Execute the other two.”

“What? No! No! They’re innocent! You can’t kill them!” Eluned shrieked, trying to lunge away from the qunari holding onto her. Merilie called out to Reinhard, who struggled against the guard that held him.

“They have already been corrupted by its evil in befriending it. They have forsaken the Qun when they tried to leave, proof of its corrupting influence,” the tamassran said. She nodded to the guards that held Merilie and Reinhard.

“No!” Eluned shrieked again, struggling against the restraining hands on her, as the guards pulled out their daggers and with one quick movement slit both of their throats. A spray of blood hit Eluned in the face making her flinch. Merilie’s brilliant blue eyes widened in shock, then slowly her face went lax and eyes dulled as the blood poured down her front. Reinhard struggled for a moment before he too went still. The guard let her go, Eluned’s legs gave out as she collapsed to the stones, sobbing hysterically as her friends and their unborn child died before her eyes. It was her fault. The guards hauled away their bodies leaving long bloody trails across the stones.
“Bring the witnesses.”

Eluned slowly raised her head. What fresh, new hell was this? She is surprised and dismayed to see Arruns and Gelasan led out. Gelasan caught her eye and gave her a sad smile, while Arruns looked confident but refused to look at her.

“Who hid the grenade?” the tamassran asked Arruns.

“She did,” he answered promptly. He looked at Eluned and gave her a smug grin.

“So be it. Take him away for re-education,” the tamassran ordered.

“Wait!” Arruns protested. “You said I would be rewarded!”

“And you are,” the tamassran replied. “You have proven that you have not succumbed to its corruption so will not be executed, but to be certain, you will be re-educated.”

Arruns looked stunned as the guard grabbed his elbow.

“I hope it hurts, you bastard!” Eluned screamed after him.

The tamassran took as step forward and slapped her across the face, “saarebas will not speak.” The guard took Eluned’s elbow, hauling her to her feet and turned her back to the post where the training dummy had been.

Eluned felt the blood drain from her face seeing Gelasan secured to the post. She shook her head in denial, “no, he’s innocent.”

“No, he is not. He betrayed the Qun by not reporting the emergence of saarebas. He betrayed it further by facilitating its escape. He refrained from reporting the corruption of the others by the saarebas. He, too, has been corrupted by its words. Saarebas will fulfill its purpose and execute the traitor.”

“What? No, I won’t kill my friend!” her voice choked with anguish. She shrieked and fell to her knees as the collar activated against her.

“Saarebas will fulfill its purpose. Fire. Now.”

“Fuck you,” Eluned spat between gritted teeth. The collar fired again, sending her to the stones, convulsing.

She gasped for air when the collar stopped.

“Ellie!” Gelasan called to her. “Da’len, you must do this.”

“I can’t hahren,” she sobbed, rolling onto her knees to face him.

“Da’len, you must for your own sake.” She bowed her head. “Da’len, look at me… I’m dead already.” He licked his lips as she looked up at him, she spotted the black residue on his lips and tongue from one of the poisonous plants from Merilie’s garden.

“Silence,” tamassran snapped. “Saarebas will fulfill its purpose. Now!”

Eluned struggled to her feet, tears streaming down her face. “I’m sorry, hahren.” She held her hands up, feeling heat form between them as she locked her eyes on Gelasan’s. Air currents started to swirl around Gelasan lifting his long dark hair around his head. He closed his eyes and cried out in spite
of himself as his skin started to blister. Eluned sobbed, “I’m sorry!” as she pushed hard. A huge fireball erupted instantly silencing the elf and making everyone else stagger back from the intense heat. The collar activated, and she crashed to the ground unconscious.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Venhedis! - Tevene swear, unspecified
Futuo vos vacui ad! - (Lat) Fuck you to the Void
Saarebas shoh! - (Qun) Saarebas/mage stop/surrender!
Vashedan - (Qun) shit
Abasement

Chapter Summary

**Abasement**

*Noun: the action or fact of abasing or being abased; humiliation or degradation*

Chapter Notes

**TRIGGER WARNING:** Non-con body modification (minor). We're getting into the realm of magic within the Qun; the Qun is brutal on mages and that's where we are going. Be warned.

Eluned woke slowly, feeling groggy and stiff as if she had been buried under a great weight. Everything around her, touching her, felt distant; dull and still, as if she was floating in a sensory deprivation tank. She shifted slightly, became aware that her hands were bound together and she only wore a rough tunic with a pair of smalls. Startled, she gasped, struggling for breath under the oppressive weight she felt and looked around the small stone room frantically to get her bearings. A huge qunari male, dark grey with large horns that swept back from his forehead and were decorated with bands of red and gold metals, stepped out of the shadows of the cell from where he stood watching her. He had extensive scars on his body that looked like heat or chemical burns, and his skin had been painted or tattooed with elaborate patterns in the same colour as the metal on his horns. She recoiled from his dark gaze.

“You're finally awake. I am your arvaarad. I've been informed that you have been willful and disobedient since your magic has been revealed,” he said in a casual tone, although for a qunari, it still sounded menacing and growly to her ears. “That behaviour will not be tolerated. You will submit, or you will be punished. You will embrace your purpose under the Qun, or you will die. Saarebas are filled with evil as you have shown by hiding what you are.”

“I didn’t know,” she protested.

He ignored her as if she hadn’t uttered a word. “Your training begins now, bas-saarebas. You will obey me in all things. In return, I will take care of you.” He approached, and she flinched as he reached for her. His hand shot out faster than Eluned expected and she fell back as he struck her face. “You will not recoil from my hand. You have already been fitted with your collar,” he reached out again giving it a tug to bring her attention to it, “it will prevent you from using your magic when not instructed.”

She realised that it was the source of her uncomfortable feeling of disconnection.

“This is your control rod,” he continued, holding up the short, ornate staff before her eyes. The staff was decorated with patterns in red much like his horns. “You are smaller than our usual saarebas, your other restraints are being made; for now, the ropes will do,” he said adjusting their fit around her wrists. “You will remain silent. I am told that you speak much. Saarebas do not speak, you will not
corrupt me with your evil words. You will do as you are told, when you are told, or you will be punished. Do you understand?”

“What? I’m not…” she began to protest as her mind struggled to catch up with the situation.

He growled with a shake of his head, he reached out with the control rod and Eluned screamed as she arched off the pallet, pain coursed through her body. “The leader of your Ashaad had said that you were intelligent and good at following orders. Perhaps they lied and are in need of re-education themselves?”

“No, please…” Eluned screamed as the control rod was activated once more.

“Basra are so stupid, like qalaba. You are now bas-saarebas. Saarebas remain silent and do not speak. You will do as you are told, when you are told. Do you understand?”

She hesitated for a moment then tentatively nodded her head.

“Good. Ast. On your feet.” She stood up, he grabbed her roughly by the elbow and dragged her to the table in the room. “Stand here,” he ordered.

She glanced down at the table as he flipped open some fabric to reveal several thick curved metal needles, a coil of waxy red string, and a dagger. She looked back at him in horror as she realised the rumour about saarebas having their mouths sown shut was true and he was about to do that to her. She stood there trembling as he threaded a large needle, which looked like something you would use to sew canvas not flesh, with the red thread. She shook her head frantically, backing up the short distance to the wall, and raised her bound hands before her in defense.

“Maraas shokra,” the arvaarad growled as he grasped her hair tightly and pushed the needle through the skin below her lip. The needle punched through with a sickening pop and scored a bloody line across her gums as he angled the needle to punch back through above her upper lip from the inside. She squealed in pain and whipped her bound hands up striking his own to stop him from mutilating her. The needle pinged off the floor as it was knocked out of his hand. “You try my patience bas-saarebas.”

He yanked her from the wall, spinning her around and shoved her roughly to the floor. Unable to catch herself with her hands, Eluned’s head bounced on the thin straw pallet, dazing her. Before she could move, he grabbed the bundle from the table and straddled her where she lay, trapping her bound hands against her belly and immobilized under his weight. He rethreaded a needle and pushed it through her lip. She squealed and shook her head. With a hand that dwarfed her head, he gripped her face holding it stationary, continuing to push the needle back and forth through her flesh until her mouth had been completely stitched shut. Eluned whimpered as tears streamed down her temples and into her ears as he worked.

“You bleat like a child,” he commented as he tied off the final knot and stood up. She tentatively raised her shaking hands to touch her mouth. “I would not do that,” he cautioned. “Tearing it out will cause more damage and I would simply sew it up again.”

He replaced the bundle on the table, poured something onto a cloth and roughly wiped the blood from her face. Her eyes watered at the astringent odour and fiery sting of the raw wounds on her face. He pulled her to her feet, untied her hands, then yanked the tunic over her head. Eluned gasped painfully in surprise, raising her hands up to cover her breasts. He slapped her hands down, snapping, “stand still.”

She stood trembling as he wrapped a long piece of fabric around her chest and shoulders firmly.
securing her breasts. Next, he created a complex weave of ropes, bright red that served to warn others that she was dangerous, which covered her chest and back, followed by another set of ropes that wrapped around her biceps, elbows, and wrists. Eluned whined in protest as he pulled her smalls down her legs. She cringed back when he looked her in the eye.

“Silence,” he growled at her.

He dressed her in a loose pair of pants and finished off with more ropes wrapped around her waist and hips. He re-secured her hands behind her back with another set of ropes, then secured a leash to her collar. The arvaarad walked to the door giving the leash a sharp tug. Eluned jerked out of her frozen state and stumbled after him. She glanced down at her bare feet, the leash was tugged again forcing her to follow the qunari out of her cell door.

She hurried to keep up with his longer steps as he led her down a long corridor that had doors distributed at regular staggered intervals. The majority of the doors were open with the cells empty, but one or two cells were occupied by qunari; she saw one kneeling, in heavy bonds and a mask secured to his unusual crooked horns, and another standing over them. A sharp tug had her scurrying to keep up as her pace lagged, her bare feet slapping on the stone floor. Two qunari guards thumped the butts of their spears against the floor acknowledging her arvaarad as the door they guarded was opened.

Eluned blinked at the bright light as she emerged into the courtyard. The arrangement of buildings was similar to the barracks she had lived in previously, but this time the compound was surrounded by high walls patrolled by qunari armed with swords and bows. Along one side of the courtyard stood a row of posts over a shallow stone-lined trench. A saarebas was bound to one of the posts, hands secured above his head, face covered with a mask, mouth stitched shut, and not a single piece of clothing. His arvaarad dumped a bucket of water over him and then proceeded to scrape the water off with some type of stick. Eluned’s eyes widened when she realised that she would likely be subjected to the same treatment. Her steps paused briefly until a sharp tug on her leash corrected her hesitation.

She followed the arvaarad wincing as she stepped on small stones or thorns that pricked the soft soles of her feet. She faltered for a moment when she realised the soot stains on the stones they crossed were from her actions just a day earlier. Bloated flies buzzed lazily over the blood that still lingered within the grooves of the cobblestones.

They entered another area that was even hotter than the open courtyard and rang with hammers hitting metal, the smell of hot metal and sweat permeated the area. They stopped before a human smith that was beating out a sheet of metal. “Itwa,” the arvaarad ordered with a jerk on the leash, pushing her into a kneeling position.

The smith turned around with a momentary glance Eluned’s way, patently ignoring her pleading look. “What do you require?”

“I bring the bas-saarebas for its saaretaar. You have been informed of this?”

“Yes. I have the pieces ready, they will just need some final adjustments now that she… it… is present for fitting.”

Tal’atkat nodded, “proceed.”

The smith picked up a pre-shaped piece of metal and walked around the anvil towards her. Eluned trembled, not knowing what to expect. “Its face.” A rough hand grasped a handful of her hair at the back of her head forcing her to look up at the smith. He placed the metal over her face marking areas
with a grease stick. “Because it doesn’t have horns to secure the mask on, there will be ties to be woven into the hair to keep it in place. Will this do?”

Her arvaarad grunted his assent. The smith handed off the mask to one of his assistants, who flicked a sympathetic look her way, with some instructions before picking up some other pieces of armour.

“Not like the Qun to keep a bas-saarebas. Thought all bas-saarebas were executed by default?” the smith asked casually as he and another assistant held a heavy plate against her chest while he marked it up with the grease stick.

Tal’atkata grunted again. “They are usually neutralized with qamek and put to work as viddath-bas but the Arishok has seen the bas-saarebas in Kirkwall and has seen that they can be controlled. Vidathiss has been directed to convert a bas-saarebas to infiltrate into Seheron and Tevinter.” He shrugged, “it is wasteful to neutralize or execute them if they can be used against our enemies. If this one does not work out, it will be disposed of and the idea dropped.” Eluned heart thudded hard in her chest in fright with the knowledge that they’d kill her if she failed to use magic effectively. She tried to shift her position as kneeling became uncomfortable on the hard floor, she shifted her foot to lower herself down onto her rear end. The leash snapped up hard under her chin, jerking her to attention. “You will kneel.”

The assistant returned with the mask handing it to the smith who once again checked the fit. Once he was satisfied, he handed it back to his assistant who attached leather cords and straps before finally giving it to the arvaarad. Tal’atkata placed the mask over Eluned’s face and proceeded to braid the cords into her hair securing it tightly to her head. The mask wasn’t irritating at first, but soon the sweat on her skin and the firm tug on her hair became more and more uncomfortable.

Worst still, she found that her line of sight was restricted to what was directly in front of her; her peripheral view was obscured completely and limited up and down. She wasn’t someone that suffered from claustrophobia but in that moment, being unable to move, hands bound, and sight limited, she felt a rising panic.

She started to breathe heavily and noisily, gasping occasionally through her stitched lips, feeling lightheaded as she started to hyperventilate. Tal’atkata wrapped his hand around the back of her neck, squeezing lightly, “taashath, calm. Find peace in its purpose.” He rummaged around then stepped in front of her, pushing a hollow piece of reed between her sore lips. He directed her head down and the reed into a cup. “Drink.” Eluned cautiously sucked on the reed, then more eagerly tasting cool water. All too soon, the cup and reed were taken away, but her panic had subsided.

She tried to let her mind lose focus, trying to ignore the growing pains in her ankles and knees from the pressure of kneeling on the hard ground. She tried breathing exercises she used to do in yoga classes but kept getting interrupted as the smith checked measurements of the armour on her and the noises of the forge distracted her.

After what seemed like hours, the smith and his assistants placed the heavy chest plate on her secured to an additional collar and pauldrons on her shoulders. Heavy chains draped over her shoulders securing the lot to a chain that wrapped tightly around her waist. Heavy bracelets of metal, like torcs, were forced over her wrists and bolted shut, then secured behind her back with additional lengths of chain. She was now fully stitched, masked, and bound like the other saarebas she had seen. Her eyes stung with unshed tears, she trembled as the full weight of her situation descended upon her as heavy as the armour itself.

Tal’atkata jerked on the leash, snapping her out of her daze. “Ast,” he commanded with another tug on the leash. Eluned struggled to her feet under the top heavy nature of the armour and staggered at the pain in her knees and ankles. The apprentice shot his hand out to steady her; the smith slapped
his hand away and Tal’atkata triggered the control rod sending Eluned crashing to the ground with a squeal. “Do not tempt to corrupt with your evil, bas-saarebas,” he snarled. The apprentice flushed and backed away as the smith scolded him.

She felt Tal’atkata’s hard grasp on her elbow pulling her back into the kneeling position. “Ast,” he ordered with a jerk on the leash. She struggled to her feet; this time no one reached out to steady her on her feet and she wobbled for a moment before managing to right herself. “Follow.”

He led her back out to the courtyard and through another gateway. There were several other saarebas with their arvaarads; the saarebas were casting magic at targets or creating frightening illusions. Tal’atkata led her to one corner and jerked on the leash. She obediently, albeit clumsily, knelt. He set up a few things and then tugged on the leash again for her to rise. Eluned struggled against the weight and managed to rise without staggering this time.

He released her hands and pointed at straw man, “vat.” She blinked in confusion, trying not to get lost in the too recent memory of burning her friend to death at such a post. “Use fire. Burn it,” he instructed.

Tentatively, she held her hands up and thought about fire. A thin gout of fire arched from her fingers but missed the target.

“Again.”

She concentrated, trying to call on the energetic feeling she associated with the fire, and directed it outwards with a greater push hitting the target.

“Good. Put it out.” She risked turning her head to look at him, not sure what he wanted. “Put out the fire.”

She looked at the fire and concentrated. Nothing happened. She reached out with her senses and felt the fire, feeling the magic within the fire. She pulled it back and yelped as the heat blistered her own hands. Tal’atkata cut off the magic with the collar and thrust her hands into a bucket of water. “Do not pull the fire back to you. Suppress it. Again,” he ordered.

She reached out with her magic again and pressing the energy down until it felt slower. The flames slowly lowered until they flickered and went out with a roll of smoke. She panted with the effort.

“Vat. Again,” Tal’atkata ordered.

Eluned struggled to draw on the power needed to complete the magic he wanted from her. The flames flickered across her fingers but fell well short of the target. Beside her Tal’atkata growled something and she saw him raise the control rod. She shook her head frantically and tried calling the magic again when the wave of pain hit her disrupting any further attempt. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell to the ground, convulsing.

She lay in the dust, panting noisily through her nose and stitched lips. She could taste blood on her tongue and realised that she had bitten the inside of her cheek. The leash was jerked again forcing her to her feet and again, she was ordered to cast fire on the target. She struggled, lightheaded, but managed to finally hit the target with a weak blast of fire satisfying her arvaarad.

They returned to her cell. “Itwa,” Tal’atkata ordered. “Bas-saarebas will remain on its knees until I return. If it moves from this position, it will be punished. Any time I, or anyone else enter the cell, it will assume this position. Is that understood?” Eluned nodded her head once. “Good.”

Tal’atkata secured her leash to the ring in the floor in front of her and left the cell, bolting the door
behind him. She sat on her heels and knees, carefully flexing her ankles to ward off the pain as she waited. When she heard the bolt, she quickly checked herself making sure she was in the same position as before.

He didn’t say anything when he entered but pushed a thick reed, the size of her finger, between her lips and placed a cup below it. “Mashev, eat.” She tipped her head slightly to angle the reed into the cup and saw the contents of the cup; it looked like a thin grey gravy mixed with porridge. She sucked on the reed and gagged on the taste and texture pulling back from the cup. The contents of the reed spattered on the floor in front of her. The mixture left an unpleasant greasy feel in her mouth and she fought back the urge to gag again. The cup was pushed under the reed again. “Mashev.” Eluned gave her head a slight shake in protest. Tal’atkata pulled the reed from her lips. “So be it. We’ll see if it feels the same the next time it is offered food.”

He placed the cup and reed on the table and returned to her, releasing the leash from the floor. With a jerk on the leash, she scrambled to her feet again. Methodically, he released the chains and moved the saaretaar from her shoulders. Eluned couldn’t help the groan of relief that escaped as the weight was removed from her body. Her hands were separated and faster than they went on, the ropes and fabric were stripped from her body leaving her bare. A tunic, barely more than a square of burlap with holes cut for arms and head, and no more comfortable, was pulled over her head. The chain went back on around her waist and her hands secured to it in front of her.

Tal’atkata led her to her pallet. With a few adjustments, he secured the leash to the wall above her bed long enough to lie down and get to the bucket a few feet away, but not long enough to get to the door or anywhere else in the cell. Her hands were kept short enough that she couldn’t touch her collar nor could reach where the leash was secured to the wall. Without another word, he turned and left, taking the rejected cup of food with him.

The cell door closed with a bang and the bolt shot across leaving Eluned alone and in the dark. She ached all over. Her lips, swollen and raw from the stitching, burned. The sweat and tears under her mask itched where they dried and stuck to the metal secured over her face. Her scalp ached from the constant tug on her hair by the weight of the mask. Her shoulders and back spasmed from the weight of the armor she was unaccustomed to wearing. Her hands throbbed from the botched attempt to put out the fire. Tender patches of skin from the ropes stung as the rough fabric of her tunic rubbed against them, and her knees and ankles ached from the constant pressure of kneeling for so long during the day. She lay down the best she could, trying to ignore the chain that dug into the small of her back where it wrapped around her waist. Awkwardly, she rolled onto her side and pressed her hands against her stomach that cramped up with hunger. Sleep eluded her as she stared into the darkness of her cell.

Exhausted, the tears welled up in her eyes again. “Nothing is worse than death. Survive and find a way to escape,” she told herself. “Do not fear the dark. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
arvaarad - Qunari that watches over mages, "one who holds back evil"
bas-saarebas - thing-dangerous thing, non-Qunari mage
Ashaad - scout
Basra - rude term for non-Qunari people
Qalaba - type of cow that the Qunari breed known for its stupidity
Ash - up, rise
Maraas shokra - There's nothing to struggle against
Itwa - down, fall
Tal’atkata - the arvaarad's name (I'm not going to spoil what it means at this point)
anaan esaam Qun - Victory to the Qun
saaretaar - I'm making this one up, "saare" prefix associated with mages meaning
dangerous, "taar" prefix used to describe heavy armour
qamek - substance used to functionally lobotomize prisoners or resistant converts, could
be similar to lyrium used to tranquilize mages
viddath-bas - mindless laborers treated with qamek
Vidathiss - A rank within the priesthood; a re-educator for captured and conquered
peoples
taashath - calm
vat - fire
Mashev - eat
Endurance

Chapter Summary

**Endurance**

*Noun:* the fact or power of enduring an unpleasant or difficult process or situation without giving way

Eluned had no idea what time of day it was, nor how much time had passed since the arvaarad had left her chained in her cell. She had spent most of the night shivering as the heat from the stones slowly leached away in the long hours of the dark, sleeping only fitfully when she could find a comfortable position on the thin straw pallet on the floor with the threadbare blanket pulled over her. No daylight crept into her cell but gradually the stones began to warm giving her some idea that it was now daytime again. Every sounds beyond the cell door had her jumping out of her skin, not knowing if one of the metallic sounds was the arvaarad pulling the bolt back to open her door.

The hunger pangs from the previous evening had subsided only to return in full force and no longer eased. They brought to her attention that she had an additional problem; she needed to use the bucket, but without her hands free… Tears pricked at her eyes, it was beyond humiliating. She gritted her teeth, there was no avoiding it but if she had her choice she’d rather attend to the issue without him standing over her while she did. Cringing, she did what she needed to do and then paced with nervous energy within the confines of her leash. She snorted to herself, how ironic it was that as much as she hated the daily running, she wanted nothing better than to go and run off the jitters she was feeling presently.

The bolt slid back in the door and Eluned turned to face whomever was opening the door to her cell. The arvaarad walked in and looked at her with a frown. She shifted her on her feet uncertain in what she should be doing. The collar came to life and she fell to her knees, her hands jerking fruitlessly toward her neck. “How disappointing that it forgets so easily. Saarebas will kneel any time someone enters the cell. Does it understand?”

She nodded her head.

He strode into the room and reached for the collar. She never realised that most qunari actually had claw-like nails rather than flat nails, she started to pull back from his hand, and at the last moment, remembered not to pull away. She froze with only the slightest flinch when he grasped the leash under her chin. “Good.” He unbound her hands and stripped off the night clothes, then re-secured her hands.

Tal’atkata prompted her to her feet and led her to the cell door. She dug in her feet at the edge of the door. While she had gotten less shy about bathing in the communal bathhouse with the other women in her barracks, she didn’t want to be paraded around the compound chained and naked. He growled at her and gave the leash a firm yank pulling her through the door. Eluned bit back the whimper and followed him as she had no doubt that he was drag her by the neck if necessary. At least he left her hands bound before her, she lowered her head, rolled her shoulders forward to hide her breasts somewhat by her arms, and let her hands fall obscuring her pubic hair.

He directed her over to the stone trough and pulled her hands above her head, securing the chain
between them to the post. She gasped as he dumped a bucket of cold water over her, spun her
around to face the post and dumped another bucket over her. She shivered and flinched as he rubbed
handfuls of sand and natron over her skin to clean her which quickly became painful under his heavy
hand. She gave a squeal and jerked away, completely mortified, when he grabbed a butt cheek and
pried them apart to wash her. “Stand still,” he growled at her, delivering a stinging slap to her ass at
the same time. He spun her around and repeated the process on her front. By the time he had
finished washing her and led her back to her cell to dress her in the saaretaar, she was hiccupping
back the tears, she felt so humiliated and violated.

Weighed down by the additional chains and armour, Eluned knelt on the cobblestones of the
courtyard beside her arvaarad. A female qunari wearing what she recognized as robes of the
priesthood approached them. “Why have I been summoned here, arvaarad?” the woman asked,
flicking her eyes to look at Eluned.

He handed her a piece of parchment. “Orders from the Vidathiss to convert a bas-saarebas. You
have been requested for this purpose as the imekari you train become some of the strongest
saarebas.”

“Yes, I train imekari. Children. Not mature bas,” she protested while she continued to read the
parchment. She frowned. “Is this accurate? It was slated for the Ben-Hassrath when the magic
manifested?”

“Yes.”

“There were no signs of magic prior to this event?”

“What is known has been reported there. Witnesses –” Eluned flinched at his words. The tamassran
gave her a sharp look. “were interviewed. No magic use was observed by any of the priests, trainers,
or its karasten.”

The tamassran pursed her lips in thought observing Eluned who tried to keep her eyes down but got
catched glancing up at the woman. “Very well. I will train with it every other day –”

“Every day, tamassran. Starting today.”

She shook her head, “pushing it too soon will only burn it out unless you wish to force feed it
lyrium?”

Tal’atkata gave her a dirty look.

“Just so.”

“Vidathiss wants a field test within three months.”

“Fine, I will train with it every day, but the rest of that day must be given to meditation to achieve
understanding of the lesson and recover its strength, until I deem that it has the strength for further
exercises with you.”

Tal’atkata grumbled at her requirements but acquiesced; he had had one of the saarebas that she had
trained, and it had been one of the best he ever handled until it was cut down in the field in Seheron.
He hoped that the bas-saarebas would propel him to a higher rank.

She held her hand out to Tal’atkata, “the control rod.” When he protested, she argued, “do not
presume to tell me how to do my job. I have trained saarebas for twenty years. You handle the
finished product. I must have total control to properly monitor the training sessions.” Tal’atkata grumbled further but he handed over the control rod and leash. “Up,” she prompted Eluned.

“Where are you going?” Tal’atkata demanded.

“I’m not going to stand here in the sun all day while I train the saarebas. I’m taking it to the other side of the courtyard. You are welcome to observe,” she replied leading Eluned across the hot stones and into the shade of the buildings. She signalled for Eluned to kneel and then sat in front of her on a chair. “I am known as In’dabir. You were tapped for the Ben-Hassrath so I know you are intelligent. We have little time to train you to fulfill your purpose. There will be no games between us. The same rules apply as with your arvaarad; you will not recoil or evade from my touch, you will kneel when I enter your cell, you will remain silent. You can answer questions with a nod or shake of your head. You will make an honest attempt of any magic I require of you; I will not punish you for failure, but you will be punished for not trying. Do you understand?”

Eluned nodded.

The tamassran tipped Eluned’s chin up and studied the green eyes of the saarebas before her. “You may also look at me. In fact, I prefer that you do so I can see if you understand.” She released her chin and then picked up her hands, turning them over, noting the reddened and blistered skin from the mistake she made trying to put out the fire the previous day. “Do you know how to draw on your power in order to channel and direct it?”

She shook her head.

“All right, we’ll start there.” She picked up the control rod and did something with it. “You can feel the energy around you?”

Warmth swirled around and through Eluned like a caress. She nodded.

“This is the source of a saarebas’ power. Close your eyes and envision pulling that power around yourself and pushing it into your center. A continuous trickle that you can draw on to fill the receptacle at your center. Do you feel that?”

Eluned nodded, her eyes closed in concentration.

“Now hold a hand out before you. Envision a candle wick floating over your hand. Now feed some of that energy into the wick to light it.”

The chain on the shackles clinked as she lifted her hand, momentarily distracting her from holding the power at her center. In her mind’s eye she pictured a little bit of a wick, waxy and white, floating over her hand. Sucking on the inside of her lip, she concentrated on pushing the energy into the wick. The poof of flame that popped over her hand startled her into opening her eyes as the little fireball dissipated almost immediately.

“Good try! Close your eyes again. Now feed a small continuous stream into that candle wick. You want to keep the wick fed and lit.”

She closed her eyes again and pictured the wick again. She concentrated, trying to feed a little bit of continuous energy; sweat prickled along the edges of her hairline as she tried to flex this new muscle. The corner of her mouth quirked up as she felt the sensation of a little flame flickering over her palm.

“Keep feeding it gently and open your eyes,” In’dabir said softly. She gave a soft gasp as she saw that the green eyes had turned golden with the power within. “Now feed a bit more power into the
flame making it bigger.”

Eluned pushed a bit harder and the flame flared suddenly and flickered back to a small candle sized flame.

“Steady. Keep the stream of energy but make it a bit bigger, gradually.” The flame steadily grew until it was a ball the size of an orange. “Good. Now cut the power off from the flame but keep it contained within yourself. Don’t let it leak away from you.”

Eluned closed her eyes, focusing on extinguishing the flame without losing her grasp on the magic altogether. As soon as the fireball went out, In’dahir ordered her to light the candle flame immediately. After about thirty seconds, the flame ignited over her hand again. She practiced that over and over until the hesitation between extinguishing and igniting the flame was only a few seconds. Suddenly the power she contained vanished, she shuddered and choked at the sensation of it being ripped away.

“You will become accustomed to the power being cut off in time. That is enough for the first day.”

Eluned looked up, surprised, but when she looked around the courtyard noticed that the shadows had moved significantly from when they first started. Hours had passed, and she hadn’t realized, not until that is, she tried to get up from kneeling for so long. She groaned as the blood flow rushed back to her legs.

The tamassran handed the leash and control rod back to the arvaarad, who had remained quietly in the shadows watching the entire session. “You should walk it for an hour or so to restore its movement before allowing it to meditate.”

Tal’atkata grunted in response, securing Eluned’s hands behind her back and gave the leash a tug to urge her forward. She hurried with a quick glance back at the tamassran before quickening her stride to keep up with the arvaarad.

Around the compound other saarebas were being trained, exercised, or otherwise occupied with tasks set out by their arvaarads. She spotted the saarebas with the crooked horns from the cell across the hall from her; leaves floated over the ground around him as little forks of lightening shot upwards causing the leaves to pop in sparks. She slowed down to watch completely fascinated. A sharp tug yanked her attention away. “Pay attention saarebas,” Tal’atkata growled at her.

He led her back to her cell, secured the leash to the floor and left, closing the door behind him. Eluned waited, kneeling on the floor and unable to move from the spot, for the arvaarad to return. She shifted off her knees to get move comfortable when the bolt on her cell door slid back. She shifted back onto her knees wincing at the pain. Tal’atkata flicked a look at her, placing a cup and reed on the table, then he stood there with his arms crossed over his chest and watched her. Her stomach growled in response as she realised that the cup would be food for her. She studied him for a few minutes unsure of what he wanted, finally she dropped her head and waited.

The moment her head dropped, he stepped forward and begin the process of removing the heavy armour from her. If she thought she hurt the day before having worn the armour for a few hours, it was becoming much worse. She was relieved as it was lifted away and subtly twisted and stretched to try to work out the kinks from bearing the weight all day. Tal’atkata stacked the armour and picked up the cup and reed, pushing the reed between her lips. She dipped her head again to the offered cup. It didn’t look any better than the day before, nor did it taste any better, but she kept her head down and the reed in the cup while she struggled to consume what was offered while suppressing her revulsion for the taste and texture of the contents. She knew full well that if she was to have any chance of surviving and escaping, she had to keep up her strength; that meant eating
even if she found the food to be revolting.

“Much better,” Tal’atkata commented grudgingly.

She awkwardly scraped her tongue across her teeth to try to rid herself of the unpleasant greasy feel left behind by her meal while her arvaarad adjusted her chains moving her to the straw pallet.

“You will meditate and then sleep.” He turned from her after securing the chains to pick up the cup and left the cell, bolting the door behind him.

She sat on the pallet, staring into the dark in the direction of the door. What was she to meditate about? The magic she couldn’t feel thanks to the collar? The magic that was the source of her misery and suffering? The magic that responsible for her friends’ deaths? Or the magic that gave these people the permission to reduce her to less than a sentient being? Resentment and anger curled through her veins as readily as her own blood flowed with every heartbeat. With a huff of disdain, she lay down on the pallet and wiggled around until she could pull the thin blanket over her and closed her eyes to sleep.

Her days began to blur together within the rigid structure of her confinement; her life as narrow as the view of the world permitted by the mask. Her day started with Tal’atkata bathing and dressing her for the day, sometimes he had food for her, sometimes he did not. It seemed like it depended on some sort of arbitrary standard that she had to meet in order for her arvaarad to deem she was deserving of food.

Lessons with In’dabir progressed, and for the most part, the tamassran seemed satisfied. Eluned showed a definite strength for fire-based magic but had some limited success with ice and spirit magics. Lightening escaped her entirely. No matter how many times she attempted to channel lightening, no matter how often she was punished with the collar for failing, she couldn’t find that magic to call upon. As training progressed and her limitations found, whispers found their way into her mind to fight back against the cruel treatment. She didn’t know where the whispers came from, from her own mind or something else that came with the magic. The whispers were silent when the magic was cut off and so she feared that she was being stalked by something else, something that had hunted her in her sleep when she first ran after the magic manifested and now found her again.

Resentment and anger burned within her as surely as her magic when they permitted her to exercise it. With all that she struggled with, she found the only highlight to her day was the occasional glance of Crooked Horns, as she had started to think of him. He was the only one that made and held any eye contact with her, he had the most gorgeous silvery eyes she had ever seen. Whether true or not, it seemed that he was the only sympathetic soul in the place.

The bolt on the door snapped back. Eluned fumbled getting into the proper kneeling position as Tal’atkata entered the cell. She didn’t know what time of day it was, but the stones still felt cooler than when he normally showed up. Whether that was because of the time of day or weather, she had no way of knowing until they went outside, not that she really cared.

After being dressed for the day, Tal-atkata led her out to the courtyard and ordered her to kneel. Other arvaarads and their saarebas were also gathered in the courtyard; saarebas kneeling in a wide circle, their arvaarads standing behind holding the leashes and control rods. Eluned carefully looked around and counted nine other saarebas. She had never seen all of them in one place before and had no idea how many others were in the barracks. With all the heavy armour and masks, she had no real way to tell one saarebas from another, with the exception of Crooked Horns, who was kneeling to her left. Several soldiers, enough for each saarebas also stood around the outside of the circle. Unease crept up her spine as she wondered why they were gathered there.
After enough time for her to get bored with sneaking looks around the circle, a priest strolled into the center of the circle and flipped open a large book. In a droning tone, he condemned the evil within the saarebas and then started to read from the book:

“The sun and the stars fall to the sea one by one in their turn, only to rise again. The tide rises, the tide falls, but the sea is changeless. Struggle is an illusion. There is nothing to struggle against. The deception flows deeper. The statue resists the ebb and flow of the sea, and is whittled away with each wave. It protests the setting sun, and its face is burned looking upon it. It does not know itself. Stubbornly, it resists wisdom and is transformed. If you love purpose, fall into the tide. Let it carry you. Do not fear the dark. The sun and the stars will return to guide you.”

She closed her eyes against the bright sunlight and just let her mind wander until suddenly she realized that she could feel her power. She tried not to shift and draw attention to herself as she carefully probed at it. As she contemplated the appearance of her magic, it was cut off and she wasn’t certain if it was because of her relaxed mental state, if her arvaarad had made an oversight, or if he was deliberately testing her to see if she’d disobey.

Suddenly she was shocked into awareness as a searing pain that went instantly cold was raked across her right side. She whipped her head around to see where the blow came from and was horrified to see that the saarebas that had been beside her has turned into a monster. Its form had twisted until its skin was even more grey than before and hung loosely from its frame. The chains and armour of the saaretaar hung about it rattling as it lunged at the other saarebas and arvaarads. Eluned tried desperately to escape shoving at the stones with her bare feet to push away from the creature whose claws already dripped with her blood. A hard hand gripped her left arm yanking her out of the way as several of the armed guards rushed in swinging their swords to cut the monster down. She flinched as she was sprayed with viscera from the slaughtered creature, growing cold anywhere the creature’s blood, or whatever it had, hit her skin. She felt the hard press of metal against her arm; looking over her shoulder she looked into the silvery eyes of Crooked Horns who still gripped her arm drawing her away from the carnage.

Tal’atkata finally pulled her roughly from the grip of the saarebas, escorting her to another building off the courtyard. She wavered on her feet as she stumbled after him, shocked and injured. A healer pointed to a bed which her arvaarad shoved her down onto, neither Tal’atkata, nor the healer, paid any attention to her directly as her arvaarad informed the healer that a saarebas had succumbed to possession becoming a Despair demon and striking Eluned. The healer prodded at the wounds making her flinch and whine in pain through her stitched lips. Tal’atkata, gripping her thigh and side firmly, forced her onto her side, while the healer poured something onto the wounds.

Shivering with pain and shock, Tal’atkata cleaned the rest of the abomination’s viscera off her and then returned her to her cell. Eluned crawled onto her pallet and curled up under her thin blanket and fell into an exhausted sleep.
Resistence

Chapter Summary

Resistence

Noun: the refusal to accept or comply with something; the attempt to prevent something
by action or argument

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tal’atkata showed no more patience or consideration in light of her injuries when he woke Eluned up the following morning and burdened her with the full complement of her saaretaar. While the claw marks themselves that the demon graced her with the day before remained numb, the rope and armour sitting over her hips pressed against the still aching flesh that surrounded them. She stood silently, staring at the control rod sitting on the table next to her, trying not to let her fingers twitch towards it while her arvaarad finished securing her armour.

“Hands out, palms up,” Tal’atkata ordered her, picking up the control rod. She realized with horror that he had noticed her focus. She jumped as the collar delivered a mild shock for her hesitation. “Hands out, palms up. Do not make me ask it again.”

She extended her hands and rolled them over to the palms were facing up expecting him to strike her hands, like the old-fashioned teachers striking the palms of errant students with a ruler. Instead he casually held out the control rod and dropped it into her hands.

Eluned had the distinct sensation that every nerve in her body had just been plugged into a high voltage power station. Like grabbing onto a live electrical wire, her hands reflexively closed on the control rod as the pain of the delivered jolt sent her muscles haywire. She fell to the floor; the collar itself could make her convulse but the combination of the control rod and her collar amped up the pain ten-fold. She was dimly aware of her hands being pried off the control rod. As the pain receded, Tal’atkata grabbed her by the arm and hauled her to her feet. She was pleasantly surprised that she had neither pissed herself nor was actually smoking, although she distinctly felt as it she should have been.

Holding her arm in a hard grip, his claws digging into her flesh, he leaned down close to her ear and said in an ominously soft voice, “if it ever hopes to escape, it had better have help.”

Still shaking, he led her out of her cell to the training yard he took her on the first day she became saarebas. In’dabir was already there, her leash and control rod were handed to the tamassran and Tal’atkata left without any further word.

Eluned turned to watch him leave, confused at this behaviour. Tal’atkata did not enjoy relinquishing control at the best of times, but now left her alone with the tamassran.

“Come, we start your training with other saarebas,” In’dabir said.

Eluned hummed to get the tamassran’s attention.
She frowned slightly at the use of voice. “What is it?” she asked.

Eluned pointed at the visible claw marks on her side, pantomimed a monster with claws with her hands and then gave a shrug with open hands to indicate she didn’t know.

“Ah, you want to know what that was yesterday?”

Eluned nodded.

“Despair, rage, fear, desire; these are demons that dwell within the Fade. A saarebas draws its power from the Fade attracting the attention of demons,” In’dabir explained. “If a saarebas is weak or isn’t vigilant, a demon can take control and the saarebas becomes an abomination. That is what happened yesterday, the saarebas gave itself up to a despair demon. For that reason, saarebas are guarded by arvaarads and they are cut off from the Fade at all times except when using magic under supervision. Demons stalk saarebas at all times, waking and sleeping.”

Her brows rose fortunately hidden behind the mask. *Did they not see the correlation between these demons and how the saarebas were treated?* she thought. Surely, they could see that despair and rage were common because of the harsh treatment and confinement that they subjected the saarebas to.

In’dabir’s hand stroked against Eluned’s jaw, drawing her attention. “You must be vigilant and ignore the voices that whisper to you. Do you understand?” Eluned nodded against her hand. “Good. Come along, Asliraf is waiting with his saarebas.”

She followed the tamassran, keeping her head down, nervously chewing the inside of her cheek. Apart from her own, she had no experience with other magic or magic users and had no idea what to expect. Were they going to make them cast against each other or expect her to combine her magic with another’s? She was so busy fretting about what they might ask of her that she didn’t even notice that they had arrived the training area and In’dabir was giving her instructions. A small zap to her collar made her jump, her eyes snapped to attention on the tamassran. She could feel the flush of embarrassment at been caught not paying attention creep up her neck, heating her cheeks and ears.

A male laughed. “Such an interesting reaction these bas have,” he said running his finger along the side of her throat and making her flush even harder. She dropped her eyes, avoiding looking at the arvaarad or the other saarebas which she hadn’t had a look at yet. “So Tama,” he turned his attention back to In’dabir, “what do you require of my saarebas?”

“You may have heard the rumours about the bas-saarebas…”

“Yes. Surely it could not have only come into its magic just a few weeks ago?”

“It is true. I read the Ben-Hassrath report myself.” Eluned noticed the saarebas shifting beside her but kept her eyes down. “Your saarebas is patient and steady and has combat experience. I would like your assistance with training. She needs to learn to use her magic with another’s before Tal’atkata takes her out onto a battlefield and gets her killed.”

“She, her? Do you not worry about Tal’atkata hearing you referring to his saarebas like that?” Asliraf said with an amused voice.

In’dabir huffed. “You know perfectly well treating saarebas as if they aren’t thinking, feeling creatures ultimately results in more abominations, not less.” Relief flooded Eluned; the tamassran *did* see the connection between the treatment of saarebas and emergence of abominations, she was trying truly to help her survive and not just survive Tal’atkata.
Eluned felt her power rush into her as the collar was deactivated. She stood still, her eyes cast to the ground waiting patiently and unsure of what to do as In’dabir didn’t give her instructions. Instead a large, unfamiliar hand wrapped gently around her arm just above the shackle on her wrist drawing her attention. The hand was almost delicate in how it handled her, she traced with her eyes the feathery white scars; from electricity, *lightning spells*, she corrected, that traced his dark skin under the shackles and up the lean muscled arm. She gasped as she felt the entirely new sensation of someone else’s magic slide against her own as if they had run a finger up her arm to her shoulder. She jerked her head up and found herself looking up into the silvery eyes of Crooked Horns. She blushed hard but held his gaze as his lips twitched with amusement. *Get a hold of yourself,* she chided herself. *You're not a teenage girl with her first crush!*

She explored the sensation, trying to extend her own magic to reach out and touch what she assumed had to be his magic, his aura. As she pushed on her magic, she felt something, almost a tremor as she came into contact. The magical aura reminded her of the weather after a thunderstorm; the lingering scent of rain, damp earth, and the hint of ozone in the air.

The aura recoiled slowly, teasingly, moving back down her arm until she could only feel Crooked Horn’s fingers wrapped loosely around her wrist. For some inexplicable reason, she felt momentarily bereft of the presence and she instinctively reached out with her own trying to grab the receding aura back to herself. Crooked Horns rocked slightly on his feet as she lashed out with her aura. She twisted her wrist in his grip and wrapped her fingers around his wrist in return, the bones of his wrist were broad enough that she couldn't wrap her hand completely around, his skin warm and smooth under her finger tips. She gave his arm a slight squeeze in apology as she reined in her magic and tried again to extend it with a more delicate touch.

Once she managed that, Crooked Horns removed his hand from her and stepped away, pushing and retreating with his aura for her to follow with her own. They played a game of cat and mouse with their auras until finally the other saarebas turned from her and she watched him do the leaf levitation trick she had watched with fascination before. With his magic, he made the leaves swirl up from the ground, then started making them disintegrate one at a time. Looking at her, he tipped his head towards the remaining leaves. She frowned in confusion, she didn’t know how to make the leaves float. Another leaf popped. *Ah, it was her turn for target practice.* She turned back to the leaves and concentrated on calling on her fire to ignite a leaf when the whole lot went whoosh in a ball of fire sending charred bits of leaves fluttering to the ground.

*Asliraf laughed, “well she’s efficient. I'll give her that.”*

The corner of Crooked Horn’s mouth tipped up slightly, then he began floating leaves again. Eluned concentrated intently and suddenly realised that she could faintly *see* the individual threads of magic that held each leaf afloat. She squinted a bit as she focused, chewing on the inside of her cheek, and then *flicked* a bit of fire magic at the one leaf she was following. It ignited while the rest of the leaves continued to float untouched. She felt giddy as Crooked Horn’s aura brushed against her again leaving a warm sense of approval in its wake.

Eluned’s training progressed and altered after that session.

She spent the mornings under In’dabir’s guidance frequently training alongside Crooked Horns but sometimes with other saarebas or on her own. After a rest for several hours at mid-day, Tal’atkata began his training sessions for the afternoons and evenings once In’dabir had indicated that Eluned had learned enough control and ability to handle her power to safely extend her efforts for his demands. Tal’atkata was ruthlessly exacting in his training, fortunately the training imparted by
In’dabir served her well and she didn’t fall under the brunt of his ire too often.

Despite the conditions she lived in, Eluned began to eagerly look forward to those morning training sessions as a highlight to her day. Her heart leapt with joy when she found Asliraf and Crooked Horns joining her training session. She tried desperately to quash the feelings as she knew that it would likely lead to heartbreak for her, but more often then not, she found Crooked Horn’s eyes on her when she’d try to sneak a look at him, and his aura reached out to her just as often as hers did towards him.

She realised that the attraction was mutual; his eyes sought hers when they passed each other during other parts of the day, and the next time they were all gathered in the courtyard for the priest’s lecture, she felt his aura reach out to hers when the collars were deactivated temporarily. She kept her head bowed but couldn’t resist the tiny smile as she pushed a feeling of affection along her aura to him. His aura pulsed back in response, grown warmer than it had been previously. Yes, the feelings were mutual. It gave her a sliver of hope to hang onto when she struggled with less pleasant aspects of her life.

After two and a half months of being bound as saarebas, Eluned’s shape had changed and her saaretaar needed to be adjusted by the smiths. She had always had a generous figure and even with the hard training she received before, she had become fitter and stronger, but it didn’t change the nature of her curves. However, the less than adequate nutrition from the once, occasionally twice, a day gruel and forced confinement, had changed that leaving places where the heavy armour and chains rubbed and left pressure sores over bones and thinning flesh. Tal’atkata led her to the smithy and secured her leash to a hook above her head. She knelt in the proper position and stayed still.

“Check the condition of the chains, while I see to the armour with the arvaarad,” the smith ordered his apprentice when Tal’atkata handed him the breast plate and pauldrons.

The apprentice walked over to her and with a glance back at his superior, he began to check the chains. “Do you want to be free?” he asked Eluned. His voice was so quiet, she wasn’t certain she had heard him correctly. She froze, her mind instantly going back to the incident she had with Tal’atkata over the control rod and his warning to her. Was this a legitimate offer to help her escape or was her arvaarad setting her up to fall into a trap? She risked tipping her head up very slightly to look at the apprentice, he was in his very late teens or early twenties and had an open, honest look to his face. He raised his brow at her. “Free?” he asked again. She gave a tiny, sharp nod. “Third night. Stay awake.” She gave a tiny nod again, then with a quick glance over his shoulder, she bowed her head again.

“Come on boy, it doesn’t take long,” the smith called out impatiently.

“Yes ser,” the apprentice replied promptly turning away from Eluned. “The restraints are in good condition.”

For three days, Eluned went through the motions of her day with Tal’atkata and In’dabir, resisting the urge to glance anywhere near the smithy. She kept her head down and obeyed their commands. She pushed her magic as far as she could to satisfy them without exhausting herself. She felt the pang of anxiety at the thought of leaving Crooked Horns, but if he sensed anything in her aura, he didn’t react to it. On the third day, she lived in terror that Tal’atkata had found out about the plans as he deviated from their normal schedule, returning her to her cell late in the evening after introducing a target practice in the dark.

She sat on her pallet, nervously twisting her fingers around the shackles on her wrists waiting for the sound of the bolt at her door ready to feint sleep if it was Tal’atkata coming to spring a trap. A
sudden thunderous boom outside sent dust and debris falling from the cracks in the stones of her cell and had her jumping to her feet. Feet pounded down the corridor past her cell and then there was a moment of silence before another roar in the distance. She dropped to her pallet as the bolt on her door slid back, she sat up again when the apprentice hurried in.

“Tip your head forward. Quickly now,” he whispered frantically to her. She felt a cold piece of metal slide against her skin and then a quick shock causing the collar to release. She could feel her power rush in under her skin far greater than it ever did even when In’dabir or Tal’atkat gave her the liberty to use her power during training. The apprentice quickly grabbed her hands and undid the shackles, carefully setting them on the floor. “Come on, let’s go.”

Eluned hesitated for a moment, plucking at the crude tunic. He grabbed her hand and gave her a pull, “we’ll get you clothes as soon as we’re clear of here. Hurry! You weren’t the objective, but I couldn’t leave you here if I could use the distraction to get you out. It’s not right what they are doing to you.”

Pausing at her cell door, the apprentice scanned the hall, Eluned glanced across to Crooked Horn’s cell door. The apprentice was taking a risk rescuing her and she knew he wouldn’t risk more to save the other saarebas. She made a silent promise that she’d find a way to free him.

They ran down the corridor, he pushed her behind him as he opened the door. Once satisfied that the path was clear, he grabbed her hand again and pulled her through. “Keep to the shadows,” he said pressing her back as several qunari soldiers rushed by. Flames flickered in the night sky from another area of the compound. She tugged on his shirt with her free hand. “I know. Resistance forces are attacking.”

Once the path was cleared again, he pulled her along towards the kitchens area. She had never been in this part of the compound, hopefully he knew exactly where he was going. They had to duck behind some barrels as some more guards came through the kitchen as they were passing through it. She started to develop a ball of fire in her hands to attack, when he grabbed her wrist. “No, that will draw too much attention. Stay quiet and we’ll get out.”

Once the guards had passed, the apprentice quickly pulled up a metal grating in the floor and dropped down below. He reached up and helped her drop through the hole, then holding her hand, led her through the dark tunnel that ran below the compound.

Eluned suddenly found herself outside the fortress. She tipped her head back and breathed deeply for what seemed like the first time in years. The night sky was crystal clear, and the two moons hung low, the light shining off the broad leaves of the trees.

“This way. The others will be waiting,” the apprentice whispered to her as her led her quickly through the brush.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay in getting this latest chapter out. I was not happy with the pacing and the chapter ended up getting rewritten several times over. :) I hope you enjoyed the interaction between Eluned and Crooked Horns.
Her escape attempt had failed. The arrow wounds on her shoulder and calf stung and whatever it had been poisoned with kept her from reaching for her magic and made it difficult to keep her mind focused to come up with any sort of plan. But it was all too late for that; the collar and shackles were on her again when she woke up tethered once more to the floor of her cell.

They had made it out of the barracks, past the walls, and into the woods. The apprentice had held her hand, guiding her through the trees and brush in the dark. She had stumbled over roots and stones as they ran through the woods, slowing them down due to her limited range of sight.

They hadn’t been outside the walls for more than ten minutes when she felt a sharp pain in her right shoulder. Fear choked her as she felt her power flicker out as if the collar had been placed around her neck again. Something hard struck her in the calf sending her crashing to the ground and tearing her hand from the apprentice’s. The world spun before her eyes as a large horned shadow stood over her and she cried out in anguish that she had been caught.

Tal’atkata roughly yanked her through the courtyard and dropped her at the center, in front of the young smith apprentice that had helped her and was now chained to one of the posts. He was nearly unrecognizable for having been beaten black and blue. His nose looked like it had been broken as had most of the fingers on his hands, and it looked, from the way his legs hung, that someone had smashed his knees as well. The young man lifted his head painfully and looked at her, she dropped her head in remorse. This was her fault.

“This is its fault, bas-saarebas,” her arvaarad hissed in her ear, echoing her own tortured thoughts, as his fingers dug painfully into her hair to hold her head upright and facing the apprentice. The hot trail of her tears ran down her cheeks and down her exposed throat as she was forced to look at her would-be rescuer. “Its evil nature, its corruption, is responsible for his fate.”

Tal’atkata barked some orders to one of the guards who drew his sword. Eluned squealed in protest but no one paid any attention to her. The guard slit the belly of the bound man and left him to die slowly as his intestines slid out with a wet splatter onto the stones below him. “He dies because of
When the apprentice’s cries finally became quiet, Tal’atkata grabbed her by her elbow yanking her to her feet and for terrifying moment, Eluned thought that she, too, was going to be executed, instead he hauled her toward the smithy. Several qunari were already in there, and the blacksmith, who had previously created her saare-taar, was laying out some curved, hinged plates of metal.

He had a furious, black look in his face and refused to look at her.

She was roughly shoved to the floor in front of the anvil; two qunari took an arm each and wrapped ropes around each wrist and hand replacing the regular shackles. One hand was hauled onto the anvil, palm up for the smith to place a hinged piece of metal around her wrist that covered half her forearm. The cuff was worked boldly with the Qun heraldry on the outside with subtle symbols on the inside of the metal and had slots punched lengthwise through the metal like a coin slot in a piggy bank. She gazed at it in confusion; it didn’t have the normal pins on the open side to secure the restraint, nor did it have any rings with which to attach chains. The smith placed an inch wide, flattened nail into the slot of the manacle resting against her flesh.

Eluned started protesting wildly, “no, no, no,” against her stitched lips. She tried to jerk her arm away but the ropes wrapping her wrist and hand, and the hard hand and knee braced against her arvaarad prevented her from moving an inch.

The smith smashed his hammer down on the nail driving it with one blow between the bones of her arm and through the slot on the other side of the manacle.

A scream ripped violently from her throat and seemed to go on and on. Through the blinding haze of tears, she could see that the end of the nail on the inside of her arm was formed as a solid ring that could be used to attach her leash or other restraints. The outside of the nail was crimped down into the cuff and filled with a bit of molten metal, leaving no edge to be found or pried up.

The smith placed another cuff on the anvil and the qunari holding onto her other hand placed it position. Her eyes rolled wildly in fear and anticipation of what was coming. She screamed again as the wide nail was driven through her arm with a solid, jarring blow of the smith’s hammer. A sudden tearing pain in her throat ended the scream abruptly with a wet gurgle. Blood splattered from between her stitched lips onto the anvil as she coughed, weakly, at the searing pain in her throat and wrist, and she passed out.

She was forced back into consciousness by the sharp sting of ammonia under her nose. Her arms were pulled behind her back, this time the new fetters provided the means to keep her arms in place. She moaned, the short piece of chain secured between each ring in her wrist tugged and aggravated the fresh wounds painfully. Tal’atkata yanked on her collar forcing her to her feet and pulled her at a brisk pace to stumble after him or fall on her face as he led her back to her cell.

Instead of unshackling her hands from behind her back, he stood her next to the table and yanked the knot that held her pants up. Tal’atkata watched her carefully, a slow smile crept onto his face as she stood there frozen in fear and confusion, swaying on her feet delirious with pain. He spun her around and shoved her forcefully face down across the table, pinning her with his hand on her back, his clawed nails digging into her flesh as he kicked her feet apart as far as the fabric caught around her ankles would allow them to go.

She realised with horror what he was going to do and weakly tried kicking at him.

He laughed, planting a foot on the fabric. “Shoh! Maraas shokra.” She heard him spit into his hand, then felt him nudge the blunt head of himself against her own exposed flesh. Her eyes widened in
terror, he felt enormous. She managed a hoarse whine in protest which was quickly cut off by a sharp cough as he drove himself into her. She squeezed her eyes tight against the burning pain, trying to force herself to relax, certain that he was going to tear her apart.

“It’s forbidden to fuck saarebas,” he said pulling out and then thrusting back in. She started to cry in earnest. “Wouldn’t want to breed more of them. But bas and qunari likely can’t reproduce,” he grunted on another hard thrust. “Well, there are ways to be rid of it should it happen.” He fell silent then except for the occasional grunt of exertion, to concentrate on his own pleasure.

Eluned struggled to breathe with the weight pressing down on her back and the damage to her throat as he drove into her over and over. Tal’atkata pulled up on her collar against her already painful throat, slowly strangling her. Spots flashed behind her eye lids as she desperately gasped for breath as Tal’atkata gave one more violent thrust deep within her, going rigid as he spilled himself with a long groan of satisfaction. He pulled out of her slowly, enjoying the sight of his spend streaked red with her blood as it trickled down her legs.

“Bas-saarebas should be grateful for my kindness,” he said casually as he secured his own garments again. She remained limp across the table’s surface, shivering uncontrollably with the agony of her combined injuries. “For its corruption of others, I should rightfully have executed it. But I am inclined to be merciful despite its evil nature.”

He tugged on her collar pulling her off the table and when she couldn’t stand up, he grabbed her arm and dragged her across the floor to the ring mounted high up on the wall and made her kneel instead of directing her to lie down on her pallet. He undid her hands lacing a chain through her new cuffs and pulled her hands roughly over her head and ran it back down to her collar short enough that she couldn’t sit but was forced to kneel up to relieve pressure on the wrists and throat. No matter what position she took; her throat, her hands, or her knees would be in pain to relieve the pressure on the other areas.

He squatted in front of her and gripped her face with one hand while the other hand reached between her thighs to gather his seed and her blood from her abused flesh. She moaned against the pain. Giving her head a shake to make her open her eyes and meet his, he wiped his wet fingers across her lips ensuring that she could smell him on herself.

“Embrace the pain, embrace its purpose within the Qun.” He abruptly let go of her face letting her head drop and her wrists jerk on the chains with the sudden shift in weight. He left her cell, bolting the heavy door behind him.

Blood trickled down her arms from the wounds in her wrists and she slowly rested her head back against the wall between her elbows. Her abdomen cramped and ached, she could feel the sticky trickle continue from her abused flesh.

She grew feverish and delirious from the injuries. Tal’atkata visited, she lost track of when and how often when he came to give her enough water to keep her alive, but didn’t move her from her restraints, or provide food.

“Embrace the pain for there is nothing to struggle against. Suffering is a choice, and we can refuse it. Struggle is an illusion,” he told her over and over.

Eluned woke up and found herself being carried in someone’s arms. She feebly tried to struggle but their grip simply tightened around her shoulders and thighs stilling her motion. The cool air outside of the barracks helped rouse her enough to stand when her wrists were secured to a hook on a post. A bucket of cold water thrown over her shocking her into full wakefulness. Tal’atkata washed her
down with his usual brusque efficiency then tugged her, still naked, towards the center of the
courtyard.

Around the courtyard, the other saarebas were being brought out and made to kneel in a circle. The
priest that usually came to preach at them also stood by, his book held flat across his hands as they
waited for her. She tried to dig in her heels, to resist. “It can walk, or I will drag it to its punishment,”
Tal’atkata growled at her.

She thrust her wrists at him, her rage momentarily stepping forward past her fear and pain.

“It thinks the pinned arms were a punishment? No, that just ensures that no future attempts will be
made to steal property from the Qun.

It’s being punished because it defied its purpose and didn’t resist being stolen by enemies of the
Qun.” He gave the leash another hard tug forcing her to move her feet again.

The blacksmith apprentice’s body was still secured to the post that he had been previously. Eluned
had no idea how long she had been out of it, but the body was discoloured and bloated. Flies buzzed
in a frenzy and momentary took flight as they passed by. She recoiled violently from the sight and
smell.

Tal’atkata pushed her face first to another post and yanked her hands above her head looping the
chain over a hook giving her enough slack to stand on her feet but not enough to lower her hands.
With a harsh hand he gathered her hair into a knot baring her back and shoved her masked face
against the post. “If it doesn’t want to risk losing an eye, it will keep its face against the post.”

Eluned pressed her face into the post and squeezed her eyes shut. The chains rattling as she shook
with fear, not knowing what to come but in terror of what she suspected.

“A saarebas that does not embrace its purpose permits its evil to enter the world. The Qun honours
those saarebas that strive against the corruption from within and embraces its purpose… and punishes
those that do not.”

She clenched her teeth together hard in anticipation as the priest finished speaking.

Her mind stuttered in shock, the scream locked behind her teeth, as she registered the sharp crack of
the whip after the white-hot pain of the lash released her mind. The chains holding her up jerked as
she sagged limply into the bonds unable to keep her feet firmly underneath herself. The sharp tang
of copper made her nose itch and she realised that the lash had opened her flesh from her left
shoulder to above her right hip. She struggled to get her feet underneath her and pushed herself
upright to take the pressure off her arms and subsequently the screaming ache in her back as her
muscles strained under her own hanging weight.

The whip fell again, this time landed lower to cross from the bottom of her right shoulder blade and
crossing her back to the opposite hip. A hoarse rasping cry slipped past her teeth, her feet slipped as
her knees refused to lock and keep herself upright. Tears flowed freely as she started to
hyperventilate against the pain.

She was dimly aware of a small struggle outside of her line of sight followed by the sound of a
saarebas grunting in pain from a control collar. Please Crooked Horns, don’t do something stupid,
she thought. She clenched her teeth together, determined not to make a sound to upset her friend.

When the lash came down a third time, she fainted and hung limply against the post.
Eluned faded in and out of consciousness eventually becoming aware that she was lying down on her stomach. Her back felt like it was on fire and she was unable to move, after a moment of panic thinking she was paralyzed, a gentle hand touched her shoulder. “Shhh. The restraints are to prevent you from opening the wounds again. Stay still. You are safe, you are in the infirmary.”

She slipped under again.

When she woke again, her back felt like it was being reopened. People argued outside of her line of sight, such as it was with her mask.

“She will have scars enough, there is no reason to add the pigment to the wounds! What you are doing is deliberately cruel!” the female voice from earlier argued, hotly.

“The saarebas is mine to do with as I wish,” Tal’atkata refuted. “The colours will mark it so it will be unable to be hidden. Do not interfere or you will be reported for re-education.”

As he rubbed whatever he was using into the raw wounds, making them bleed again, he spoke in a gruff voice, “all blades are forged with a hammer and in fire. Embrace the pain, do not struggle against it. Embrace its purpose and find peace in its role.”

She gritted her teeth against the pain; she would not give him the satisfaction of her suffering.

It was her fault that the apprentice died.

It was her fault that Merilie, Reinhard, and Gelasan died.

It would be her fault if Crooked Horns died.

In this world, compassion killed.

People’s compassion, their friendship and kindness towards her, got them killed.

She had to try, even though it was entirely against her nature, to keep her distance from others. She had to close herself off from Crooked Horns, from In’dabir, to keep them safe.

She had hoped that if she could survive, that somehow, some day she could find a way back home or at the very least create a new, happy life for herself, but now that didn’t seem possible. For the first time since touching the stone in the cave that brought her into this hell, she had truly wished to die but even that was kept from her.

Chapter End Notes

Now that it's time to publish this chapter, which has been written for quite a long time, I find myself suddenly nervous... *pulls up big girl panties* I can do this...

Translations
Shoh! Maraas shokra - (Qunlat) Stop/surrender. Nothing to rebel against.
**Adaptation**

Chapter Summary

**Adaptation**

*Noun: the process of changing to suit different conditions or uses, or to meet different situations*

Chapter Notes

Based on feedback from the last chapter (thank you Honor_Love), I've rewritten the beginning of this chapter to provide reference to what happened last chapter without the graphic details for those that couldn't read it. Basic summary of last chapter: the smith apprentice helped her escape, they were captured, she was forced to witness his execution, then her arvaarad subjected her to a series of brutal punishments.

The healers released her from the infirmary once they deemed her recovered from the punishment inflicted upon her by her arvaarad and ready to resume training. The whip wounds had healed enough to no longer open with movement but still burned and ached with the additional treatment Tal’atkata had subjected them to. She had no way of seeing the marks but heard the healers muttering about black and red.

Eluned swayed on her knees as she waited in her cell for the daily training. Tal’atkata had washed her and dressed her and left her secured for In’dabir, cruelly linking the chain from her collar through the ring on the floor to the new fetters driven between the bones of her arm. Every attempt to lift her head tugged on the chains radiated pain like fire up her arms and into her hands, and leaning forward to provide slack to her hands, stretched out her back under the tightness of the whip wounds.

She knelt in the most comfortable way she could find and examined her hands dispassionately. The left one seemed fine other than the pain when the shackle itself was manipulated, but the right… There was a constant tingling sensation in her thumb and first two fingers, and she had problems bending the last three fingers. She could only assume that the nail driven through her arm had done damage to the nerves and tendons to her right hand, and if she ever managed to escape again, it would be unlikely that she’d regain proper use of her right hand. *Not like there’s orthopedic surgeons in Thedas,* she thought bitterly.

The bolt on her door slid back and the door opened. She recognized the lighter steps of In’dabir but didn’t look up from staring at her hands. The tamassran didn’t move for some time from the door, waiting, Eluned supposed, for her to acknowledge her presence.

In’dabir sighed, “you were not very wise. Your escape attempt was an affront to Tal’atkata, he will not quickly forgive the insult.”

Eluned didn’t respond. She didn’t want his forgiveness. She wanted his blood. *His* blood. *His* pain. His *fear.*
The chains were released from the floor. In’dabir’s hand came under her jaw and lifted her head so she could look at her, Eluned kept her eyes lowered. The qunari studied her and said softly, “he’s taken you, hasn’t he?”

She stubbornly refused to make eye contact but the tamassran could feel her chin tremble in her hand.

She sighed, “it’s not sanctioned but if it brings the saarebas in line, the Qun will turn a blind eye.” She gently released Eluned’s face and fiddled with a leather tie on her own wrist and pulled a small crystal off the tether. “The arvaarads aren’t aware, but any female saarebas has an enchanted crystal implanted under the skin to prevent them from quickening. I don’t know that the taardathras have tried breeding humans with qunari, but I suspect you don’t want to risk it?”

Eluned gave her head a minute shake.

“I thought not. Come, you’ll need to lie down,” In’dabir prompted her as she helped her up from the floor in the center of the room and led her to her straw pallet. The tamassran scanned over Eluned’s skin, her eyes stopping on the scars across her side and hip from the despair demon weeks earlier. She tapped her fingers along one of the scars closest to her hip. “Still numb?”

Eluned nodded.

In’dabir nodded to herself, satisfied. She pulled out a piece of cloth, hidden in her clothing, revealing a small obsidian blade and healing potion wrapped within. “Prepare yourself,” she warned before dragging the blade along the scar.

The cut really didn’t hurt that much; however, as the tamassran started to push the crystal under her skin and into the first layer of muscle, Eluned bit the inside of her cheek against the pain, breathing harshly through her nose, resisting the urge to arch away from In’dabir’s hands.

“It’s almost over imekari, you are doing well.” There was a tingling sensation as In’dabir dripped the healing potion into the wound behind the crystal and then onto the flesh sealing the wound camouflaged within the existing scar.

She wiped away any traces of blood, helped Eluned sit upright and then held the little vial of healing potion to her lips to drink the rest. “Good? Tal’atkata’s confidence in your… condition… has enabled us to convince him to allow your training to continue. Let’s not waste it or give him reason to punish you further.”

Eluned trailed after In’dabir, lost in her own thoughts she didn’t notice that they went to a new secluded spot in the training yard. She barely registered that her control collar had been disabled; her magic flowed sluggishly, and she made no attempt to respond to the other magic aura that gently prodded at her own.

“It doesn’t have to be this way. You can fight back.”

She flinched and blinked rapidly at the sudden sting of her eyes, helpless to the hiccupped sob that stuck in her ravaged throat.

Crooked Horns followed her to the ground as her knees gave out, pulling her into his lap. He gently wrapped his arms around her mindful of the still tender whip injuries, and crooned as her grief, rage, and fear spilled over with her tears. He tucked her against him and rested his chin on her head all the while letting his magic surround her and shield her.

She forgot all about her vows to keep her distance as she tried to burrow herself in closer to him,
pressing her fingers against the bare flesh of his abdomen left uncovered by the armour.

After an indeterminate amount of time when Eluned had gone quiet, Crooked Horns pulled back enough to look at her. He tipped his head to the side in question.

She released a shuddered sigh and gave him a faint nod. She would survive; she’d keep Tal’atkata complacent with her good behaviour and she’d watch for another opportunity to escape. But she had to be smarter about it, she now knew the risks and the consequences of failure.

He smiled slightly and nodded back to her before helping her to her feet to continue their training session.

Kont-aar had rats. Big rats. Big rats that they caught live in cages and then used for saarebas target practice. Eluned thought that the secluded training spot was simply the kindness of In’dabir and Asliraf to allow her to have some comfort from Crooked Horns. To a certain extent, it was, but the area could also be completely enclosed to keep the rats confined while the saarebas learned how to aim at a moving target. That was her next lesson.

In’dabir and Asliraf stepped out of the training area and closed the gate behind them, leaving Eluned and Crooked Horns within the area. Asliraf looked at Eluned then with a grin, tipped over a crate that she hadn’t noticed before. The lid fell off and a squeaking, writhing ball of rats tumbled out and then scattered under the plants and shrubs. Eluned jumped in alarm and tried to climb Crooked Horns like he was a tree to escape the rodents that were the size of small cats. She could feel Crooked Horns vibrate with his laughter as he peeled her off and stood her in front, her back pressed up against his chest.

He passed his arms around her shoulders and started to cast a tiny spell while she watched. He immediately lashed out with his lightning and a rat gave a startled squeak from under a bush and fell out of the plant, dead.

She trembled, it might have been a rat, but she still didn’t want to kill. To refuse; however, would endanger the others for her disobedience. Eluned extended her aura as Crooked Horns demonstrated again, casting the tiny spell before striking another rat.

Ah ha, it was a targeting spell, she realised.

He tapped her on the arm for her to try. She mimicked what he did and suddenly she could tell exactly where a rat was located, she let go and she flicked a fire spell in its direction. The fire spell only partially hit the rat setting its fur on fire but not killing it. The rat squealed and ran out of the shrubs setting the grass on fire in its mad dash. Crooked Horns lashed out with a lightning bolt and put the rat out of its misery.

She spun away, sucking air between her lips as the acrid smell of scorched rat hair reached her. She felt tears prick her eyes. For fuck’s sake, she chided herself, get a grip, it’s just a rat!

Crooked Horns placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her around, giving her a little shake to get her attention. He ducked his head and tipped her own up to make eye contact. He made a gesture with his hand, lightning crackled over it and vanished as he snapped his fingers.

She frowned slightly trying to figure out what he was telling her, then it clicked. Use the targeting spell as a prefix to her fire spell, rather than a separate, discrete spell so that she didn’t lose the aim for the attack. She nodded her head that she understood.

Crooked Horns patted her on the shoulder, turned and walked over to the wall next to his arvaarad,
he pulled himself up onto the wall and sat down. As he did, he gave her a look then kicked his foot out knocking over another crate.

The rats tumbled out and dashed around the space with the remaining rats from the first crate. Eluned jumped but when Crooked Horns made no move to help, she immediately started casting. Her first casts were clumsy, but she quickly adapted, and her targeted fire spell became smoother and more accurate until all the rats were dead. She stood bent over, her hands resting on her knees as she panted with exhaustion.

“Well done,” In’dabir praised her. “Tal’atkata will be pleased with your progress.”

“And the kitchen workers will be happy that they don’t have to dispatch this lot,” Alsiraf commented as he grabbed one of the dead rats by the tail and tossed it back into the crate.

Eluned’s eyes widened in horror as she realised that the rats were also being used a source of meat for the saarebas. She swallowed hard and tried not to think about her evening meal.

She had three more training sessions with the rats in the following days. In’dabir led her back into her cell at the end of the third, released her hands from her back and turned her around. “This was our last training session. You won’t see me again.”

She jerked her head up to look at the other woman, then lurched forward wrapping her arms around the tamassran’s waist.

After a moment of hesitation, a hand came up and stroked her hair. “I’ll miss you too imekari,” In’dabir said softly, gently grasping Eluned’s shoulders and freeing herself from the hug. She cradled Eluned’s face in both of her hands and looked into her eyes. “Be good imekari. Do what your arvaarad tells you, and don’t encourage his anger.” She wiped away the tears that leaked out from under Eluned’s mask.

“Come, he’ll be here soon to get you settled for the night.” She urged Eluned to kneel in the center of the room and secured the chains.

“Be safe… Eluned,” she said, looking over her shoulder with pity for the human woman before exiting the cell for the last time.

Eluned’s daily routine changed with In’dabir’s absence. She spent the entire day in Tal’atkata’s presence, either training much as she had seen the other saarebas when she first arrived, or out in the field.

Tal’atkata had been given an assignment to join the scouting rotation of one of the ashaads that maintained security around Kont-aar. The attack on the city just weeks ago resulted in increased patrols to ensure the safety of the Qun’s citizens from the Tal-Vashoth rebels and the occasional Tevinter incursion. She didn’t realise at the time she was out with Gelasan, every rotation included several saarebas and their arvaarads.

The change in routine also meant that she saw Crooked Horns far less regularly. On occasion, much to her joy, she and Tal’atkata were paired with Alsiraf and Crooked Horns; although she could see from Tal’atkata’s demeanor that he did not like Alsiraf and treated him with disdain. Under her arvaarad’s strict eye, she and Crooked Horns had no opportunities to interact as they had when she was with In’dabir, only having the opportunity to brush their auras when the collars permitted it, catch each other’s eye, or with great daring, carefully extending a hand from the limitation of their bonds to touch each other when passing in the corridor.
Tal’atkata made sure, every time that they were out in the field, to order Eluned to kill something. This usually meant killing birds, or strange pink creatures that looked like pigs but had feet like hands, and one time, a red and white mountain goat. To her relief, he seemed pleased that she killed the creatures swiftly.

The sun was starting to dip behind the trees which marked the end of their watch. Trailing behind Tal’atkata on her leash lost in her own thoughts, Eluned took no notice the rustling in the bushes until a woman came bursting out of the trees in front of them. She felt her magic flood her as Tal’atkata snarled at her to kill.

Eluned’s head snapped up even as she started casting her targeting spell. She made eye contact with an elven woman that stood crouched before them in the road, her bow half drawn. Merilie’s face, eyes dulling and face going slack as blood poured down her front, flashed before Eluned’s eyes, and she froze, her spell faltering in her hands.

The collar sprang to live shocking Eluned, as much as Tal’atkata’s repeated order to kill shocked the elf into action. The archer stood up, raised her bow and started to draw as Eluned fumbled to draw on her mana. An arrow came flying out of the trees ripping the elf’s throat open in a shower of blood before she or Eluned could complete their own attacks.

Eluned stood staring at the dead elf, oblivious to the qunari archer’s conversation with Tal’atkata. She followed blindly as he yanked on her leash to lead her back to the barracks and her cell.

“Kneel,” he ordered with a tug on the leash. She stood shaking, until he kicked her in the back of the knee forcing her to the ground.

“I am disappointed in it. Its defiance does it no service.” Tal’atkata sighed, “I suppose I can inform the Ariqun that the ash-taardathras can have it. It is disturbing how eager they are to get their hands on it, or well, their knives and whatever else they plan on using.”

Eluned raised her head to look at him, to determine if he was telling a lie to scare her. His expression didn’t alter as he met her eyes.

“I’m sure its defiance will serve to sustain it once they start to take it apart piece by piece.” He removed her saare-taar and walked to the door leaving her chained in the center of the room. “The ship is leaving for Par Vollen in two days with it on board.” He left and bolted the door behind him.

Eluned folded forward over her knees, shaking. *What had she done?* She hadn’t meant to defy him. *Struggle is an illusion.*

If she was good, if she killed when they ordered it of her, they’d spare her.

*Embrace one’s purpose.*

Surely staying alive, even enslaved, is better than some gruesome end being vivisected for the idle curiosity of these barbarous people? Alive means there is still hope for escape.

Dead is… well, dead. *And to die like that,* she shuddered at the thought. She simply wasn’t brave enough defy Tal’atkata to that end.

She waited patiently for her arvaarad to return. He had still to return with her food for the day and then secure her for the night. She waited and waited. She could hear movement outside her cell as other saarebas and arvaarads moved around at the end of the day, but her door did not open. The heat started to leach out of the stones as night fell and still Tal’atkata did not return. She shifted on
the bare stone floor to lie down on her side, her hands still bound behind her back.

She shivered in the cold and slept fitfully, waking to the sound of the door being unbolted. She scrambled up as best she could onto her knees as the door was opened and bowed her head.

“Mashev,” an unfamiliar voice ordered when the cup and reed appeared in her line of sight.

Eluned flicked her eyes up but didn’t recognise the qunari that held the cup for her. No one else had ever attended her before. He stood silently while she ate her meal, leaving silently once she had finished. She sat trembling in her cell even as the heat of the day progressed and passed again into night.

Late the following morning, her door once again opened. She struggled onto her knees bowing her head before whomever entered.

“Ast,” the strange voice from the day before ordered her.

She got to her feet and stood before him obediently. Metal cuffs were placed around her ankles with a chain that ran between them and then up to the chain around her waist. Her saare-taar was placed on her with its chains, then an extra set of manacles were placed around her upper arms and secured to the saare-taar.

A tug on her leash had her following the new arvaarad out of her cell and into the bright day. He led her from the compound, falling into step with several other arvaarads and their saarebas heading to the harbour. The chains jangled as she shook in terror, she was really being sent to Par Vollen. She was being sent to die.

Her failure to heed In’dabir’s warning, to kill as Tal’atkata had ordered, to embrace her purpose as saarebas meant that she had no value to them in that role. Her value now was only what her body and mind could tell them when they destroyed her.
Eluned kept her head down as she followed meekly behind her new arvaarad. Soldiers armed with swords and spears led and followed the line of saarebas. The ground beneath her bare feet changed from the stone slabs of the barracks to a dirt road and back to cobblestones as they moved into the market area on the way to the harbour.

She had a strange sense of displaced déja vu as she followed the others and heard whispers of shoppers and merchants as they recoiled from the passing procession. How long ago had it been since she had stood aside whispering her questions to Gelasan watching such a procession pass? Since she touched that accursed stone in the cave? A year? Fourteen months? She had no idea anymore.

The road angled downhill giving them a view of the harbour from above, sunlight sparkled on the waves and softly moving leaves of the trees that lined the street. In the harbour, a long low cargo ship rode at anchor. Qunari, human, and elven porters teemed over it hauling crates and boxes off and loaded new containers back on. The saarebas were led into the cargo hold where they were pushed into cages and their chains secured. She jammed herself into the corner of her cell and carefully lifted her eyes and looked around. There were five other saarebas who were bound much as she was, three opposite her and one on either side. Their heads all hung low as well.

Much to her surprise, Crooked Horns was in the cell next to her. He was a good saarebas, he could not be going to Par Vollen for the same reason as her. A little sob escaped in her misery; he lifted his head slightly and looked at her before giving her a slight shake of his head and shifted in his cell until their shoulders could touch between the bars.

The journey took four days by the time the ship left on the tide from Kont-aar and arrived in Qunandar where they were unloaded. The hold was hot and damp as sea water spilled down from the deck above, it stunk of sweat and waste no matter how often the buckets in the cells were emptied.

Her eyes watered uncontrollably as she and the others were led above deck and offloaded from the docked ship. She stumbled as her legs adjusted to the still land and hurried to keep pace with the
new arvaarad as they were marched from the harbour to the nearby fortress. The road was populated at regular intervals with soldiers from a karataam, all young soldiers probably in their first years of service, keeping an eye on the activity to and from the docks.

Walking in to the compound, Eluned noticed that it was familiar to the one in Kont-aar. The arvaarads led their charges to the posts secured over stone trenches and cleaned them off from their journey. Eluned squeezed her eyes closed and did her best to ignore all the stares and comments, those that she could understand, around her. She hadn’t seen any other humans as she furtively looked around on the walk to the fortress, she was likely an unusual sight for most of the qunari there. From what she had learned before becoming saarebas, it was rare for humans or elves, other than merchants or ambassadors, to enter Qunandar.

After bathing, she was taken to her new cell and dressed in a clean antaam-saar then chained to the floor to await her fate. Her saare-taar sat on the table close by mocking her; accept the misery of slavery it represented or accept what promised to be a horrendous death at the hands of the ash-taardathras. Not that there was any guarantee that she’d have a clean death in service as a saarebas, but it was less likely that she’d have a slow death. From what she had already seen and heard when she was with the ashaad, most enemies of the Qun tried to take out the saarebas first and as quickly as possible.

She recited the Soul Canto to herself to try to still her trembling as she waited:

*The sun and the stars fall to the sea one by one in their turn, only to rise again.*
*The tide rises, the tide falls, but the sea is changeless.*
*Struggle is an illusion. There is nothing to struggle against.*

Pausing for a moment to listen to the footsteps that passed her cell, she resumed:

*It protests the setting sun, and its face is burned looking upon it. It does not know itself.*
*Stubbornly, it resists wisdom and is transformed.*
*If you love purpose, fall into the tide. Let it carry you.*
*Do not fear the dark. The sun and the stars will return to guide you.*

Her heart leapt into her throat when she heard the bolt side back on her cell door. She adjusted her position into the proper obeisance and bowed her head. Heavy steps entered her cell and waited just outside of her line of sight. She trembled but held her position as her heart pounded loudly in her ears.

“Does it accept its purpose?” the familiar voice asked.

She sobbed in relief and shuffled on her knees across the floor until she could press her shoulder into his leg, her head resting against the outside of his thigh.

He laid his hand on her head, his clawed fingers curling into her hair and asked again, “does it embrace its purpose?”

She nodded her head, rubbing her cheek against Tal’atkat’a’s leg; grateful that her arvaarad had not abandoned her.

“How does it show its gratitude?”

She froze and kept her eyes down as she stared at the stones of the cell floor. She knew what he was asking; no, demanding, of her. It was still rape whether she fought him or went willingly. It didn’t change the fact that she didn’t want this particular attention.
Her mind ran in circles trying to find an alternative but found none. She withdrew from him and stood on shaky legs, she slowly turned and walked to the table. She hesitated for a moment, shivering, then bent over lowering her upper body onto the table’s surface and spread her legs slightly. Behind her, Tal’atkata walked over to her pulling on the knots of her pants letting them fall to the ground. He ran his hand up her back scraping his claws roughly across the whip scars before clamping the hand on the back of her neck and kicked her feet wider apart. She breathed harshly through her nose and focused on the flickering torch on the opposite wall, willing herself to relax.

“Be an obedient bas-saarebas, and it shall be rewarded. Be a grateful bas-saarebas, and I shall look after it,” she heard Tal’atkata chant from a distance as her limp body was pushed and pulled across the surface of the table.

She squeezed her eyes tight and submitted.

Surrender. Do not fear the dark. The sun and the stars will return to guide you, she repeated to herself silently as she let her mind drift away.

Tal’atkata fussed with the placement of her clothing and armour for far longer than he ever had before. He adjusted everything making sure that every rope, every knot, and every chain was just right making her wonder at his increased obsessive attention. With a tug on the leash, he led her from the cell and out into the compound where once again she fell into line with the other saarebas that had come from Kont-aar with her.

Sweat bloomed across her bare skin as they left the dark cool of the stone cells and entered the humid heat of the surrounding jungle of the island. The lush jungle encroached on the road to one side, huge palm trees cast shadows over the road, walls of buildings lined the other in neat, orderly rows.

Qunandar was a noisy city. The harsh syllables of Qunlat bounced and echoed against the stone walls with an active population of citizens going about their tasks. The air was redolent with the scent of blooming flowers, ripe fruit, and fresh baked bread, as well as the heavier notes of sweat and vegetative rot. There was a pronounced military presence in the city, she recalled from the early lessons from the priest that Qunandar was the heart of the Qunari nation and where the ruling triumvirate; the Arishok, the Arigena, and the Ariqun, presided.

In the distance, she could see huge structures built from the native stone. It was surreal to see something that looked like a cross between the Egyptian pyramids and the tiered pyramids of South America, like someone looked at those and decided to smoosh them together to create the terraced pyramids she could see. That or decided that Thedas’ terraced pyramids weren’t as aesthetically pleasing or practical for the specific regions and pulled them apart for construction on Earth.

She wasn’t sure if it was the heat or the sudden reprieve of the death sentence, but she had a giddy moment when the first lines of “We’re off to see the Wizard” skittered through her mind as they were led down the yellow sandstone paved road and turned through a heavily guarded gateway. They approached another temple structure similar to the one she had been brought to initially when she arrived in Kont-aar but grander in size and decoration. It was uncanny that there were great architectural works so similar between the worlds that she wondered that she couldn’t be the only one to travel between them. It also made her wonder about mythologies, in particular, that of the Hellenic minotaur and the Qunari race.

The five other arvaarads and their saarebas split off before the temple doors and headed in another direction. Eluned flicked her eyes up and watched Crooked Horns’ retreating form for a moment before Tal’atkata’s hand on her leash directed her to follow him into the temple itself.
Two heavily armoured guards pulled open the tall carved doors to permit Tal’atkata and herself in. The air was heavily perfumed with some type of incense that made Eluned feel a little light-headed with the heat. Ahead of them sat three qunari; a female dressed in an elaborate antaam-saar which must have been the Arigena, a male dressed in priests’ robes who must have been the Ariqun, and the one in the center really caught her eye. She had never seen a qunari without horns. He was a big, imposing male dressed in heavy armour. His white hair was pulled back into braided rows along his skull to fall loosely down his back, and a long goatee braided and knotted on his chin. He wore a perpetual scowl as he watched them approach. This was the Arishok.

“Twa,” Tal’atkata ordered her when they came to a halt before the them. Eluned dropped to her knees and bowed her head as ordered even though she was curious to look more closely at the three qunari that sat upon the dais in front of them.

“Ah, this is the bas-saarebas that the Vidathiss had selected? How has it conformed?” the Ariqun questioned Tal’atkata as he rose from his seat on the dais and stepped down to circle around her.

“It has been… willful, but…”

“Hmm, yes. I can see that,” the Ariqun interrupted, stopping behind Eluned and studying the marks on her back.

The Arishok grunted, “bas can be stubborn and resistant to accepting their purpose.”

Tal’atkata inclined his head to acknowledge the statement. “This one has embraced its purpose.”

“I wonder,” the Ariqun said, still standing behind Eluned. A large hand wrapped around her throat above the collar, the clawed nails pressed against the underside of her chin forcing her head back until she was looking up into his face. He had the most disquieting eyes she had ever seen, dark red eyes stared into her own, watching for some reaction on her part. “We had reports that the bas-saarebas had escaped.”

Eluned wasn’t sure if he was accusing her for being free or accusing Tal’atkata for permitting it. She forced herself to remain still and relaxed under his gaze. Don’t react. If you want to survive, don’t react.

“It was stolen very briefly by Tevinter rebels.”

“And the response?” The grip around Eluned’s throat tightened as she resisted the urge to gulp under his grip.

“The thief was executed, his body later mounted on the walls for all to see. The bas-saarebas didn’t resist as it should have. It was punished and marked before the other saarebas as a deterrent and a reminder.”

The Ariqun tightened his grip further, pressing his claws into the skin until blood started to trickle down her throat. Eluned remained motionless, her eyes on him until he released her. He returned to his seat, apparently satisfied with what he saw. “The ash-taardathras will have to wait.”

Eluned blanched and let her head drop forward again, she swallowed hard, resisting the urge to slump with relief. She couldn’t help the slight shudder when she caught the intense eyes of the Arishok studying her as she lowered her head. For all of Tal’atkata’s mind-fuckery, he had apparently told the truth about her possible experimental use. She hadn’t realised until the Ariqun’s declaration that she was still at risk of being handed over! Even now, she wasn’t completely out of danger in that regard either; the Ariqun said that the “ash-taardathras would have to wait” meaning
that an error on her part could still send her back to their clutches.

“We’ve read the reports. You will be assigned to the karataam and will be paired with Asliraf and his saarebas,” the Ariqun continued.

Tal’atkata gritted his teeth in annoyance, he recognized the interference of the tamassran in the pairing.

The Arishok’s eyes sharpened on Tal’atkata. “A problem?”

“No, Arishok. There is no problem,” Tal’atkata replied with a bow of his head.

“Good. Because you can be easily replaced. Asliraf is an experienced arvaarad; I’m certain with the precautions that have been put into place for this one, he would have no difficulty handling both saarebas.”

“There is no problem Arishok,” Tal’atkata repeated, his voice taking on a more deferential tone than before. “I look forward to working with him.”

The Arishok glanced at his colleagues and then without a further word, waved his hand at Tal’atkata to dismiss him.

Eluned swiftly rose to her feet at her arvaarad’s command, before he could even tug on the leash, under the watchful eyes of the Triumvirate. The hairs on the back of her neck stood upright as she felt the cold hard gaze of the three on her back as she silently followed in Tal’atkata’s wake.

A guard at the door of temple escorted them back to the barracks. She and Tal’atkata continued on to her new cell. Tal’atkata ushered her into the cell and closed the door behind them.

“This is its doing!” Tal’atkata roared as he spun around and struck her across the face, knocking her to the ground.

Eluned shook her head frantically, recoiling from his rage.

He grabbed a hold of her collar hauling her off the floor and gave her a vicious shake before throwing her back to the floor. “I will not be corrupted by it like the tamassran.” He glared at her, huffing noisily, until finally he secured her leash to the floor and left the cell.

Eluned released the breath she didn’t realise she had been holding with a shuddered sob, shaking as her panic subsided, folding over her knees until her forehead rested on the floor. She had seen Tal’atkata’s anger before, but this latest outburst was unlike the others. He was unstable and she didn’t know how to deal with that besides keeping her head down.

There wasn’t much need for yet another karataam to be on duty in Par Vollen, but conflict was constant on the island of Seheron. Within a few days of the tense audience with the Triumvirate, Eluned found herself confined once again on a ship. This time; however, it wasn’t in a cage in the cargo hold of a merchant vessel but on secured by her leash on deck of a military ship.

The dreadnoughts were wide low ships built solely for war, with a wicked ram on the bow of the ship and wide, open decks for soldiers to launch attacks. The sixty rowers were confined to the bottom deck of the ship in rotating shifts at the oars, the soldiers were above, and the saarebas remained on deck above them. The saarebas were chained down the center of the top deck close at hand to be called into battle at a moment’s notice by their arvaarads, but this also left them exposed to the elements.
It was a mixed blessing that the weather was unseasonably cool for which Eluned was somewhat grateful for during the first five days of the journey crossing the Boeric Ocean from Qunandar to the city of Seheron on the same-named island. That changed; however, as the weather took a decidedly nasty turn when they approached the rocky outer islands that lay off the coast of the main island. She cowered against the deck, shivering from the cold and lashing rain, and prayed to whatever gods might be listening with every shudder and groan the wooden ship made, that they would make it to shore safely.

After aborting an attempt to navigate the treacherous coral reefs of the islands, the dreadnought moved back out to sea to wait out the storm. Eluned whimpered with fear with every clash of lightning that made the sea boil around them and every violent list of the ship. She didn’t know what was worse, having the ship smash to bits on the reefs or capsize out in the middle of the ocean; either way, she would certainly drown burdened with her armour and chains, no matter how competent a swimmer she was.

Mercifully, the storm only delayed them for two tense days and she slept, exhausted, on the deck only waking for food and water until the ship slipped into the docks in Seheron ten days after leaving Qunandar.

The beresaad, saarebas, and arvaarads got off the ship and retired to temporary barracks. Armour and weapons were cleaned and repaired of any damage sustained during the rough sea voyage. Eluned found that her armour had been modified, she now had boots for her feet that included hardened leather to protect her legs from foot to over her knees, vambraces to cover her arms and the back of her hands, and tabard of hardened leather to be worn under her chestplate. Once everyone had been fully equipped and prepared, the beresaad moved out to their new permanent assignment at the fortress of Akhaaz.

Eluned was going to war.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for your comments, questions, and kudos over the last couple of chapters. I'm so thrilled to hear from you, whether you love the story or want to brainstorm revenge ideas for Ta'atkata - it's all good! :) 
I have an updated picture of Eluned as bas-saarebas that is appropriate for this most recent chapter:
War was hell. It had been said by a famous general on Earth, and it held true in Seheron. Never in her life had Eluned seen such violence and wasted lives first-hand as she did standing in blood-soaked fields and jungles on that island. The air choked her with the stink of blood, excrement, smoke, and ash as friend and foe alike, fell. She, herself, was responsible for much of the smoke and ash, hitting the enemy hard with intensely hot flames that panicked and incinerated any too slow to escape or caught up in Crooked Horns’ shocking traps. If it wasn’t for his steady presence at her side, or even Tal’atkata’s and Asliraf’s direction and guard at their backs, she was certain she would have gone mad months ago.

Tal’atkata was over-joyed with the recognition he received from the Karasten, the commander of their karataam. He preened at the attention and decorated Eluned like a warrior would decorate their sword or axe with spoils of war; piercing her ears until both were littered with enough metal rings, studs, and tiny lengths of chain to set off a metal detector at a hundred feet, rings of metal on braids in her hair, and narrow cuffs of hammered metal around her upper arms.

She stared across the camp to where Crooked Horns received attention from his arvaarad. Her hands were bound in front of her as she knelt before Tal’atkata while he worked on the wound left by an arrow that had flown too closely and sliced open her arm just below her pauldron. She tried not to flinch as he pushed the needle back and forth through her flesh.

Yes, if it wasn’t for the other saarebas, she most certainly would have lost it. She put her hands together, threading her fingers together and she caught Crooked Horns’ eyes with her own. He answered by threading his fingers together as well and the corner of his mouth quirked up in a tiny smile.

A body moved into her line of sight, blocking her view of Crooked Horns. “Get your bas-saarebas up. We’re moving out. Reports of some activity close by.” The messenger passed along the orders to Tal’atkata and then onto the other arvaarads. Tal’atkata tied a knot in the last stitch and then hauled her to her feet, stepping in line with the others of their karataam and moving into the jungle to engage the enemy.

They slowly crept into the jungle; the hot, humid air made the sweat run under the armour and sit under the edges of the mask drawing insects to settle on the skin. The scouts ranged ahead skirting the thinning forest that opened before them as the more heavily armoured warriors slowly entered the space with the saarebas close behind. Suddenly the normal calls and activity in the tree canopy stilled, the birds fell silent, which was never a good thing. One of the ashaad signaled a warning that sent everyone to their knees to wait for further instructions. They waited and waited, trying to ignore the biting insects that took advantage of their stillness; they dared not swat at the flies and potentially give away their position to enemies.
Cries of alarm and pain echoed from ahead of them, the tension spiked as heavy fog started to roll in through the trees and the command came from the Karasten to take defensive position against incoming Fog Warriors.

There was a soft hissing noise and before Eluned could react, Crooked Horns spun on his feet throwing his arms around her; he grunted, his body jerking a couple of times as they fell. Her breath was knocked out of her as his weight landed on top of her pinning her to the ground. He pushed himself up slightly with his free hand, the other trapped between her and the ground and looked her over for injuries.

He stroked his fingers against her jaw as he looked into her eyes and then shuddered, slowly letting his head lower until his mask rested against hers. “Ka da…” he muttered through his stitched lips, a low rumbling sound, and then went limp with a shuddered breath.

She was momentarily shocked, it was the first time she had ever heard his voice beyond a hum to get her attention or a croon when she was hurting.

He wasn’t moving. She could feel his aura of magic flicker around them, becoming weaker and weaker. She pushed her hand against his side under his armour and pulled it way sticky and wet with blood. She sobbed silently, tears streaking under her mask, as she gave him a shake to try to rouse him.

_No, no, no! He couldn’t be… I can’t do this without you!_ she thought desperately as she gave him another shake, a small whine escaped her.

She felt his body roll off her. She looked up in fright, expecting the enemy, instead Tal’atkata’s foot gave the other saarebas another shove and grabbing her by the arm, he pulled her out from underneath Crooked Horns and to her feet. She struggled to get back to Crooked Horns, scrabbling at the ground, ripping out chunks of grass with her fingers for leverage.

“The retreat has been called,” Tal’atkata hissed at her.

She tugged against her arvaarad again, yanking her arm free to scramble back across the ripped-up earth. _She couldn’t leave without him_, her mind howled.

Tal’atkata’s fist slammed into her jaw, dazing her. “It’s dead. Leave it,” he commanded, dragging her roughly with him. She stumbled over Asliraf’s mangled body, blinded by tears and the sting of the alchemical fog, as her arvaarad pulled her from the battlefield.

Eluned grieved.

She loved Crooked Horns, she realised. His presence at her side; the heady flavour of his magic, the scent of rain, damp earth, and the hint of ozone, when they let their auras touch each other; their little hand signals and eye contact; the absence hit her with such a vicious ache in her chest that it caught her breath. Their little stolen moments, even amidst the violence had kept her going. She realised that he may have even loved her, too.

She didn’t want to go on.

She hit the Fog Warriors and Tal-Vashoth rebels with everything she had; taunting them, daring them to take her out and end her existence without Crooked Horns. Grief and fury fueled her power, but the world was grey and greyer still at the end of every battle that she walked away unscathed.

The soldiers started to whisper.
They called her “Vatasala”. Soul of fire.

They huddled behind walls and their shields, whispered in awe that the enemy retreated from her when she was seen on the battlefield.

They whispered with their own fears that she was possessed by a spirit of grief or fury. She didn’t care what they thought; perhaps they would strike her down for it and put her out of her misery.

Tal’atkata was ecstatic as his reputation grew as the arvaarad of “Vatasala”. He found himself once again called before the Arishok when their karataam joined the beresaad in the field outside of the fortress of Ath Velanis.

Eluned knelt silently, head bowed, letting her mind drift as it did so often since Crooked Horns fell. Around her, karastens and kithshoks debated with the best strategy on how to besiege the fortress that a Tevinter magister had claimed and was now reportedly conducting some foul blood magic on a missing human king.

The Arishok strode to the command tent with several others. Footsteps faltered in front of her momentarily before hurrying to catch up.

“Since when does the Qun keep human mages?” a deep male voice asked in the Trade tongue.

Eluned flicked her eyes up and caught sight of the back of a very short, broad man with a large crossbow laid across his shoulders. He accompanied a tall man in very rich clothing.

“Vatasala is none of your concern,” Arishok replied to the short man. When he was about to argue, the Arishok continued, “we have recent reports that a mage blew up the Chantry in Kirkwall killing many. Would not your own city have been better off if your mages were under stricter control?”

The man who asked the question grumbled to himself but didn’t reply.

The other man, with a different accent than the first but still speaking Trade argued, “would you have seen the Hero of Ferelden like this? Or Wynne? Or… even Morrigan?” He paused when he didn’t get a reply from the Arishok. “Um, maybe Morrigan isn’t a good example…”

Arishok gave him a flat look. “The Warden was Basalit-an for all that they were mage. Vatasala is a subject of the Qun and is bas-saarebas. This is not open for discussion.”

Eluned let her eyes drop before anyone noticed her paying attention to the conversation.

As soon as Tal’atkata and their karasten was dismissed, Eluned immediately gained her feet to follow without so much as a backward glance to the men that had asked about her. She quickly forgot about the conversation entirely as they were confronted with the forces of the magister.

The rain doused any mage fire and grenades, hampering the Qunari from gaining any ground against the Tevinter forces holding the fortress. The soldiers were repeatedly rebuffed, with disastrous results, by those holding the higher ground behind the palisades. The dreadnoughts in the harbour bombarded the walls of the fortress creating a distraction but it wasn’t enough to create the opportunity the Qunari needed to breach the fortress.

Eluned cocked her head as she studied the wooden palisades. *If only they had Greek fire or the modern equivalent, napalm.* Wait… Magic was a manifestation of one’s will, strength to draw on the Fade, and their imagination. She narrowed her eyes as she concentrated on the palisades and called fire to her hands. The fire ball writhed and twisted between her hands, whipping with an energy she had never attempted before. She struggled to hold onto it and pushed even more power into the fire
then twisted her hands, flicking them down.

The fire vanished. Tal’atkata growled with disgust as the magic vanished from her hands only to
snap his head towards the palisades as fire erupted in mid air falling with a thunderous roar that they
could hear from their vantage point. Soon the sounds of the rain and fighting were drowned out by
the panicked and agonised screams of everyone caught in the flames that stuck to everything even
spreading further flickering across the water that puddled from the storm.

The ground came up and slapped her hard as she collapsed in an exhausted heap after releasing the
spell. They were in no immediate danger being far enough from the rest of the fighting and beyond
the range of any missile weapons that the fortress may have, so she sat boneless on the ground,
gulping air and trying to force her head to stop spinning. Her nose was running. She brushed the side
of her hand across her nose, she looked down to find blood smeared across her skin. Huh, might
have ruptured something, maybe an aneurysm, she thought with a disturbing lack of concern.

Tal’atkata hooked his hand under her arm, snarling for her to get up, to cast again.

She ignored him and let herself hang in his hands like a ragdoll. She wasn’t afraid of his anger, what
could he possibly do to her that he hadn’t already done?

She still hung in his hand when one of the kithshoks came up and thumped him on the shoulder to
congratulate him on his saarebas’ success in breaching the fortress for the Qunari army.

They continued to congratulate him every time she walked into a town, into a pocket of Tal-Vashoth
resistance, into a Fog Warrior stronghold, that they couldn’t breach but she turned into a barren,
smoldering pile of ash. They lauded and honoured him for it, and they feared her.

2 years, give or take, later (early 9:41 Dragon)

Eluned swayed with the motion of the wagon bumping over the rough road as she sat chained to the
floor of the wagon bed. She let her head roll with the movement; there was nothing to see other than
the road behind them. Her mask prevented any peripheral view at the best of times, but the
voluminous cloak that hid her chains from the world, obscured her view further when she attempted
to turn her head to look around. In truth, she didn’t really care. What difference did it make if the
trees on the battlefield were different from the ones before? That the grasses grew in a different
shade of green? It all became a smoking, bloody slurry in the end. The screams of the fallen echoed
like the screams in her mind, deaths she knew were no one’s fault but her own.

It seemed to her that it had been weeks since they left the ship that dropped them off in the hidden
cove alongside the great forest. When they arrived in the cove, she was passed over the side of the
ship’s hull and dropped into the waiting arms below in the much smaller boat that took them to the
shore. The short beach gave way to dense forest that looked entirely different than the jungles of Par
Vollen or Seheron. Great big trees with trunks that would have rivalled the oldest redwoods back
home stretched high above their heads, entwining their branches creating a dense canopy. The forest
was beyond ancient and the few elves in the group appeared very uneasy, scanning the treeline as
they hurried along the crude roadway that skirted the edge of the forest.

They dared not move to the more open land and roadways to the west just yet as it took them too
close to the Tevinter city of Qarinus but instead stuck to the relative cover that the forest provided
until they could meet their rendez-vous to the south-east in Antiva. After a week of travelling on
foot, the forest gave way to the rolling foothills on the eastern edge of the mountains. There they
split the beresaad into two groups to disguise their numbers, and a smaller group of viddatharti joined
each division with horses and a wagon for their supplies. From there they headed south along the
mountain chain camping off the roads and away from the scrutinizing eyes of any scouts along the Tevinter border.

“Is that - that’s the saarebas, the one they call Vatasala?” a young viddatharti soldier asked quietly as they sat around a campfire one evening. Eluned sat silently across the camp from the fire, chained to one of the cart’s wheels for the night.

“Yes. That’s the one,” the older soldier said. He had been part of the original group from Seheron.

“It’s shameful, if you ask me,” another of the viddatharti soldiers commented, spitting into the fire as he ran a sharpening stone along his blade. “I would never let myself be taken like that. I’d kill myself first before I’d let them do that to me.” The others grunted or nodded in agreement.

_Not like she hadn’t tried_, Eluned thought bitterly, overhearing the conversation.

“I’ve heard that the saarebas is possessed and the cuffs have magical inscriptions to keep it contained,” the younger of the three soldiers said.

“Possessed? Where’d you hear that stupidity?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t you seen her eyes? I wouldn’t be surprised if it was true.”

Eluned quietly raised her head and stared at the youngest one. The soldier looked across the camp and gasped as the firelight flickered, reflecting in her eyes behind the mask. He quickly looked away.

“Don’t be an idiot, boy,” the old soldier said. “And leave the saarebas alone.” He looked across the camp, pursing his lips together as he watched the woman shiver as she huddled against the wheel of the cart.

The weather became cool and less stable, rain fell more frequently as they travelled. For that reason alone, she was thankful for the heavy felted wool cloak that Tal’atkata had thrown around her. He didn’t want to provide it to her when it was offered by one of the human viddatharti who jokingly commented that she was going to turn blue with the cold. Her arvaarad had dismissed it claiming that saarebas didn’t require comforts, but the human had cleverly argued that other travellers they would encounter on the road would be disturbed by her appearance and it was best to hide her from prying eyes in case word travelled back to their enemies. He relented then.

She let the hood slip further and further over her head until she was hidden in a burgundy cocoon and slept unseen by the world. Whether she meditated or slept, she just let herself drift between one command and the next, time had no relevance to her any more. If she wasn’t being commanded to slaughter Tal-Vashoth, Tevinters, or bandits, she remained confined to the little square of space in the wagon during the day or bound to whatever Tal’atkata decided, be it tree or cart wheel, for the night often after being bent over for his own use in the privacy of his tent. Her entire existence had diminished to a near catatonic state with brief interludes of violence.

One thing she did notice on the few times that she would drag herself out of her listless trance was the sound of the language around her. The qunari in the beresaad said little when they came across other people traversing the roads, but the humans and elves would speak and gossip with the travellers and merchants. At first, she didn’t understand any of the language she heard around her but over the last few days, she started to recognise words and phrases and realised that what she was hearing was French, or well, _Orlesian_, the priest in Kont-aar had named it a lifetime ago. They must be far to the south west of Kont-aar, she thought listlessly.
She snapped to attention as Tal’atkatata whipped the cloak off her head while loosening the leash from where it was secured to the cart floor. “Quickly,” he commanded. She slid off the cart floor and hurried along behind Tal’atkatata as he led her into the trees alongside the road. The rest of group scattered drawing their weapons as they hurried into position. Tal’atkatata led her to a rise at the edge of the treeline where they could see the rest of the beresaad stand ready for a group of Tal-Vashoth that approached. Her power flooded her, thrumming under her skin waiting to be released upon her arvaarad’s word.

She ducked as something flew over her head and smashed into the tree branches above her sending pieces of glass, leaves, and splinters of shattered wood raining down on her. Whatever was in the grenade made her eyes water and burn, catching her breath in her throat, and making her stagger to her knees and gasp. She shook her head to try to clear her mind, her magic was still present but Tal’atkatata hadn’t ordered her to attack. There was clearly fighting happening close by judging from the screams and the clash of weapons hitting other weapons, armour, and flesh.

Dazed, she didn’t know how much time as passed but an awareness on the edge of her mind whispered urgently to her, “wake up, wake up! Fight! Be free!”

She struggled to her feet, looking around. Behind her, Tal’atkatata lay in the mud, unconscious or dead she didn’t know, nor did she have any desire to touch him to find out. Blood flowed from several wounds, including blood from his nose and ears.

She hesitated, looking at the fighting still going on in the field in front of her. Without her arvaarad, the beresaad would likely kill her as there wasn’t anyone in the group that had experience to pick up the leash. And she had heard the whispers of their fear, of possession. They would certainly execute her.

The Tal-Vashoth were just as likely to kill her, unless… She hesitated, undecided, looking back to Tal’atkatata who remained unmoving, and back at the field of battle. She raised her hands and called her magic, sending out streams of fire targeting the members of her beresaad killing the remainder that still fought the Tal-Vashoth.

The Tal-Vashoth turned their attention on her, alarmed that there was a mage on the field that they were not aware of. She dropped to her knees as they approached holding her bare hands before her, her head up and eyes open; as much as she didn’t want to see the killing blow should it come, they needed to see that she wasn’t hiding anything. She stayed perfectly still as a scowling Tal-Vashoth mercenary wielding two wicked daggers marched up to her and crossed his blades under her chin.

“Stop!” barked a male voice.

The mercenary scowled at her but stepped aside, a blade still held under her chin pressing lightly but still sharp enough that she could feel the sting where the blade had started to cut.

“Step back Ashaad,” a female voice ordered. Eluned turned her head slightly to look at the qunari woman.

A Tal-Vashoth approached cautiously, he handed a fancy quarterstaff to the woman as he past her. Her eyes widened as she felt his magic around him. A mage!

“I’m not going to kill you,” he said, waving his hand at the dagger wielder. The moment the blade left her throat she threw herself at the mage’s feet. He gently pushing on her shoulder to get her to sit up. “I’m not going to kill you,” he repeated as she finally made eye contact with him.

Another Tal-Vashoth sheathed a two-handed sword over his shoulder and laughed, “looks like your
pets are choosing you now, Adaar.”

“Not now, Meraad,” Adaar scowled at him before turning back to Eluned. “Do you understand me?”

She nodded then spun on her knees and scrambled in the mud to find something to cut the straps of the mask from her face. Her hand closed on a piece of glass, she immediately tried to get it under the straps of the mask to get it off, cutting her face.

Adaar grabbed her hand to stop her. “Stop. We’ll help you… Won’t we, Shokraker?” he said, only then throwing a glance over his shoulder at the woman.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “Fine, but it’s your responsibility to make sure she doesn’t slow us down. We have a contract and need to get moving. Find the control rod, we’ll need that to get her out of the collar. Move!”

The others, nearly a dozen Tal-Vashoth, spread out to locate the control rod which was quickly found. She tried again to get at the straps of the mask, her muddy fingers skittered across the straps uselessly.

“Shh, it’s okay,” Adaar said to her, gently holding her hands still. “We’ll get that off you but right now, we need to leave the field before any reinforcements arrive. Can you walk?”

She nodded as he helped her to her feet, but she stumbled with fatigue and stress after just a few steps. Someone grumbled about killing her and leaving her for the crows, which was quickly hushed. Adaar swept her up into his arms and broke into a run to keep up with the others.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been a long time in coming. I debated in writing more about Eluned’s time in Seheron but... I just couldn’t, hence the time jump.

The events in Ath Velanis on Seheron are covered in the comic / graphic novel, "Dragon Age: Until We Sleep". If you are at all curious, you can read the comic here.

I don't generally have specific playlists when I write, but I just so happened to be listening to my Dragon Age SoundCloud collection when I was editing this chapter and "Slowly Into the Light" started playing (YouTube link / SoundCloud link). Before I knew it, I was bawling. So take a listen while re-reading the chapter. Did it make you cry too?
Eluned woke slowly. The air was cool, but she didn’t feel the wind like she normally did. She shifted on the furs below her and froze. She never slept on furs. She cautiously opened her eyes and saw canvas above her and a large horned shadow fell over her. She threw the blanket off, jumping to her feet, she promptly staggered and fell over.

The qunari reached for her and Eluned shrank back against the tent cloth. He paused, “it’s okay. You’re safe. You’re with the Valo-Kas. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Eluned’s eyes flickered over him, to the small camp table with its little bottles and a cup, and to the open tent flap behind him. Her eyes darted back to him as he spoke softly, calmly, keeping his hands visible before him.

“Do you remember what happened? We found you at the end of the fight yesterday. You killed the others you were travelling with, which was really helpful by the way.” He continued to watch her in case he needed to take evasive action if she decided to go for her magic.

She went still as she realised that her line of sight wasn’t being restricted. She raised one shaking hand, then another to her face to find that the mask was gone. Forgetting the Tal-Vashoth in front of her, her fingers traced the sharp hollows at her temples and under her cheekbones, hollows created by muscles atrophying from lack of use for over four years. She trembled, not recognizing her own face in the changes her fingertips mapped. Her fingers stopped abruptly, her lips were no longer stitched shut.

“Yeah, you collapsed and weren’t doing so well. We needed to get a restorative potion in while you were unconscious. Couldn’t do that with your mouth stitched shut.”

She crumpled onto the bed of furs, still touching her face and lips as she started to cry. Once the tears started to subside, the qunari held out a tin cup. When she didn’t reach for it, he took a drink from it and then handed it to her again. It was only water, she sipped greedily until the cup was empty.

“I’m Kaaras Adaar. Can you tell me your name?”

She opened her mouth slightly, her jaw felt tight and stiff. Instead of her name, she only managed to make a quiet raspy sound before a fit of coughing took over. Finally, she just mouthed “Ellie” without trying to make a sound.

“Ellie?”

She nodded.
“Damage to your throat?” He raised his hand and she flinched away. “I’m sorry. I have some healing magic that might help, at least ease any discomfort, if you permit.” She held still when he reached out again. Kaaras’ magic washed over her, it wasn’t like Crooked Horns’ but still pleasantly cool and she closed her eyes letting it wash over her. “The damage is beyond my ability to heal but hopefully that makes you more comfortable.”

She opened her eyes and nodded again, her fingers came up tentatively to wrap around the collar still about her neck. It was disabled, she could feel her access to magic, but the collar was still present.

Kaaras scrunched up his face. “Yeah, sorry about that. I wanted to remove it entirely but Ashaad had argued to keep you bound. He’s formerly of the Qun and is highly suspicious of mages and saarebas. I convinced them that I’d take responsibility and deal with anything you might do. Shokraker agreed to a compromise; that weleave the collar on, at least until we know that you aren’t going to turn on us.” He looked at her skeptically, “you’re not going to do anything, are you?”

She shook her head. Suddenly her stomach gave a loud growl startling them both.

Kaaras grinned. “Feel like getting something to eat? I can introduce you to the others. We’re going to be moving on pretty soon any way, so someone will be coming for the tent.” He handed her the burgundy cloak she had been wearing in the cart. “Here one of the boys found this. We’ll have to find you some other clothing but at least you don’t have to wear that heavy armour any more. Might wanna keep the leather bits though?”

She nodded, the leather tabard, greaves, and vambraces might be good to keep along with the felted wool cloak.

Kaaras took her hand gently and led her out of the tent to the fire the others were sitting around eating. She felt inclined to slip behind him to avoid the stares of the others, but he pulled her to sit beside him. He looked at her and frowned, “when was the last time you ate solid food?”

She shrugged.

“Years?”

A nod.

“Hmm, okay, well better stick with the stew and soft vegetables. You’ll want to slowly work on getting your jaw moving again and your stomach accustomed to something other than whatever they fed you.”

*Rat gruel,* she shuddered in memory.

Eluned watched as Kaaras moved off to the other side of the fire to get food. A large body thudded down onto the log right beside her nearly knocking her onto the ground as the wood shifted. She turned to look at the newcomer and recoiled from the glare she faced from the Tal-Vashoth sitting beside her. It was Ashaad, the one that had crossed the blades under her chin on the battlefield and argued to keep her bound. She cringed, drawing up her shoulders, and leaned away from him.

A grey hand reached over and flicked the scowling qunari on the back of his pointed ear, hard.

“Leave Adaar’s pet alone, Ashaad! She’s beginning to think you’re going to eat her.”

Ashaad grumbled unintelligibly, got up of the log and stomped off, his spot on the log was immediately taken.

“Don’t mind Ashaad, he’s qalaba when it comes to anything to do with magic. I’m Meraad and have
no such reservations. So how did you end up with the Qun? Where did you come from? What was that group here for? Are there more coming?"

Meraad kept firing questions and chattering away at Eluned that she just stared at him with no clue where to interrupt or how to answer his questions. She hadn’t had anyone simply talk to her for years and was feeling overwhelmed by the constant stream of conversation.

“Meraad! I think you’ve bombarded Ellie with enough questions for the moment,” Kaaras interrupted him. She gave him a grateful look as she accepted the bowl of stew. At least then she had an excuse for not trying to reply to Meraad. “Maybe give her some time to eat and get back on her feet before you interrogate her.”

“While she’s getting on her feet,” Ashaad growled as he stomped past again, “tell her to stop doing whatever it is she’s doing. It’s giving me a headache.”

Eluned frowned at Ashaad’s complaint and turned to Kaaras with a questioning look for an explanation.

“Ah, he means that you’re leaking.”

She flushed with embarrassment and immediately looked down at herself thinking she had somehow soiled herself.

Kaaras’ cheeks took on a burnished tinge as well, “uh no, not like that. He means your aura. You probably were never taught to pull your aura tight to you with the collar, but some people are more sensitive to mages even without doing magic. It’s a good time to start practicing because where we are headed is going to have a lot of sensitive people; mages and templars. You will need to learn to shield yourself in order to be safe.”

“How?” she mouthed with a little shrug of one shoulder.

“How? Oh, how to not leak. Uh, well let’s see…”

She shivered from the cold morning breeze and pulled her cloak around herself as she waited for Kaaras to think on the explanation.

“Oh! Your cloak! Think about pulling your aura around you like your cloak, or better yet like a second skin. You’ll need to concentrate on doing it for the first while but eventually it’ll become a habit and you’ll do it automatically.” She pulled her aura into herself as he explained. Kaaras smiled, “yes. Just like that! You’re a quick study. Keep practicing that and it’ll become second nature to you.”

As they continued heading south, Kaaras introduced her to the rest of the group. Shokraker led the group, Eluned found it fascinating that they would have a female leader especially considering the number of the group that had previously belonged to the Qun. The Qun didn’t recognize women as warriors, but then, perhaps it was that rejection of the Qun that made them embrace her leadership as they did. In any case, she was a good leader; she listened to her group when they had questions or concerns and gave their input consideration, but she was very clear in what was expected of each member of the group and held everyone accountable.

Apart from Shokraker, there was one other female that went by the name of Katoh. She was loud and boisterous, often sparing with Meraad and knocking him in the dirt when he tried flirting with her or tugged on her long braids of red hair. Meraad was a jovial sort and frequently fell into step with Eluned and Kaaras as they travelled, telling stories and jokes to try to coax a smile or a silent
laugh out of her which she quickly hid out of force of habit.

There were apparently two Ashaads in the group; the one they call Ashaad Two, that made it patentely clear that she was not welcome, she stayed away from him the best she could. Ashaad One was friendlier, if aloof, and didn’t interact much.

Kaariss styled himself as the dashing rogue-slash-poet. Eluned wasn’t sure if the poems he composed and recited to her were his way of flirting or if he was making fun of her, either way she furtively rolled her eyes and politely ignored him.

Another warrior, Sata-Kas, came over and introduced himself. “Can you hear but not speak?” he asked while he gestured with his hands. Eluned stared at him when he repeated himself. “Can you hear,” he gestured to his ear with a hand, “but not speak,” he tapped the first finger of one hand against the first finger of the other, then tapped his chin below his mouth with the side of his hand.

_Holy shit_, Eluned thought, _he’s doing a form of signing_. She nodded her head and repeated the sign he made for hearing, she could hear, but not speak she confirmed with the same gestures.

“What are you…?”

“Well that’s all well and good waving your hands around when we’re sitting around the fire,” Meraad scoffed, interrupting Kaaras’ question, “but how are we all supposed to talk in the field, assuming she stays with us?”

Sata-Kas looked back at Eluned. “Can you whistle?” he asked and signed.

She nodded and quickly pursed her lips and let out a thin whistle. She looked disappointed with the result.

“Very good. You’ll need to practice,” Sata-Kas said and gestured.

“Why do you keep gesturing when she can hear you? She’s the only one that can’t speak.”

Sata-Kas whacked Meraad on the horns, “think, you idiot! How do you learn a new language?”

He threw up his arms to fend off Sata-Kas’ hit, “by listening and repeat… oh!”

They all rolled their eyes at Meraad.

“Where did you learn this?” she asked Sata-Kas.

“Where did I learn this?” he asked back with the gestures. “There was a child in the village I grew up in that couldn’t hear. His parents spoke to him like this.”

“Did the other villagers learn?” she asked.

He repeated the question then replied, “no. The other children made fun of him. I was the only Vashoth child in the village, I knew how he felt. I learned to talk to him and we became friends.”

“Where is he now?”

He looked at her sadly, “dead. Bandits.”

She tentatively reached out and touched his arm, “I’m sorry.”

He patted her hand in thanks. As they continued to travel, Sata-Kas would sit with her, Kaaras, and
any others that took an interest and taught them how to converse with her using gestures and different whistles.

The mercenary group became more comfortable with her presence. After the first flush of freedom, Eluned kept to the familiar habits of saarebas; she remained quiet, unobtrusive until someone called upon her. She stuck close to Kaaras and refrained from using her magic, she practiced drawing her aura as tightly to her as she could. Ashaad Two was a good indicator as he never failed to frown or glare at her if she slipped.

She followed Kaaras like his own shadow as they travelled and settled in camp, never venturing away on her own; subconsciously placing herself two steps behind and slightly to his left just as she had with her arvaarad. She walked with the others as much as possible, only occasionally hopping on their cart when she was too exhausted to keep up. Her years as a saarebas, confined and half starved as she was, had completely eroded any strength and stamina she had developed training with Gelasan as a scout for the Qun. She joined Kaaras when he took his turn on watch, she ate when he ate, she did nothing without his guidance. At night, she shared his tent, wrapped in her cloak, on her own bedroll.

Kaaras frowned, watching her closely as they travelled, unsure of how to break her out of her shell. His eyes darted to the collar that still rested around her neck at Shokraker’s orders; as long as that reminder of her status as saarebas weighed on her, she would never be free.

All around Eluned, the jungle was quiet as she crouched in the grasses, waiting and watching. The grasses and leaves swayed in a breeze but not even the softest sound could be heard. She glanced up and birds in the tree canopy bobbed and swayed but were silent. She frowned, realising that not only were sounds muted but also the colours around her were washed out and greyed as if viewed from behind a gauzy curtain. Confused, she looked down at herself where she sat crouched in the grass. She didn’t look washed out like the scenery. Her hands weren’t chained together, and the heavy armour didn’t sit over her chest and shoulders. She raised a trembling hand to her face and breathed a sigh of relief; no thick threads stitched her lips shut and no mask covered her face. She slowly stood up and turned, looking around her. There was no one else there.

The area seemed familiar, she was certain that it was the jungles of Seheron but she didn’t know where. Or for that matter, when. As she stood pondering, a fog started to roll in. She tensed in alarm and drew her mana to her, ready as her eyes darted around. Stationary figures emerged as the fog rolled over her; qunari soldiers, archers, arvaarads and saarebas appeared all around her, crouched and waiting in the silent fog. Her breath sped up and her heart pounded as adrenaline spiked through her when she recognised where and when she was. In front of her, two figures appeared; herself and Crooked Horns crouched side by side in the grass.

“No,” she pleaded, her own voice startling her as she shook her head. She didn’t want to see this.

Suddenly all the figures on the field started moving. Crooked Horns swiftly turned into her, his body jerking once, twice, three times before the ghostly couple fell to the ground.

“Ka da…” His voice broke the silence.

Her hands felt hot and wet like they were covered in his blood again. She clenched her fists and closed her eyes. This isn’t real, she thought. The sensation left her hands and she opened her eyes again only to find the scene had reset to the bare field.

The fog rolled in and again the ghostly figures appeared including herself and Crooked Horns. She tore her eyes from the echo of herself and looked around the rest of the area. Along the edge of the
field, she noticed dark shapes; like shadows but not cast by light instead absorbing it, they flickered just outside of her peripheral view.

“No, please, not again,” she moaned, closing her eyes tightly against the hot burn of her tears as the ghostly figures started to move again.

“So much sorrow, so much despair.”

Eluned’s eyes snapped open as she whirled in the direction of the voice. “Who are you?”

One of the dark shadows flitted out of the corner of her eye, avoiding her direct gaze. “Your grief pains you. I can take the pain away, let you forget.”

“No, I don’t want to forget him.” She lowered her head to try to obscure her efforts to see whatever it was that was speaking to her as she tracked its movement around her.

She jumped as a cold pressure settled over her shoulders, but still the shadow eluded her gaze.

“It hurts you so much,” the voice coaxed. “You don’t have to feel this again.”

“No. If the grief is all I have left of him, I will keep it.”

The cold pressed harder on her, pushing, clawing at her like it was trying to crawl under her skin.

“But it’s so unnecessary. I can help, you just have to let me in.”

No! Eluned jumped up out of her bedroll and bolted out of the tent, fire limning her hands as she prepared to fight.

Cries of alarm sounded around her. She heard blades clearing scabbards as horned figures rose around her. She rolled her shoulders and raised her hands, flames flickered as she readied herself.

“Ellie!” a voice called out. A horned figure emerged from a tent and approached her slowly. “Ellie, you’re safe. It was a nightmare, you’re safe.”

She bared her teeth at the figure and raised her hands with a wordless growl as it kept approaching.

The horned figure stopped in its tracks and raised its own empty hands, waving at something or someone to the side of her. “Ellie, listen to my voice. I’m Kaaras. You’re with the Valo-Kas.” He shook his head at something beyond her. “Ellie. You were having a nightmare. You’re safe, no one,” he said emphasizing the last word with another flicker of his eyes to the side of her, “is going to hurt you.”

Her brows pinched together as she considered his words. She darted her eyes around and saw the concerned looks on faces, she looked back at Kaaras, recognition slowly dawning on her.

“You’re safe, Ellie,” he said softly stepping towards her.

She shuddered and let her magic go. Kaaras caught her in his arms as she stumbled forward with a cry. He bundled her up in her discarded cloak from her bedroll, sitting her by the fire with a mug of hot tea while he joined Shokraker and Ashaad where they argued. She didn’t pay close attention to their words as she tried to keep her trembling hands from spilling the hot liquid over them, although she knew that Ashaad was angry and wanted the collar activated again.

Kaaras came and sat down beside her again, rubbing his hand up and down her back a few times before resting both elbows on his knees. “Bad nightmare?” he asked quietly.
She nodded her head.

“Surely, you must have had them before you were bound as saarebas? All mages do.”

She shook her head.

“How is that…” he trailed off appearing to have an inner debate with himself. He sighed beside her.

“I suppose that the collar prevented you from entering the Fade when you slept so it’s been years since you had to deal with the demons? The first times are the worst and your memories will feed them. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through but I’m sure you’ve experienced some horrible, messed up shit that the demons will love to use against you.”

She sniffed wetly, swiping at her nose with the back of her hand, nodding her head again.

“You have to remember it’s not real. Just don’t accept or agree to anything anyone offers you, alright? Are you going to be okay?”

She nodded, giving him a watery smile.

“Good. Come on, get yourself packed up. I’ve got a surprise for you later today and I know you’re going to like it,” he said with a grin.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:

Qalaba: A type of cow that the Qunari breed known for its stupidity. Yeah, Meraad called Ashaad a stupid cow.

Thank you, thank you, thank you all for your comments and kudos. Your enthusiasm, tears of grief and outrage, and plots of revenge against those that hurt Eluned, both here and on Tumblr, give me life and keep my fingers flying over the keyboard, so I thank you all. :)
They stopped to camp for the night and as the sun started to fade from the sky, Kaaras grabbed her hand with big smile on his face, leading her to the ridge of the hill. In the valley below was a massive city; the city was in no means huge compared to what she had known prior to coming to Thedas but it was much bigger than any city she had thus far experienced since touching the stone in the cave. They were still at least a day’s travel in order to get to the city walls, even from that distance, she could see that the city had multi-storey ornate buildings, tall walls, and a busy harbour beyond. As the day fell into dusk, the light from a myriad of lamps in certain areas of the city cast a warm glow into the sky and the deep chime of bells calling the faithful to worship echoed across the valley to their camp.

“That is the Nevarran city of Cumberland. We’ll camp outside of its walls tomorrow, but the day after we’ll go inside. Shokraker has to go meet some contacts and some of the others are going to see about leads on new jobs. I am going to the market to refill some of our healing supplies and I thought you could join me. You need some clothing other than the antaam-saar you wear day in and day out.”

She looked excited but immediately her face dropped. “No money,” she whispered.

“You don’t need to worry about that, alright? I have enough to get you some things.”

Eluned opened her mouth to protest but closed it again when he raised a brow at her daring her to argue. She nodded.

“Good. Now let’s go eat. I’m famished.”

She ducked her head to hide the smile as she fell into step just behind him. He was always hungry; he was like a walking stomach always pulling out tidbits of bread, fruit, and bits of jerky that he constantly shared with her as they travelled.

Shokraker approached as they settled down on the log with their bowls of stew. Eluned glanced up and tensed as she spotted the control rod in the woman’s hand. She startled at Kaaras’ hand resting on her shoulder. “It’s okay. You’re safe,” he said quietly.
“I will not send you into the city with the bonds of slavery around your neck,” the woman stated, handing Kaaras the control rod. “Just remember that Kaaras is still accountable for your actions.”

Eluned replied with a nod. Shokraker turned away without another word.

“Well then, let’s get that thing off you,” Kaaras said with a grin. She sat still while his fingers brushed along her neck spinning the collar around. A brief shock made her jump slightly and the weight of the collar fell away from her neck. “There you go,” Kaaras sat beside her again, a huge grin on his face.

She nodded, feeling dazed, rubbing the back of her neck. She was free.

When they approached the city gates on the morning of the second day, Eluned couldn’t help feeling awed and a bit apprehensive at the prospect of being around all those people. There was a constant din of voices that set her on edge. She rolled her shoulders under her cloak pulling the hood up over her head despite the morning heat and closed the distance she normally kept behind Kaaras. Without the collar, she felt naked and light, like she’d fly away with an errant breeze without the solid weight of it holding her down. It was disconcerting that she felt more visible, more vulnerable, without it present despite how much she had hated it.

Kaaras must have sensed her discomfort as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, ignoring her instinctive flinch, pulling her to his side. “Don’t worry Ellie. They seldom see Vashoth in the city so all eyes will be on us. Sata-Kas and I will be with you the whole time.”

They waited patiently at the gates of the city, not wanting to get caught between the wheels and draft animals, as two large wagons carefully maneuvered around each other within the confines of space between the huge iron banded gates that stood open on either side of the cobbled road. Old worn ruts worn into the stones forced the wheels into tracks closing the gap between the heavy loads unexpectedly. The drivers yelled at their animals and applied the whip, encouraging them to pull the carts away from the grip of the tracks, as guards at the gates held back pedestrians and cursed the drivers for holding up traffic. After a few tense moments, the carts safely passed each other, and the bottleneck of people started to dissipate as they resumed their flow in and out of the gates.

A good portion of the Valo-Kas were headed into the city for the day, those that weren’t stayed to guard the camp until the others returned and they could take their turn to visit. Shokraker and Ashaad Two left to go meet their employer to wrap up their current contract and hopefully get a lead on a new one. To that end, Shokraker told everyone to keep an ear out to any rumours and gossip that might pan out for a job. Several others took pieces of armour and weapons for repair, while Kaaras and Sata-Kas led Ellie into the regular marketplace in the direction of an apothecary shop Kaaras wanted to visit for more supplies.

Eluned craned her head around, the hood of her cloak falling back from her head and she looked around from sight to sight. It wasn’t the utilitarian type of market she had become used to in Kontaar, where the stalls held the most basic staples; loaves of bread, bolts of plain fabric or ready-made items of clothing, and tools for various trades. Here, this market was filled with the delicious smells of spices and rich baked goods, bright colours of fabrics with pretty embroidery and glittering embellishments, and the voices of the merchants calling to customers, it made her head spin with sensory overload. She flitted from stall to stall, eager to see what was offered, with a pair of indulgent shadows that followed her.

She whipped her head around to the sound of something shattering on the cobblestones, instinctively gathering her mana as she turned in the direction of the noise. A well-dressed woman stood before her, staring and looking shocked, “Dios, su desgraciada cara!” The woman placed a trembling hand...
over her own mouth and backed away, staring at Eluned’s face the whole time. Other shoppers turned to see what the excitement was and started whispering.

Eluned’s shoulders crept up, she didn’t understand what they were saying but she got the idea and was mortified. She wasn’t especially vain about her looks, she considered that she was moderately attractive and had at least made a bit of effort on how she looked when she on Earth. When she arrived in Thedas, she got appreciative looks on occasion not that she really paid it any attention, busy as she was trying to adapt to her new situation; having someone recoil from her like she was some hideous monstrosity was upsetting. Did she truly look that awful? She pulled her hood back up and well over her face until she couldn’t see anything or anyone except the stones in front of her feet and no one could see her.

Sata-Kas growled at the woman, towering over as he stepped between her and Eluned. “Fuck off you shallow bitch. Vete a la mierda.”

The woman gasped again and hurried away. Other gawkers likewise quickly returned to their own business intimidated by the glowering qunari in their midst.

Kaaras put his arm around Eluned’s shoulders pulling her into his side. “Don’t pay them any mind, Ellie. You’re healing, they don’t understand what you’ve been through.”

Even though Kaaras tried to reassure her that the damage to her face wasn’t that bad, the incident left her shaken and she remained tucked into her hood, no longer feeling the enthusiasm she had to explore the market as she did at the start of the day. She suddenly felt tired and wanted to return to the camp but Kaaras still had errands to run so she trailed along silently behind him.

A little bell jingled as Kaaras pushed open the door to the shop. Sata-Kas took one look into the dim interior and ducked his head back out. He dropped onto a bench by the door. “I’ll wait here. No point in all of us squishing into that little space.”

Kaaras gently took her hand and led her into the shop. “Come on Ellie. I want you to meet a friend.”

Donis Gradenigo reminded Eluned of some sort of great mantis or walking stick insect dressed up as a man. He unfolded himself from his stool in the corner of the shop when they entered, all legs and arm, elbows and knees as he rose to his full height which was close to Kaaras’ without any of the breadth or muscle of the qunari. His scruffy robes didn’t improve the impression either as bits of dried plant material, dust, and God knew whatever else fluttered off of him as he moved to greet them. “Kaaras Adaar, my friend,” he clasped a hand on Kaaras’ shoulder and shook the other hand. “Bienvenido, welcome! It’s been ages since the Valo-Kas were this way.”

Kaaras’ clapped his free hand on the apothecary’s other shoulder setting free another puff of debris, and Eluned was amazed that the human didn’t just crumble into a pile of sticks. “Hello Master Gradenigo. It is good to see you. I brought my friend, Ellie, to meet you.”

“Hi’s nice to meet you Ellie,” he said extending his hand to her.

Ellie flinched back and nodded to him from under her hood.

He turned to Kaaras and raised a brow in question.

“Ellie, I’m going to get supplies organized with Master Gradenigo. Will you be alright for a few minutes?” The apothecary handed him some bread and thrust his chin towards the gilded cage of song birds. “You can feed the birds,” Kaaras told her, placing the bread in her hand.

He gave a little sigh when she moved away to the birds.
He turned back to Donis at the back part of the store. “She’s not having a good day today. It started out fine but there was an incident in the market and she’s withdrawn. I was hoping that you might have some things to help her.”

“Tell me.”

“We rescued her from a Qunari beresaad recently. She had been in their possession for quite some time, years, and has become very malnourished. She doesn’t have the strength and stamina to undergo magical healing. I have done some with the worst of her injuries; however, I am reluctant to push too much. There is extensive damage to her throat, she is unable to speak, and I’ve noticed that she sometimes wheezes when the air is cold.” He lowered his voice, “she also has scars and abrasions on her face as well as other areas of her body.”

Donis pulled Kaaras aside with a quick glance at Eluned who was still busy admiring the little colourful birds by the apothecary’s window. He gripped his arm firmly to keep his attention on him, “don’t tell anyone that you took her from the Qun. The Qun doesn’t keep human mages as saarebas and saying that she was paints a target on her. Anyone who asks about her, tell them you rescued her from a rogue Tal-Vashoth band that found it amusing to torture a southern hedge mage with the trappings of a saarebas.”

Kaaras’ eyes narrowed. “Have you heard something?”

“No, but I’ve travelled into northern Rivain to trade to know enough about the Qun that if they made her saarebas, they will want her back. Or want her dead.”

Kaaras threw a worried look at Eluned. “What can I do?”

“Help her find a new life. You’ve already begun with the healing. Does she eat, drink?”

Kaaras nodded. “A bit. It’s a slow process because the muscles have wasted away but there’s improvement.”

“Good, good. You’re doing well. What could you tell about her throat?”

“There’s no signs of damage on the outside, so whatever damage was done happened on the inside.”

Donis nodded his head slowly. “Likely over use.”

“Over use?” Kaaras’ brow pinched together in confusion. “How? Her mouth was stitched shut so she couldn’t talk.”

“You can still scream and cry without opening your mouth.”

Kaaras’ brow shot up in surprise and immediately dropped as he scowled. *How much pain did she suffer to damage her voice by screaming?* He shuddered at the thought and recalled the whip marks and other scars he saw after she collapsed when they found her. “I’m not skilled or strong enough to reverse the damage to her throat with magic, but perhaps you have something to help ease her breathing?”

“Yes, come along. I can’t repair the damage, either, but have just the thing to help.”

Donis spent the next hour wrapping up bundles of herbs, little bottles of tinctures, poultices, and other items that Kaaras needed to keep the healing supplies stocked for the Valo-Kas, as well as some teas for Ellie’s throat.
“Ellie? Can you come and join us,” Kaaras called to her. She gently wiggled a finger to get the little bird off her finger before pulling her hand from the cage and slid off the stool. “Would you remove your hood so Master Gradenigo can see your face.

She kept her eyes lowered, not wanting to see the shock on his face when she lowered the hood. She stiffened when she felt his dry, papery fingers touch her chin.

“Pardon belleza, but could you turn towards the light?”

She turned until the light fell fully onto her face and flicked her eyes up to find a pair of soft brown eyes looking at her kindly. “Such beautiful eyes. I can not undo the marks around your lips, I’m afraid, but these marks,” his finger tips lightly grazed over some places along her cheekbones and brow, “we can make disappear.”

He let go of her face and bustled around his work space to mix a variety of herbs and oils into a thick white balm. “Mantequilla de los nugiños (butter of nugs) specially blended for you, belleza. A tiny bit every day brushed over those marks will have them gone in no time.”

“Thank you, Master Gradenigo.” Kaaras handed him a pouch that jingled with coins. “Until next time.” He put his arm around Eluned’s shoulders to direct her towards the door.

“Oh, one other thing,” Donis called halting their departure. “Give me one moment.”

He hurried away into a dark corner of the shop and then they could hear hurried movements above them. Eluned grew tense, suddenly feeling afraid, but Kaaras remained calm and relaxed beside her. The sounds above them retreated and the apothecary emerged again from where he had originally disappeared.

“Years ago, my dear wife, may she rest at the Maker’s side, and I went to Tevinter so I could consult at the Circle in Minrathous. While there my wife became enamoured with the ladies’ fashion to wear pretty scarves to protect their complexions from the harsh sun. She would be happy for you to have this.” He draped a dark blue silky scarf around Eluned’s shoulders then adjusted it, hooking little ribbons cleverly worked into the border of the scarf over her ears so the fabric draped across her face sitting over her nose and cheekbones, with the rest of the fabric wrapped around to cover her hair. He took a step back and smiled at the results. “It suits you, belleza. It brings out the colour in your eyes. You look quite mysterious and exotic.”

She looked over at Kaaras, who grinned back at her. “Gorgeous.” He laughed when she blushed. To their surprise, she grasped Donis’ hand and gave it a squeeze. Thank you, she gestured.

“Thank you,” Kaaras translated.

“You are most welcome, belleza.” He gave her a warm smile and with a gentle squeeze back on her hand, let it go. “Be safe. Be happy.”

They emerge back out in the blinding sun, blinking at the harsh light after the gentler darkness of the shop. Sata-Kas pulled himself to his feet from the bench against the wall. He cast an approving smile at Eluned seeing her emerged again from under the cloak.

They returned to the market, stopping to purchase a few clothing necessities for Eluned; a pair of breeches, a couple tunics, under garments, and a coat, before heading back to the camp outside the walls.
Everyone settled down around the fire with the evening meal to share the gossip and news they gathered on their respective trips into the city.

“I overheard that the Chargers were through here recently. We missed them by a couple of days,” Meraad added, pushing a log back onto the fire. “Word is that they’ve take a contract and are heading to the Free Marches and then onto Denerim.”

Shokraker nodded, she had heard something similar.

“Oh pity. I would have liked to have had a chance to spar with their captain,” Katoh pouted. “I would love to know if the rumours are true about the size of his…”

“Axe,” Meraad interrupted her, the jealousy clearly evident in his tone. “We all know he has a large axe.”

Eluned clapped her hands over her mouth to stifle her laugh. The others didn’t spare Meraad and laughed out loud. He scowled and got up, stomping away from the fire and into the dark beyond the tents. After a few minutes, when everyone’s attention had turned back to the other gossip, Eluned noticed that Katoh got up and headed in the direction that Meraad had taken, disappearing into the dark.

“We’ve got a new contract,” Shokraker told them, then nodded to another Vashoth that Eluned hadn’t met before. “Taarlok, fill everyone in please.”

The qunari leaned forward into the light of the fire. “Managed to get a contract with the Chantry in Val Royeaux.” He paused of a moment while some of the others around the fire muttered and grumbled about the Chantry. “This contract comes directly from the Left-hand of the Divine on her behalf.”

That silenced everyone.

“Why is the Divine hiring mercenaries? Doesn’t she have her own guard?”

Taarlok nodded his head, “she does; however, she is calling for peace talks between the mages and templars. Tensions and violence have been escalating rapidly, particularly in parts of Ferelden. She is calling the leaders of the factions to come together to negotiate an end to the hostilities. She doesn’t have sufficient guard to keep the peace, hence the call for outside assistance. The Valo-Kas was requested specifically. We are to go to Val Royeaux to escort the Divine to Haven and remain there for the duration of the talks to maintain security.”

“So we’re escorting the Divine straight into a war zone.” Sata-Kas commented with a resigned shake of his head. “I can’t possibly see how that can go wrong.”

“Right. Everyone who needs any equipment repaired or personal items better make sure they get it done tomorrow,” Shokraker ordered. “We leave for Val Royeaux the day after and should arrive at the Grand Cathedral within a week if the weather holds and we don’t run into any issues on the road. Questions?” When no one had anything else to say, she confirmed the watch schedule for the night and headed to her tent.

“Lovely. Right into the hornets’ nest of templars and mages,” Kaaras sighed. “Come on, Ellie, I could use your help organising our healing supplies. And we’ll practice pulling your aura tighter to you, it’s gonna be important.”
Translations:
Dios, su desgraciada cara - (Sp) [God] Maker, her wretched face
Vete a la mierda - (Sp) Fuck off
Belleza - (Sp) beauty
They made another trip into Cumberland at Shokraker’s recommendation. The Valo-Kas were better off carrying more supplies initially then trying to get a deal at their next stop. Prices, Kaaras said, were ridiculously high in Orlais and more so in Val Royeaux. Orlesians scorned any goods that weren’t exorbitantly expensive, viewing them as being inferior regardless of their actual quality. This attitude, of course, trickled down to all the merchants creating a substantial divide between the upper classes and the lower, between those that could be frivolous with their money and those that couldn’t.

With this knowledge in hand, Kaaras also insisted that they purchase a heavier cloak and gloves for Eluned. Winter would be breaking in the coming weeks in the northern parts of Thedas, but Shokraker advised that they would be moving towards southern Orlais and Ferelden and much colder weather was expected to linger at their destination. Eluned loathed the cold and wasn’t looking forward to travelling further south despite Kaaras’ excitement when he told her about the high rugged peaks, perpetual glaciers, and towering pine trees of the Frostback Mountains. However, being on the other side of the Waking Sea put even more distance between herself and the Qun, and for that she’d put on as many pairs of socks, gloves, and cloaks as was needed.

It took them just over a week to traverse the Imperial Highway from Cumberland to Val Royeaux. The cobbled road was busy with merchant caravans, and other travellers so news was exchanged easily enough to give the Valo-Kas an idea of what to expect in the city. Eluned didn’t pay too much attention to the gossip being more interested in the plants that were valiantly poking their heads out of the receding snow.

Kaaras once again pointed out landmarks for Eluned to see as they approached the city. The city was considered the jewel in the crown of Orlais; home to the University of Orlais, the Grande Royeaux Theater, the Imperial Palace, the Grand Cathedral, and the White Spire. The White Spire, he told her, was the headquarters of the Templar Order and where they kept the phylacteries of every mage held in the Circles.

Eluned frowned in confusion.

“Ah, the phylacteries? When a mage is taken to a Circle, the templars take some of their blood and perform some magic ritual on it. After that, the blood can be used to track and locate a mage should they try to escape from the Circle.” He shook his head. “The templars are adamant that any mage that uses blood magic must be destroyed and yet they use blood magic themselves to keep track of the very same mages.” He glanced at her, “uh, just don’t say that in front of a templar or anyone for that matter.”
She nodded. “So it’s a leash?” she gestured.

“Not a physical one like you were made to wear. I don’t think the phylactery can be used to control, just to track. Don’t ever let a templar get a hold of your blood, Ellie.”

She nodded. She already slipped one leash, she certainly didn’t want another one.

“Hey, if you look there you can see a really tall tower rising over the city,” Kaaras pointed out to her. “That’s the White Spire. Normally it’s lit with magic but when the Circles fell, the mages left so there is no one to light it.”

Shokraker moved along the group until she was walking next to them. “Kaaras, I need you and Ellie to stay together and keep a low profile. We are going to the Grand Cathedral to meet our contact but with the hostilities between the mages and templars, I don’t know what the situation will be like in the city. Go to the Belle Marché or the Summer Bazaar if you like, but stay away from the Grand Cathedral, the White Spire, and the Seekers head quarters.”

They walked through the Sun Gates, an impressive ornate display of Orlesian history wrought in steel and gold, and followed the Avenue of the Sun, the main throughway into the city itself. Shokraker, Taarlok, and Ashaad (Two) turned off to head to the Grand Cathedral to meet their contact, the Left Hand of the Divine.

Kaaras grinned and took Eluned’s hand, “come on. You can’t go to Val Royeaux without having frilly cakes.”

“Cakes?” Meraad perked up. “I like cakes.”

Eluned giggled at Meraad’s eager statement drawing surprised looks from the others.

Kaaras led Eluned and the others that decided to join them through the city to the Summer Bazaar. They all laughed at the ridiculous graffiti scratched under the statues that decorated the Avenue of Reflective Thought that led into the market. Through the gates and into the market proper, Eluned let her gaze follow the gilded, white and blue plastered tower in the center of the market all the way up to the red silk banners that draped from the tower to the surrounding balconies. They fluttered and snapped in the breeze like a ship’s sail casting shadows onto the stones below to provide some respite from the bright sun.

“Ellie, this way!”

Eluned turned to follow and came face to face with her first Orlesian. She recoiled sharply from the gilded mask before her. She felt cold and started to shake as she stared at the mask in horror.

“Est-ce que vous allez bien ?Vous avez l’air d’avoir vu un fantôme!” the masked woman said.

“Pardon madame, my friend has taken ill,” Kaaras said stepping between the two women, and blocking Eluned’s view of the mask. “Ellie?” When she didn’t respond, he gently towed her out of the traffic and against a wall of the market. The others stood around in a loose bunch to give her a moment.

“Why do they wear masks?” Eluned asked, still looking horrified. She blinked several times and ran her fingers across her brows, trying to clear the memory of her own mask from her mind and skin.

“They do it for fashion. Each mask is decorated to represent their house and station in Orlesian society,” he replied.
“They also do it to hide their faces for the Grand Game,” Katoh added over her shoulder. “Stupid politics, scheming, and lies.”

“Do you want to go back to the camp to wait for the others? The café is just around the corner if you still feel up for cake.”

She drew a shaky breath. “I’m okay.”

Kaaras smiled and hooked her hand into his elbow to escort her and the others around the corner to Le Masque du Lion. The maître d’ seated them in a back corner where they would be less conspicuous in his fine establishment. Kaaras and Sata-Kas sat on either side of Eluned, with Meraad and Katoh opposite.

The maître d’ looked them over for a moment then heaved a big sigh. “Aujourd’hui, nous proposons un assemblage de quatre délicieux gâteaux. La première offre est un gâteau au fromage, délicatement assaisonné de safran, de cardamome et de miel accompagné d’un fondant au gingembre. Vient ensuite une mousse au chocolat Anitivan associée à une truffe aux champignons des cavernes. Nous proposons de plus une éponge légère à la vanille avec coulis de cerise noire et kirsch. Enfin, nous présentons un macaron au citron croquant rempli de crème de framboise.”

“Yes, I’ll have that,” Eluned gestured immediately.

The four qunari turned and looked at her in surprise. “You understood that?” “You can speak Orlesian?” they asked simultaneously.

She nodded with a shrug.

“Are you sure Ellie? You might be ill from eating something that rich,” Kaaras warned. She was sure.

The maître d’ cleared his throat impatiently. The others quickly gave their orders.

Plates of cakes, pies, pastries, glasses of wine, ale, and mead were delivered to the table. Eluned scooped up a little piece of ginger coated cheesecake and closed her eyes in bliss as it melted in her mouth. The table around her fell silent. When she opened her eyes, everyone was watching her with amused expressions.

“Is that good?” Meraad asked.

She nodded her head eagerly.

“Good. I’ll try it,” he said reaching his fork across the table.

She quickly defended her cakes with her fork, flipping his away from her plate with a growl.

“Well, not such a timid human after all!” Sata-Kas laughed, shaking his head.

A hand gripped a fistful of her hair forcing her face down into the furs, a large arm like iron wrapped around her waist to hold her in place. Eluned opened her eyes with a gasp as the nightmare slid away. She blinked a couple of times and then froze; a large body was pressed up behind her and a heavy grey arm draped over her waist. She thrashed in panic getting herself clear of the bedroll and crashed to the ground as she stumbled over a pair of boots.

Kaaras jerked from his sleep as Eluned’s elbow slammed into his chest as she fled the bedroll.
“What?” She sat on the floor opposite him, wide eyes and breathing fast with a look of terror on her face. “Ellie? What’s the matter?”

He flipped the top cover off the bed roll and started to get up to go to her, she pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them as she stared at him. He stopped, looked at her and glanced back at the bed roll and had an awful realization. “Ellie, I’m sorry. You were shivering in the cold and I… I didn’t think. I’m so sorry.” He held his hand out to her, “I would never hurt you like that. I promise.”

Slowly she started to move, carefully watching for signs that he was deceiving her. She placed her hand lightly on his own and when he didn’t grab her hand, she released the breath she was holding in a rush and moved closer.

Very slowly and gently, Kaaras guided her until he could give her a hug. “I would never hurt you like that, I promise,” he said softly against her hair. “I think of you like a little sister and I will kill anyone that hurts you.”

Eluned nodded, wiping away tears from her cheeks.

Kaaras pushed her back carefully so he could look at her. “Are we okay, Ellie?”

She nodded again giving him a watery smile.

“How are you feeling after your over-indulgence yesterday?” he asked as he started to pack up their belongings. She gave him a thumbs-up. “Good, ’cus I’d hate for you to be ill like that before we boarded the ship to take us across the Waking Sea later today.”

Eluned made a face at him. She really didn’t like sea voyages.

Eluned settled behind Kaaras on the horse as they moved into the rear portion of the caravan. Several Valo-Kas rode at the front as the vanguard with the others of the Divine’s personal guard. Additional guards flanked the carriage that the Divine and her companion, a red-haired woman by the name of Sister Leliana, otherwise known as the Left Hand of the Divine, rode in. The Valo-Kas were escorting Divine Justinia, the fifth of her name, and her retinue to Haven. The most holy of sites, the Temple of Sacred Ashes, was to be the location of her peace talks between the mages and the templars in the hope to end the war between those parties. Once in Haven, the Valo-Kas would provide additional security since the Divine couldn’t count on the Chantry’s traditional army, the templars.

Whenever they stopped for breaks, Eluned noticed that the Sister watched her, silently standing guard over the elderly woman. It was silly, she felt like the woman’s eyes followed and observed every little movement and gesture she made, so she kept her head down and refrained from looking back.

When they set up camp that evening, Sister Leliana showed up at the Valo-Kas fire. “Since when does the Valo-Kas company include humans?” she demanded of Shokraker.

Shokraker looked at her calmly, “Ellie is not an official member of the Valo-Kas. We rescued her from some Tal-Vashoth bandits a few weeks ago and she is currently recovering under the care of our healer.”

“Why has she not been returned to her family or sought shelter and healing from one of the Chantries you have surely passed?”
“She has not indicated that she wishes to leave,” Shokraker replied patiently. “It is our understanding that she has no family to be returned to. Until such time as she wants to leave us, she remains as a ward of our healer.”

Leliana stared at Eluned as she considered Shokraker’s words, then nodded her head and left to return to Justinia’s tent.

Two days later, Ellie noticed from the corner of her eye that the woman wearing the purple hood and chainmail stopped at the edge of their fire and addressed Shokraker, “the Most Holy would like to meet your human companion.”

Ellie raised her head drawing her scarf across her face and found the woman looking at her intensely.

“For what purpose?” Shokraker inquired.

“The Divine would like to speak with her. Her reasons are her own.”

“Ellie does not speak.”

The woman raised a delicate red eyebrow and addressed Ellie directly, “nonetheless, will you come?”

Eluned jumped when Kaaras laid his hand on her shoulder. “You’re safe. I will come with you if you like?”

“The Divine wishes to speak with her alone.”

“Ellie does not speak,” Kaaras reiterated what Shokraker had already told the redhead. “I will come to translate if that is what Ellie wants.”

Eluned nodded placing her hand over Kaaras’ where it still lay on her shoulder.

The Divine was an elderly woman, dressed in a very ornate set of robes of red and white cloth, heavily decorated with gold. Her hair was covered in a wimple like a nun and adorned with a ridiculous hat that towered over her head and trailed over her shoulders. It amazed Eluned that the woman could keep her head upright. But unlike her Left Hand, her face was kind and eyes were gentle.

“Most Holy, this is Kaaras Adaar of the Valo-Kas, and his ward, Ellie,” Leliana introduced them to the woman seated on a padded chair within the large tent.

“Greetings Kaaras Adaar and Ellie. I would like to speak to Ellie alone please.”

“Ellie doesn’t speak. I’m here to translate for her.”

The Divine looked at Kaaras and back to Eluned, looking for signs of distress or fear from her. “I think Ellie and I will manage on our own.”

Kaaras turned to Eluned, blatantly ignoring the two other women in the tent. “Ellie? Do you want me to stay?”

Eluned mulled it over, glancing at the Divine, finally she shook her head and gestured, “I’ll be fine.”

“Alright,” he said with a light squeeze to her shoulder. “I’ll be close by if you need me.” He puckered his lips to mime a whistle. Eluned nodded that she understood. He ducked out of the tent.
“You too, Leliana,” Justinia said softly.

“Most Holy, I must protest. We know nothing of this woman; she is a security risk.”

“Leliana,” Justinia chided her, “have a little faith. It will be fine.”

The red-head pursed her lips, her gaze hard on Eluned as she evaluated the woman before her. Then with a curt nod, she stepped out of the tent without another word.

“There. Now we can have a nice little chat, you and I. Would you like some tea?” Justinia asked turning to pour some tea into a china cup. She smiled when Eluned nodded. “Honey? Cream?” Eluned shook her head. Justinia handed her a teacup and settled back in her own seat, taking a sip of the steaming brew while she observed the woman before her.

Eluned dropped her eyes, not wanting to see the Divine’s reaction when she pulled the scarf from covering the lower part of her face, so she could sip the tea offered to her. She flicked her eyes up when she heard nothing but the sound of fabric and a teacup being gently returned to it’s saucer. Justinia’s kind, patient expression hadn’t altered.

“Sister Leliana tells me that the Valo-Kas rescued you from bandits. Is this true?”

Eluned recalled the story that Shokraker had given the Left Hand, it would be best to keep her story consistent. She nodded.

“You haven’t been coerced into staying with the Valo-Kas? You are with them on your own free will?”

Eluned held one finger up and shook her head, then two fingers and nodded.

Justinia looked at her for a moment, then smiled. “Forgive me, I’m asking too many questions in quick succession. You have no family to return to?”

She shook her head.

“Where are you from originally?”

Oh shit, Eluned thought. What could she tell her? She looked around to orient herself and then pointed to the north. Then she wobbled her hand, pointed to her head and shrugged.

“North? But you don’t remember?”

Eluned nodded, then mimed being struck in the head. She held her hands out and shrugged again.

Justinia’s eyes dropped to the scars around her mouth for the first time. “You are a mage, are you not? The Tal-Vashoth bandits did that to you?” she asked sympathetically.

Eluned hesitated recalling Kaaras’ warnings about the Chantry’s view on mages. She slowly nodded, dropping her eyes from Justinia.

Justinia reached out her hand slowly so not to frighten the woman before her and placed it gently against her cheek. She refrained from reacting when she could feel the sharp edges of cheekbone and stark hollows above and below that were hidden by the scarf. “May the Maker bless you, and Holy Andraste protect you, child. I will pray that you find healing and happiness in your coming days.”

Ellie bowed her head, tears pricking at her eyes. She wasn’t Andrastian or devout, she hadn’t belonged to any faith when she was on Earth, she didn’t even believe in the existence of any gods,
for that matter. She couldn’t help but feel a little bit of comfort in the older woman’s words and touch; she might not believe but the Divine did, and it was enough.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Est-ce que vous allez bien ? Vous avez l'air d'avoir vu un fantôme!
Aujourd'hui, nous proposons un assemblage de quatre délicieux gâteaux. La première offre est un gâteau au fromage, délicatement assaisonné de safran, de cardamome et de miel accompagné d'un fondant au gingembre. Vient ensuite une mousse au chocolat Anitivan associée à une truffe aux champignons des cavernes. Nous proposons de plus une éponge légère à la vanille avec coulis de cerise noire et kirsch. Enfin, nous présentons un macaron au citron croquant rempli de crème de framboise.

(Fr) Are you alright? You look like you've seen a ghost!
Today, we offer a sampler of four delightful cakes. The first offering is a cheese cake delicately seasoned with saffron, cardamom, and honey with a ginger fondant. Next is an Antivan chocolate mousse with cave [deep] mushroom truffle. Third, a light vanilla sponge with black cherry coulis and kirsch. Finally, a crisp lemon macaron filled with raspberry cream.

Author's note: Seriously, I would eat all those cakes. Well, maybe I'd pick the deep mushroom off - sounds a little risky... But the rest? Nom nom nom! :)
Refuge

Chapter Summary

**Refuge:**

*Noun: a condition of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger, or trouble*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shokraker stood on the edge of their camp overlooking the lake and the walled town of Haven. The town, in truth was little more than a village, but with the influx of templars, mages, and refugees fleeing the fighting between the two aforementioned groups – *out of the frying pan and into the fire* – the town buzzed with nervous activity like a kicked beehive.

“As-eb vashe-qalab!” Ashaad Two growled as he studied the village as well. “We are going to be spread too thinly to watch both the templars and the mages.” He glowered as he tracked some movement outside of the main gates. “What are they thinking? Their commander might be an ex-templar but they still have templars policing their own. Vashedan! This…”

“Enough Ashaad. We have our task and we won’t worry about them unless it becomes an issue that we need to step in to address.” Shokraker sighed, “this would be easier if we had some eyes and ears in the village itself.”

Eluned whistled catching their attention. “I could do it,” she gestured.

“Ellie is right,” Sata-Kas added. “She understands Common and Orlesian. No one will pay attention to yet one more human going about their business.”

“Are you sure about this Ellie? You’ll be on your own.”

She looked to Kaaras and nodded to him. “I can do this.”

Shokraker studied her. “Alright. Kaaras, you’re familiar with Haven so take Ellie in tomorrow and show her around. Make sure you locate the mess because we’ll have Ellie pick up our rations while she’s in the village. It’ll give her a legitimate reason to be there that no one will question. It goes without saying, Kaaras, no staff.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Kaaras said as they walked down the trail from their camp to the main gates of Haven.

“Yes, I do. It’s time I stood on my own two feet and was useful,” she gestured

He stopped her and gave her a worried look. “I know but… but you’ve had two panic attacks in less than a week and I don’t want you push yourself before you’re ready because of some misplaced feeling that you owe us… or something.”

She pursed her lips together before she replied, “I can hide in the corner of the tent and still have nightmares. Yeah, the masks freaked me out, but now I know so won’t be shocked next time.” Kaaras
opened his mouth to argue. “I need to do this Kaaras. I need to do something and feel normal.”

He opened his mouth, closed it again, then replied, “okay. I understand, but if it becomes too much, you tell me immediately.”

“Deal.”

The noise of weapons clattering against shields grew louder as they emerged from the trees. Lines of soldiers, or soldier recruits, practiced their skills under the watchful eye of men in full plate armour. A tall blond man wearing a red surcoat with big fluffy red and black collar over gleaming plate mail called out, his voice ringing over the weapons, “Rylen! Trevelyan here has just arrived from the Ostwick Circle with a handful of his brethren. See to their addition into the rotation.” A man saluted and escorted the others away.

Kaaras tipped his head down towards Eluned as they kept walking. “Those men that just arrived, as well as the Commander and his subordinate; they’re all templars.” He glanced around cautiously. “Normally, keep your aura wrapped tight to you but for the moment, just let it out a tiny bit. Can you sense how the templars feel cold?”

Eluned concentrated and shivered when she detected what he was talking about. It was like poking into a cold nothingness.

“You can always tell a templar because they all feel like that. It’s due to their lyrium usage, it’s what gives them their abilities. Keep your aura tight no matter what. They will see you as a wild apostate without formal training in magic, they won’t hesitate to kill you.”

She nodded slowly that she understood. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.

“Um, I suggest you be careful around the Circle mages too, they will not respond favorably to you either for the most part. Most Circle mages have it beaten into them that magic is dangerous and evil, and that apostates are untrained, walking bombs moments away from becoming possessed…”

Talking about possession made the scars across her hip from the Despair demon ache. She shivered, recalling the whispers of the viddathari about her own supposed possession.

“Are you okay?”

She lifted her head and drew her shoulders back. She gave him a nod. She could do this.

Haven was a terraced village, cut into the side of the mountain. From the gates located at the bottom of the village, one could look out across the frozen lake at the bottom of the valley and up into the opposite mountain where the Temple of Sacred Ashes was located. A commanding stone bridge spanned the narrow end of the lake connecting Haven to the road cut into the mountain to take the devoted up to the temple. Eluned could see that the lower end of the path visible through the trees was dotted with people wearing armour, others wearing the red robes of the Chantry.

Thought the gates of Haven, the village was cut into several levels. The bottom level circled the town bordered with a wooden palisade. It was sparsely populated with a few buildings that Eluned recognized as barracks. Along the palisades, guards were posted at strategic locations along side huge trebuchets. There were a few merchants in place selling weapons, armour, and sundry items to appeal to the more militant minded that frequented that part of the village. A merchant discussing something with a customer stopped talking and watched as Eluned and Kaaras walked past.

“Stinking ox-men,” the merchant spat in their direction.
Eluned turned and glared at the blonde man. Kaaras placed his hand on her back and pushed her forward. “Not worth it, Ellie,” he muttered, continuing up the steps.

At the next level, there was an open communal area dotted with tents and a couple of campfires that had logs set about for people to gather close to the warmth. Clusters of small, permanent cabins lined the edges of the area, no doubt belonging to residents or more important visitors to Haven and pilgrims to the nearby temple. A wide path led to a small tavern called the Singing Maiden; several people were already congregated there, talking and dicing, playing cards, and drinking. Further yet, were the public baths and some merchants with more domestic wares.

Kaaras led her to the top level of the village. At the far end sat the Chantry with the commanding view of the village, the lake, and the temple on the opposite mountain. The Chantry was an attractive building made of stone with towering wooden doors banded in decorative metal, and stained-glass windows high above in the walls. Eluned could imagine that at noon, the sun would shine in those windows casting multicoloured light on the floors within.

He continued to guide her along a tidy narrow road that led away from the Chantry to a series of buildings that were larger than the cabins on the mid-level of the village. He pointed out the apothecary and healers’ buildings, and other sundry locations before leading her back towards the lower level again.

“You should take a stroll up here daily when you come to get the requisitioned food. Vary your route so no one makes a note that you are here regularly. No one should bother you, but if anyone asks just show them this note.” He handed her a scrap piece of parchment with a basic list of healing herbs that the group could legitimately have wanted from the apothecary. “Just listen to the gossip. People are going to be talking about the conflict but if you hear anything regarding more direct actions or about the upcoming conclave, let Shokraker know.”

She nodded as she made a note of the different routes in and out of the area.

“Come on, let’s go back down to the main level where the mess is located.”

Eluned walked through Haven twice a day, taking different routes, watching and listening to the people she passed by. People grumbled about the weather, about the accommodations or lack thereof, they grumbled about the quality of the food. She heard mages whisper and complain about the templars. She felt a visceral terror when she was close to the templars but made the effort nonetheless to skirt past a group of them sitting around the tavern to listen to them. Unsurprisingly, they complained about the mages.

The regular people, the pilgrims and refugees, that came to Haven looking for protection or even looking for family members that had been dragged off to the Circles were the best source of gossip. They watched the mages and templars equally but shared their experiences getting to Haven.

“My neighbour was killed because the templars thought his garden hoe was a mage’s staff. His widow won’t leave the farm.”

“We had to drop everything we had and run when we got caught in the crossfire on the road here. One of the mages set our cart on fire and a templar cut down our horse. We only got out with the clothes on our backs!”

“Hostilities between the Empress and the Grand Duke have devastated the Exalted Plains. I haven’t heard anything from my brother and his family in weeks.”
“There will be a sermon delivered tomorrow afternoon in the Temple of Sacred Ashes before the Conclave starts. Two of the Revered Mothers, one from Denerim and the other from Val Royeaux are delivering it. Everyone is encouraged to attend.”

“As if prayers are going to be of any help.”

“Ellie? What are you doing here? I thought you didn’t venture away from the Valo-Kas?”

Eluned whipped around at her name and came face to face with the Left Hand of the Divine. She adjusted the basket on her arm and waved a hand towards where the merchants were located.

Leliana raised a brow slightly. “You’re running errands for the Valo-Kas. Is there something they require?”

She showed Leliana the parchment, silently thanking Kaaras for this forethought.

“I see. Let me introduce you to Adan,” she said, guiding Eluned back in the direction she had come from. “He’s the apothecary here in Haven and would likely be a better source than the merchants.”

Eluned cursed under her breath. She didn’t want to spend any more time with Leliana than absolutely necessary; the woman was too observant and asked too many questions.

“She’s running errands for the Valo-Kas. Is there something they require?” a man’s voice interrupted them.

Leliana stopped and turned from Eluned to address the approaching Commander who was accompanied by a dark-haired woman also wearing heavy armour and armed with a sword. Eluned took the first opportunity to escape, ducking into the narrow walkway as quickly as she could and skirted her way back around and out of the village to return to the camp.

Upon her return to camp she helped Ashaad One, who’s turn it was to make dinner, and waited for the Shokraker and the others to return so she could relay what she had found out that day. She didn’t think she really had much information that was of use and probably should have stuck around to eavesdrop on the conversation between Leliana and the others, but the two people that she knew of made her deeply uncomfortable and she didn’t need to find out if the third did as well.

In the morning, Kaaras suggested that perhaps she’d like to attend the service. “I haven’t seen you pray but you’ve seemed more settled since your talk with the Divine. Maybe you’d find something from attending.”

She rocked her head side to side and pursed her lips, undecided. “I’d like to see the temple. I’ve heard that there is some wonderful stained glass.”

Kaaras grinned. “Then go. Look at the glass and come back. You don’t have to stay for the sermon, but with all those people there, it’ll be safe enough for you to slip in and out. No one is going to notice the odd person walking through.”

“What about you?”

“We’re going to do a patrol on the lower road in the direction of the Hinterlands after we do a sweep around the temple. The news you heard about the travellers getting caught in the crossfire is worrisome, especially so close to Haven. The last thing we need is for hostilities to spill over to here. We’ll be back in time for the evening meal.”

“Alright. I may go to the temple. I have to go get our bread rations today, so I’ll see if I have time. Be safe.”
“You too, Ellie,” Kaaras said giving her shoulder a parting squeeze.

Eluned wandered around the grounds of the building, looking at the religious sculptures and statuary, fascinated with the architecture. The whole Andraste and her pyre was disturbingly similar to the whole Joan of Arc history and it made her skin crawl at yet another parallel to her own world. She paused on the outer perimeter of the temple and adjusted the scarf tucked in around her face and under the hood of her cloak. It was bitterly cold; the sharp dry air occasionally made her breath catch in her damaged throat sending her into fits of coughing. She’d have to make a point of having some of the tea that Master Gradenigo had provided to help with her breathing difficulties when she got back to the camp later.

She looked at the main doors of the temple and the armed guards wearing some livery with hairy eyeball symbol, as Meraad called it, on them. So, they were Chantry guards and not mercenary hires like the Valo-Kas. She really wanted to take a look inside and at least warm up before she made the long trek back down the hill through the snow and wind to the Valo-Kas camp, she wasn’t all that interested in listening to the sermon that was to be delivered by the Revered Mother. She had some time before the others would be back, plenty of time to pick up the new loaves of bread from the bakery, to take a quick look around the temple. People were coming and going, no one would pay much attention to her if she chose to enter the temple.

She just had to get past the guards. Like most things, it was just a matter of confidence. If you looked and acted like you belonged, most people would happily help you along. Fortunately, it was colder than hell, no one would wonder about her scarf wrapped around her face to hide the scars, and her cloak, while not the same bright shade of red as the Chantry clergy, was similar enough to pass her as a sister from some poor backwater temple. If anyone asked her questions, she could just attempt to answer and break into coughing. They’d more than likely be sympathetic and hustle her in out of the cold. She smiled behind her scarf, she could totally do this. She threw her shoulders back, raised her head, and stepped out from behind the hedge she was spying from and walked briskly up to the temple doors. One of the guards stepped in front of her… and pulled open the door for her. Eluned laughed to herself, it was too easy!

The long nave that ran down the center of the temple were lined with ornately carved pillars that soared in the air to the ceiling far over her head. Orderly rows of pews lining the outer edges of the nave with further seating pressed against the outer walls of the temple. Above the outer edge of the nave, a gallery ran on either side with a view to the lower level. Alcoves punctuated the space with statues of Andraste in her many iterations. At the head of the nave just behind an altar stood the largest statue of Andraste, head bowed, and her hands held out over her congregation. Behind her a huge rose window of stained glass gleamed with the full sun hitting it.

Eluned wandered along the temple reading the plagues and etchings that accompanied the statues, slowly working her way deeper into the temple. People chatted, speaking in hushed tones around her as she passed by. She stayed away from the side of the temple where the templars congregated, instead passing her way through the mages who were more concerned with watching the templars than paying attention to her. She noticed a corridor that ran off to the right side of the temple behind the statue, most likely to offices or storage. Perhaps the Divine was already here with her Right and Left Hands making their final preparations before the beginning of the talks the next day. As she stood to the side of the alter, she saw a flash of silver and blue vanish around the corner ahead of her. It was odd, she hadn’t seen any uniforms or anything similar in the village over the previous week. She followed at the discreet distance, curious. Curiosity killed the cat. And satisfaction brought it back. No, it was just fucking dead. I should turn around, she debated with herself.

As she followed the corridor deeper into the temple, she could start to feel a low thrum of magic. It
drew her, called to her, like the magic in the cave a lifetime ago. It settled into her bones like the heavy beat of music thudding against her sternum. That in itself should have made her turn back. Were all the other mages and templars unaware of this magic? Perhaps it was something normal, something to do with the sacred ashes that were supposedly stored within?

She hesitated at a set of closed double doors, letting the magic rolled over her, powerful, but at the same time it repelled her. It made the hairs on the back of her neck prickle with dread and sat on the back of her tongue, bitter and foul. She turned to leave, and turned back, dithering with indecision. Someone should know about this, or maybe they already did? If they did, why wasn’t anyone here? Maybe this was a normal thing, but it felt so wrong.

She stepped towards the power placing her hands on the door handles, she’d take a peek and if looked nefarious, she’d run to find Shokraker and Kaaras for help. The power pulsed making her step back again. Something was definitely not right, she could feel how the magic felt twisted and malignant. She turned to flee when she heard it.

“Someone! Help me!” a woman cried.

Eluned recognized the voice. She sighed, closing her eyes, letting her head and shoulders slump forward in resignation. She couldn’t just walk away from someone who needed help. Curiosity got her into the mess with the Qun, and it was about to get her into whole new one.

She quickly turned the handles on the door and stepped through as quietly as she could. She froze, trying to understand what she was seeing. Nearly a dozen people in blue and silver uniforms, like the one she saw earlier stood in the circle around the room. They were casting magic, or at least providing power to a freakishly tall man, creature, thing in the center that was weaving snarling strands of power, glowing an evil red, around the Divine holding her suspended in the air by the magic. She was clearly in distress.

“Keep the sacrifice still,” the creature said in a surprisingly cultured, deep voice.

Sacrifice? Oh hell, no. Eluned took a deep breath, stuck her fingers in her mouth, and blew a piercingly loud wolf whistle startling everyone in the room. The magic in the room ebbed slightly with the loss of concentration.

“Run while you can! You must warn them!” the suspended woman called out to her.

“We have an intruder.” The creature in the center of the room turned to Eluned and she recoiled in horror. Shards of red stone, glowing and pulsing with power, jutted out of his face and shoulder. Long arms, skeletal, overlaid with muscle and more stone directed the power to the woman with one hand and held a glowing orb in the other. “Seize her!”

Several of the blue and silver uniformed people emerged from the shadows, the sound of blades being drawn from scabbards rang out prompting Eluned to draw on her own power to defend herself.

It was all enough of a distraction for the suspended woman to lash out her hand and strike the glowing orb from the creature’s hand. It sailed through the air, over the heads of the mages channelling their power, hitting the ground with a far heavier thud that an object of its size should have, and rolled towards the doors.

Eluned dropped her power and lunged for the orb, instinctively. The moment her hand touched it, the world exploded with green.
Translation:
As-eb vashe-qalab – (Q) This is bullshit
Suspect

Chapter Summary

Suspect
Verb: to believe to be guilty, false, counterfeit, undesirable, defective, bad, etc., with little or no proof

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Eluned became aware that she was lying on the ground. Her cheek and nose were pressed against damp stone and the air around her was still but decidedly chilly, smelling damp and musty, acrid with fear, blood, and sweat. Water tripped in a slow regular patter somewhere behind her. She kept her eyes shut tightly. Please, let me open my eyes to see the cave. Let all of this have been a terrible dream. Let me be home. Her brief hope shattered as she heard someone wearing metal armour shift their weight and clear their throat. They made no other move, it was unlikely they were aware that she was conscious. Taking care not to move and alert the other, she shifted her hands slightly; there was an additional weight on both wrists, she could feel the all-to-familiar drag on her shackles. Chained again.

Her heart leapt to her throat; had the Qun found her? She immediately reached for her magic and found it responded to her call. Not the Qun then; they would have collared her immediately, or failing to have one available, dosed her with the poisons that blocked her magic as easily as the collar did.

Suddenly, her left hand crackled with magic. She bit the inside of her cheek, tasting blood, to stifle the impulse to make a sound. The magic snapped and ignited the nerves in her arm like grabbing onto a live electrical wire, or the control rod when she wore the collar. Against her will, she opened her eyes and watched the malicious green energy spark and sputter where it was buried in her flesh.

More footsteps shifted uneasily around her. There was more than one person in the room with her. She gave a resigned sigh, no point in pretending to be unconscious any longer, sooner or later someone would notice and frankly, she was getting uncomfortable laying as she was with her face against the cold stones. She could kneel for hours on end but twisted in a heap as she was, it was getting painful. With the energy in her hand quieted down, she closed her hands into fists and slowly raised herself off the ground to her knees, sitting back on her heels with her hands resting on her thighs.

As she moved she heard multiple blades, swords, being drawn.

Rage suddenly bubbled up, she was not going to be cut down while chained to a floor. A quick flicker of her eyes told her that there were at least four people holding blades on her. She immediately cast a ring of fire around herself to keep the others back, the magic came so easily it should have made her pause if she hadn’t been so furious. Several of the soldiers cried out in alarm as they fell back from the intense flames that spun in a maelstrom surrounding her. One of the soldiers swiftly left the cell, banging the iron bound wooden door shut behind them, the clang of armour and slap of leather soles faded as he ran from the cell.
She immediately started channelling a much heat as she could into the chain where it ran through the big ring on the floor. If she could soften the metal enough, she could weaken the links to force open. The links were glowing nearly white as she wrapped her hands around the cooler part of the chain and grit her teeth while giving the chains a vicious tug. She stifled a groan as the chain held and yanked painfully at the metal running through her wrists. She channelled more heat into the chain to try again.

Before she could make a second attempt, footsteps approached at a quick pace. Two people, no three, entered. The guards in the room sheathed their weapons when the new people arrived, the original guard taking up their former position.

The flames around her gutted out when a dark-haired woman, fierce as any Valkyrie or Amazon, strode up to her and closing a fist in her hair yanking her head back to hold a sword against her throat. “Tell me why we shouldn’t kill you now, mage. The conclave is destroyed. Everyone who attended…” she faltered momentarily, steeling herself. “Everyone who attended is dead. Except for you.”

Eluned glared back at her interrogator. She didn’t know what had happened to respond even if she could speak.

The woman frowned angrily, lowering her sword and releasing her hair, she reached down and roughly grasped Eluned’s left hand, pulling it up hard against the limits of the chains, “explain this.”

Eluned hissed in pain, the green glow crackled to life again in her palm before flickering out. She looked at the woman and gave a sharp shrug.

“You’re lying,” she snarled drawing back her gauntleted hand to strike.

This is bullshit, Eluned thought angrily. She ignored the woman and yanked on the chains again. Torchlight flickered as the sword came up again into her line of sight.

“We need her, Cassandra” the other woman said stepping from the shadows and breaking her silence. She grasped her elbow and pulled the dark-haired woman away.

Eluned turned her head recognising the voice. As the woman emerged from the shadows into the light, moving silently despite wearing chainmail, her suspicions were confirmed. Leliana had originally protested her presence with the Valo-Kas to Justinia; she wasn’t likely to be merciful to her now if she suspected her of being the cause or complicit in the awful events. The Left Hand of the Divine circled her and Eluned got the distinct impression of a great predator circling its prey looking for an opening, a weakness to exploit.

Leliana stopped and crouched down in front of her, “do you remember what happened, Ellie? How this began?”

Cassandra looked at her in surprise. “You know this woman?”

“Yes. She was with the Valo-Kas. Do you remember anything, Ellie?”


“A woman?” Her attention focused sharply on Eluned. She’s a shark, and there was blood in the water.

Eluned cupped her breasts in her hands and nodded. “Woman,” she repeated. Someone snickered
and stopped immediately, no doubt in response to the disgusted noise Cassandra made. She extended a hand like she was offering it and then shrugged, dropping her hand and frowning again. *She had gone to the bakery to order bread for the day, and then... She went for a walk to wait, but...* She really wasn’t sure what had happened. “Where Valo-Kas?” she mouthed.

“Go to the forward camp Leliana,” Cassandra said stepping turning both of them away. “I will take her to the rift.”

Eluned slammed the chains onto the floor drawing their attention back to her. “Where Valo-Kas?”

“We don’t know, Ellie. Many... hundreds of people are missing or dead,” Leliana replied softly. “We can discuss the Valo-Kas later. After.”

Eluned sat back on her heels and dropped her hands into her lap, stunned. The chains chimed on the stone floor. Kaaras, Sata-Kas, Meraad, Katoh, Shokraker, and the others. Dead? *She couldn’t possibly have lost all her friends yet again.*

Cassandra turned back to Eluned, removed the chains that were linked to her own fetters, and after a moment’s hesitation bound her hands together with rope. Eluned rolled her eyes. She got to her feet at the warrior’s behest. She glanced around quickly for her cloak and scarf that she remembered she had been wearing yesterday… or when whatever happened, happened. They were nowhere to be found. The soldiers in the cell trailed behind them.

The cell she was held in exited into some kind of subterranean hallway with alcoves along one side and rooms with doors along the other. Books, chests, and other items scattered haphazardly in the torch-lit alcoves. They emerged at the top of the stairs into a large open hall. Eluned guessed, correctly it appeared as they left the building, that they were in the smaller Chantry building that stood within the village of Haven, itself far below the temple at the top of the mountain.

*Fuck, it was cold!* Eluned trudged after Cassandra, head down and started to channel a bit of mana to warm herself since no one thought to give her something to protect her from the cold. She called on a trickle of mana to warm herself and it responded like a fully opened firehose. She halted in surprise, raising her head as she did so and got her first glimpse at the sky.

Cassandra stopped, noticing that she no longer followed. “We call it ‘the Breach’. It is a massive rift into the world of demons that grows larger with each passing hour.”

Eluned tore her gaze away from the nauseating swirl of green and looked at Cassandra, raising her brows in question.

“It’s not the only such rift, just the largest, all were caused by the explosion of the conclave. Unless we act, the Breach may grow until it swallows the world.”

Suddenly the Breach in the sky pulsed outwards and the mark on Eluned’s hand flared up in response. She groaned at the pain, stumbled and dropped to her knees in the snow. She pulled her hand against her belly and folded over it, breathing noisily through the pain.

Cassandra squatted in front on her placing her hand against her shoulder to steady her, “each time the Breach expands, your mark spreads… and it is killing you. It may be the key to stopping this but there isn’t much time.”

Eluned looked up at her, blinking back the tears that pricked at her eyes.

“Whether it is possible to close the Breach is something we shall discover shortly. Someone caused this, and you are our only suspect. If you wish to prove your innocence, this is the only way.”
She stared at Cassandra, looking for some signs of deceit, and finding none, she scowled and looked away. She nodded once, sharply.

“Then…”

She nodded again.

“Come, your mark must be tested on something smaller than the Breach.” Cassandra helped her back to her feet and they proceeded through the village, pausing only to grab a cloak from a pile and throwing it around Eluned’s shoulders. She nodded in thanks, ignoring the obvious blood stains that decorated a good portion of the hem.

She kept her head down, partially to hide the scars on her face from view, but she also didn’t want to see the looks of accusation being thrown her way. The words that were muttered – murderer, oxmen’s whore, abomination – as she passed were bad enough.

Once clear of the village crowds, they paused to cut the bindings on Eluned’s wrists. “You will not run.” It was as much a statement of fact as it was a question.

She shook her head and continued to follow the warrior up the mountain trail, thinking furiously about what she could remember. She had been in the village to get bread for the Valo-Kas... *Dear god, what had happened to them?* She had seen no signs of the Tal-Vashoth mercenaries in their hike up the mountain.

The stone bridges she had walked before to the temple lay in ruins, stone walls smashed, and trees blasted flat. Chunks of stone, blazing with green fire, rained from the swirling vortex in the sky, igniting everything in their path as they slammed back to the ground.

She wanted to ask Cassandra some more questions, before she had a chance they heard the clash and roar of battle ahead of them. She froze on the edge of the shattered wall as Cassandra leapt down, drawing her sword and shield to help the others that were already fighting. A shifting green *something* hovered above the ground, twisting and pulsing in time with the Breach above. She could feel the magic in her hand pulse and throb in time with the thing before her. Demons and shades swarmed around it, fighting the soldiers present. The green pulsed and Eluned cringed at the sound it made, like nails on a chalkboard, or metal scraping against metal, as more demons appeared.

Cassandra looked back at her, “why are you standing there? Help us!”

Eluned startled at her shout and slid down off the wall. *Despair demons*, she curled her lip in derision as she started to cast, *those fuckers went down easily to her fire.*

In a moment of calm when the last demon fell, a bald elf appeared at her side and grabbed at her left arm, holding it up towards the pulsing green rift, “quickly, before more come through!”

She flinched hard at his grasp and tried to yank away from him, but he didn’t even budge with her effort. Her attention immediately snapped to the sensation of the magic from the green connect with the mark in her hand as it raced up her arm, hot and sharp. She could feel the green, like a hole torn through fabric or flesh, discordant notes of music that jarred her senses. She instinctively grasped at the edges and pulled them together, willing them to mend. The edges resisted like a rubber band being pulled tighter and tighter, until suddenly it snapped back closing the green, the mark on her hand falling silent.

She looked at her hand, giving it a little shake to dispel the lingering feeling of electricity, and then at the elf. She took a few steps away putting some distance between herself and the mage.
A short man, a *dwarf*, walked over. “I think you need to make introductions before you go groping the prisoners, Chuckles.” He turned towards Eluned and inclined his head, “Varric Tethras, rogue, storyteller, and occasionally unwelcome tagalong”, the last comment with a wink to Cassandra. She responded with a disgusted look on her face.

Eluned looked at the dwarf and frowned slightly. He seemed… oddly familiar but she couldn’t place him. She pointed at the crossbow on his back and gave him a thumbs-up.

“Ah, isn’t she. Bianca and I have been through a lot together. She’ll be great company in the valley.” Cassandra stepped up to argue with him, there definitely seemed to be some animosity between those two and Eluned had no interest in whatever their issues were.

“My name is Solas, if there are to be introductions,” the elf stated drawing her attention from the bickering of the other two. “I’m please to see that you still live.”

“He means that he kept that mark from killing you while you slept,” said Varric patently ignoring Cassandra’s arguments.

Unfazed by the interruption, Solas continued, “whatever opened the Breach in the sky also placed the mark on your hand. I theorized that the mark may close the rifts that have opened in the Breach’s wake. It appears that I was correct.”

Cassandra strode forward, “meaning that it could also close the Breach itself.”

“Possibly,” he replied folding his hands behind his back and rocking on his heels. Looking at Eluned, he continued “it appears that you hold the key to our salvation.”

“Good to know. And here I thought we’d be ass-deep in demons forever,” Varric snarked.

“Ugh,” Cassandra groaned with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. “Come on, we must get to the forward camp quickly.”

“Well… Bianca’s excited,” Varric stated. He glanced over at Eluned, studying her as they followed the warrior. “So are you just painfully shy or are you unable to speak?”

She looked at him, tapped her throat and shook her head.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he immediately replied looking contrite. “Well fortunately I love to talk so we won’t be subjected to uncomfortable silences on our hike.”

They continued hiking the broken trail up the mountain when Eluned felt the mark in her hand begin to vibrate. She let out a low whistle of warning and ducked off the side of the path, crouching to look past the corner of the stone. She signaled that there were demons, holding her first and pinky fingers upright while holding down the middle two with her thumb, then gestured three to the right, one to the left.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Varric said softly falling into step with the others behind her.

She looked over her shoulder at the others and nodded before proceeding forward. The demons were swarming around aimlessly under a rift before a closed gate. Aimlessly that was, until they noticed the group approaching. Eluned shivered as she felt the unfamiliar sensation of a magical shield being dropped over her, she hesitated for a moment casting a quick glance back at the elven mage, but then focused on cutting a path through the demons until she could affect the rift that hovered over their heads. The rift closed with a crash and she shook out her hand again.
Soldiers at the gate exclaimed their relief at their arrival and ushered them through and along the bridge to a table set up with several people gathered for a heated discussion. Eluned spotted Leliana immediately, beside her, a man in religious garb viciously argued with her. He paused as they approached, his gaze falling on Eluned.

“Chancellor Roderick, this…” Leliana started to introduce her.

“I know who she is. As Grand Chancellor of the Chantry, I hereby order you take this criminal to Val Royeaux to face execution.”

Eluned frowned at the man. *Surely the gaping hole in the sky was a more immediate concern than setting a date for her death?* She rapped her knuckles on the make-shift table interrupting the argument of the others. She pointed at the Breach and then gestured with her hand towards her head splaying her fingers out in an exploding motion, “*are you out of your mind?*” She tapped her fingers against her temple and then made a rude gesture with the same fingers towards her rear end, “*or is your head stuck up your ass?*”

The chancellor’s face turned purple with outrage, clashing horribly with the red on his robes. His mouth opened and closed like a landed fish as he stuttered incoherently.

Varric barked out a laugh and then coughed to cover it up. “Well, that was certainly clear.”

Cassandra pressed her lips together with disapproval, then addressed the group, “closing the rift at the temple is the priority over justice at the moment. We can go through the valley, but we’ll have heavy resistance. It will cost many lives, the forces there are struggling as it is.”

“The mountain path, while not as quick may be safer. I lost contact with a scouting patrol through the upper pass, they could still be alive,” Leliana added.

Both women turned and looked at Eluned. Her brows rose incredulously. *They were asking her?* She rolled her eyes and then beckoned with her hand towards the valley, “*pull them back,*” then circled the group and pointed up the mountain path, “*we’ll look for the scouts.***

“It’s on your head, Seeker,” the chancellor threatened Cassandra as they moved past.

Eluned flipped him the bird as they moved past. *Sanctimonious asshole.*

Eluned ignored the thanks of the scouts, while she was happy that they had been rescued, she had no interest in their platitudes. She just wanted to get this whole ordeal over with and then she could go find the Valo-Kas.

The rest of the way to the temple was quiet, eerily so. They saw no demons, but also no wildlife either. As they got closer, the trees had not only been blasted down by a shockwave but also burnt and covered in ash. Everything was covered in ash. A gust of frigid wind blew down between shattered walls stirring up the ash into a grey cloud that settled on their skin, their hair, and into their clothing. Eluned swallowed hard at the sickly acrid stench of burnt flesh. It was not an unfamiliar scent to her having been responsible for burning many enemies during her time with the Qun, but the strength of the smell from the number of dead made it almost overwhelming. She tried to breathe through her mouth to avoid the stench and cloying scent at the back of her nose, but the ash remaining in the air made her cough painfully.

They passed between a broken archway and the sight beyond made Eluned’s heart stop. Carbonized corpses, some still burning, littered what was the courtyard at the front of the temple. Most of the corpses were facing away from the temple, people fleeing whatever had happened, but a few were
facing the temple. A ragged cry tore from her throat as she ran across the courtyard and dropped to her knees before a corpse belonging to a qunari. The heat had desiccated the flesh and muscle bonding it to the bone below, the horns twisted into unrecognizable shapes. She had no idea who they had been. She raised a shaking hand to touch the face and recoiled in horror, tears tracing wet trails through the soot on her skin, as the body crumbled under her fingertips until it collapsed into a pile of ash that scattered with the wind.

The others watched her with interest. “I might be wrong, Seeker, but that doesn’t look like the actions of a mass murderer.”

Cassandra flicked a glance at Varric. “Perhaps, but her grief does not automatically absolve her of guilt.” She strode over and hooked a hand under Eluned’s arm to haul her to her feet. “Come, we must press on.”

Eluned glared at her, yanking her arm out of her grasp, climbed over some rubble and entered what remained of the temple.

“This is where you walked out of the Fade and our soldiers found you,” Cassandra told her. She stopped beside Eluned as she looked into the crater at the center. “They say a woman was in the rift behind you; no one knows who she was.” She turned away as others joined them. “Leliana, take your men and spread out in the temple.”

Eluned led the others along the winding shattered path through the temple to the crater floor. The magic in her palm throbbed and tugged at her, pulling her towards the rift that twisted and crackled above them.

“How is the hour of our victory,” a disembodied voice boomed out. “Bring forth the sacrifice.”

“What are we hearing?” Cassandra asked.

“An echo of events. At a guess, the person who created the Breach” Solas replied.

“Keep the sacrifice still…”

“Someone help me!”

Cassandra gasped, “That is Divine Justinia’s voice…”

The rift shifted and the mark on Eluned’s hand sparked and crackled making her stagger, gasping in pain.

“Someone help me!”

A loud high-pitched whistle echoed across the cavernous space. The others turned to look at her with a mixture of shocked and incredulous expressions.

“That was…” Cassandra said to her. “Most Holy called out to you, but…”

Suddenly the rift shifted, and the image of a woman suspended in red swirling energy held up by a dark entity appeared before them. She looked over to the ghostly image of cloaked person, “run while you can! You must warn them!”

“We have an intruder,” the dark entity exclaimed, “seize her!” The rift shifted again, blinding everyone temporarily.
“You were there! Who attacked? And the Divine, is she?” Cassandra demanded. “Was this vision true? What are we seeing?”

Eluned rubbed the heel of her hand against her forehead, trying to massage the growing headache that was developing with the sub-auditory thrum from the rift and her palm. She shrugged, tapped her temple, and shook her head. “I don’t remember.”

Solas interrupted them, “this rift is not sealed but it is closed. The mark can be used to open the rift and then seal it correctly. However, opening the rift will attract attention on the other side; that will mean demons. Be on your guard.”

Chapter End Notes

I am so excited. I recently commissioned an artist over on Tumblr, saybakkk, to create Eluned for me. I am so thrilled with the results and wanted to share it with all of you if you haven’t already seen it on my own Tumblr. Without further ado, Eluned Treherne (she looks so wonderfully pissed off):
She stood still and high on the cliff edge looking down at the little town. The guards’ torches left tiny comet trails of light, smeared and moving in slow motion, as they travelled along their sentry paths far below her. The sky was dark, stars glittered in the sky, and the two moons hung full and low making the snow glitter as it blew across the hills and drift below her, but the wind didn’t touch her.

She stood still and high on the cliff edge looking down at the little town as if watching some scene being played out on a screen. The green of the Breach leached into the inky blackness of the sky and swirled in slow motion in front of her.

“Why are you here?”

“I’m looking for the way home.”

Solas’ brow rose in surprise, fully expecting her to turn around as speak to him with her silent words and gestures. “You can speak?”

“Of course, I can. Or I could until they took my voice.” The environment shuddered with the venom he could hear in her tone.

They. The Tal-Vashoth bandits the Valo-Kas had rescued her from.

“Your way home is before you. You are home.”

“No. This isn’t home.”

“Perhaps it is not your original home, but you are safe in bed in a cabin down there. You just need to wake up.”

Solas was surprised again when she resisted.

Hot air currents contrary to their apparent surroundings started to rise buffeting him, making him struggle to maintain his stance. Gentler winds lifted her hair around her, ethereal flames flickered over her hair and form burning neither.

His brows twitched as he pursed his lips. “You are home,” he said forcefully. “You need to. Wake. Up.”

“No!”

Fiery heat blasted out from her in a wave, striking him and shoving him away from her. Solas
opened his eyes and stared at the unconscious woman in front of him that had forced him from her dreams.

She stood still and high on the cliff edge looking down at the little town. The guards’ torches left tiny comet trails of light, smeared and moving in slow motion, as they travelled along their sentry paths far below her. The sky was dark, stars glittered in the sky, and the two moons hung full and low making the snow glitter as it blew across the hills and drift below her, but the wind didn’t touch her.

She stood still and high on the cliff edge looking down at the little town as if watching some scene being played out on a screen. The green of the Breach leached into the inky blackness of the sky and swirled in slow motion in front of her.

Solas studied the woman standing exactly as she had the day before. He saw two dark shadows, and a pale bright shadow that flickered and pulsed, circling her and hovering around the periphery of his sight. He hadn’t noticed them on his previous attempt to wake her. That they were spirits was obvious, but were they there because of her or simply present because of the tear in the Veil? She didn’t appear to be one of the fabled Dreamers, she didn’t appear to be changing her dream, willing it to suit her requirements but instead, merely observed it. It was as it had been on his earlier attempt to bring her out of the Fade.

“Why are you here?”

“I’m looking for the way home.”

“Where is home?” He tried a different line of questioning with the hope to keeping her calmer. He looked out across the valley. “Is it to the north?”

“It’s not here. I can’t get there by going a direction.”

He cocked his head to the side, curious. The Fade was never straight forward but such obscure answers were more typical of spirits than humans or elves. “Are you a spirit?”

She gave him a bemused, lopsided smile. “No, I’m human.”

“If you are human, then why can you not go in a direction to reach home?”

Her expression turned wary. “This isn’t my home.” She turned away from him and looked at the Breach, “but I felt the way I came when I closed that rift at the temple.”

“If you are not a spirit…” Solas said aloud as he tried to piece together what she was telling him. He frowned as a thought came to mind. “Is there someone there with you? Is that why the rift feels like the way home?”

“No, I’m alone. I’m always alone!” The wet trails of tears shone on her cheeks when she turned back to him. “This isn’t my world, but when I connected with that rift, for a moment, if felt like the door that brought me here.”

Solas stared at her, stunned. She wasn’t speaking of possession, but surely, she couldn’t be speaking of an Eluvian and one that was active between worlds.

“Don’t tell them!” she said urgently. “They want to kill me as it is.”

Solas blinked his eyes and found himself looking at the still unconscious woman laying on the bed.
She stood still and high on the cliff edge looking down at the little town. The guards’ torches left tiny comet trails of light, smeared and moving in slow motion, as they travelled along their sentry paths far below her. The sky was dark, stars glittered in the sky, and the two moons hung full and low making the snow glitter as it blew across the hills and drift below her, but the wind didn’t touch her.

She stood still and high on the cliff edge looking down at the little town as if watching some scene being played out on a screen. The green of the Breach leached into the inky blackness of the sky and swirled in slow motion in front of her.

The shadows, dark and light, still lingered, but the dark ones seemed denser, stronger than before. He recognized them now as spirits of Fury and Anguish. The light one was nearly gone but he thought that it might be a spirit of Hope. His brow drew down and he pursed his lips as he considered the woman before him. There were many spirits of grief and anger drawn to Haven in the aftermath of the explosion, but none so strong as those that lingered around her. Was it the anchor that amplified her emotions drawing them to her, or something of the woman herself that drew them?

“Ellie.” Solas stepped up beside her on the cliff edge overlooking Haven and the Breach beyond. “You need to wake up,” he coaxed gently.

“No. I have to find the way home.”

“Ellie. The way home is not here but you will not find it if you let your body die in the Waking world.”

“They’re going to kill me any way.”

“No, they are not.”

She turned to him, tears streaked down her cheeks. “It would be better if I died.”

“No, it would not.” He glanced at Fury and Anguish that slinked ever closer. “There are other dangers to staying here.”

“I am in no danger from them,” she replied dismissing his concerns.

“If you are too weakened in the Waking, you will be. I promise you I will help you look for the way home, but you need to… Wake. Up.”

She nodded slowly, closed her eyes, and vanished.

Eluned woke up to the feeling of tears sliding down her face to her ears. She lifted her arm and slung it across her face, squeezing her eyes shut and taking deep breaths to calm down. A crash of glass had her bolting upright from the bed and calling fire to both her hands.

“Forgive me, my lady, I didn’t mean to wake you, I swear!”

She extinguished the spell and winced as the frightened elf threw herself to the floor, her forehead nearly bouncing off the wood planks in her haste to bow before her. She gave a low whistle to get the woman’s attention. When she didn’t respond, she reached out and tapped her on the shoulder.

The elf slowly raised her head without actually looking at Eluned, “I beg your forgiveness and your blessing. They say you saved us. The Breach has stopped growing, like the mark on your hand. It’s all anyone has talked about the last three days.”
She had been unconscious for three days? She glanced around the cabin. There were some vials left out on a table by the bed. A small box containing what looked to have been empty vials lay shattered by the prone elf; she had probably been in to collect them when she woke up. The elf still hadn’t looked at her. Frustrated, Eluned gave her shoulder a bit stronger of a push to make the elf look up.

The woman squeaked when she made eye contact, her eyes flicking across her her face and back up, “I’m sorry, I’ve said the wrong thing! I’m only saying what I heard. I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m certain Lady Cassandra would want to know that you’ve awakened. She said, ‘At once.’” The elf jumped to her feet and scrambled backwards to the door, nearly running into it as she spun around and bolted.

What the hell was that about? She sat back on the bed, pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them as she leaned back against the wall. She lifted her left hand to rub her forehead and stopped, staring at the green slash across the palm of her hand. Oh right. She dropped her hand with a sigh and brought the other up. She winced as her fingers brushed across a tender area on her forehead; her fingers traced a new wound running down her forehead through her left eyebrow, skipping her eye and down her cheekbone to curve towards her jaw.

She remembered what had happened in the temple.

“The mark can be used to open the rift and then seal it correctly. However, opening the rift will attract attention on the other side,” Solas warned. “That will mean demons. Be on your guard.”

Cassandra called out to the soldiers and scouts that ringed the crater as Eluned raised her hand to the rift.

And demons there were. A huge Pride demon emerged killing one soldier immediately before anyone had a chance to react. Eluned struggled to connect to the rift again while lesser demons continued to emerge with every twist and pulse of the rift. The Pride demon cackled as it cut through one soldier then another that weren’t fast enough or too distracted by other demons to dodge the reach of its whip of lightning. She ducked behind masonry to block the Pride demon only to be flanked by a shade or Despair demon.

The Despair demons always made a beeline for her. When she finally had a clear opportunity, she reached up and connected to the rift. It was bigger than any she had dealt with before and she struggled as it tugged on her; she felt like the connection was trying to draw her within instead of her pulling it closed. She gritted her teeth and concentrated on the magic; she didn’t see the Despair demon slash at her with its claws. She knew exactly what it was when the freezing pain raked down her face; she couldn’t see to her left where the blow had come from, whether that was because she lost the eye or just blinded from the blood she couldn’t tell. She also couldn’t disengage from the rift to face her attacker.

She didn’t remember what happened after that but obviously from what the elf had said, she managed to close the rift. She brushed her fingers down the wound again. Well, at least she hadn’t lost the eye after all.

She looked around the cabin, undecided. The elf said Cassandra wanted to know when she woke up, did that mean she was to go to Cassandra or that Cassandra would come to her? Either way, Eluned wasn’t interested in having any sort of conversation with the warrior. She hopped off the bed. The tunic she was dressed in fell nearly to her knees. It certainly wasn’t her own clothing based on the fit. She opened the one trunk in the cabin and frowned as she pulled out unfamiliar clothing. She dumped a heavy leather coat on the floor and some other items before finding a soft woolen tunic and leather breeches. She wrapped some leather bracers around her wrists to hold the sleeves in place and cover her fetters. On a second inspection, the leather coat seemed like it might be a good fit; she
pulled that on, her own boots, a pair of gloves to cover the mark on her palm and opened the door of the cabin.

There were lines of people outside her door. She quickly ducked back inside and closed the door, leaning back against it. No one pounded on the door after she retreated. She sorted through the chest and pulled out a scarf and wrapped it around her neck and lower part of her face. If she had to walk through all that crowd, she didn’t want them staring at her face. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door again and stepped outside. It was silent until she started walking through the crowd.

“That’s her. The Herald of Andraste.”

“She sealed the rift and she’s gonna seal the Breach.”

“I thought she was a prisoner?”

“She’s the oxmen’s whore. It’s blasphemous.”

“Will you bless us, my lady?”

There was a clear path leading from her cabin and up to the top level of the village but Eluned was having nothing to do with it. She headed straight towards the gates, after a moment of hesitation, the people quickly moved out of her way. Voices got louder as confusion set in behind her.

“Where is she going?”

“Is she leaving us?”

She walked briskly, skirting the training grounds where soldiers were going through drills, to the path to the Valo-Kas camp. A few paused in their sparring to watch her leave. She noticed someone in plate armour with the red emblazoned fiery sword separate from the recruits and fall into step a short distance behind her. She didn’t bother acknowledging him but continued through the trees to her destination.

The camp was abandoned. The tents stood haphazardly, the fire pit choked with blown snow. She ducked into the first tent, it appeared like someone had gone through the camp and rifled through all the contents looking for valuables. Weapons, clothing, and personal items were all missing, leaving behind broken vials, scraps of cloth, and sundry items. She hurried across to the tent she and Kaaras has shared. All the herbs, her tea and ointments, and Kaaras’ healing supplies were all gone. They hadn’t returned or had and left again in a hurry, but she didn’t believe that they would have gone without her. Were they missing, dead, or had something else happened? She couldn’t say who had ransacked the camp; refugees, bandits, or even the soldiers under orders.

Eluned gathered up a few armloads of wood and set them in the campfire. She sent a quick glance at the templar, then cast her magic igniting the wood. The templar shifted his weight slightly but didn’t make any other moves. She studied the templar, blatantly staring at him. His armour, while looking to be well cared for, had scratches and dents, likely from the recent fighting. He had a newish cut across his forehead that bisected his right eyebrow. The top half of his long brown hair was pulled back into a messy tie with the rest falling around his collar. She couldn’t tell how old he was, whether a few years older or younger than herself. Life was harder in this world and the last few weeks exhausted the strongest making everyone appear older than they were.

She sat on one of the logs before the fire and contemplated her options. She wanted to rejoin her friends within the Valo-Kas but she didn’t know where they were or if they were even alive. She wiped her fingers on her leg, subconsciously trying to erase the sensation of the charred qunari
corpse collapsing under her touch. Did they think she was guilty, would they even want her with them anymore? She could wait for them at the camp in the hope that they would return for her. She could go and search for them, but she had no idea of where to start and based on the condition of the camp, she had no resources of her own to support her own search. She heaved a sigh and rubbed her forehead, only to stop immediately as she brushed the new wound she had forgotten about it.

The templar shifted, turning to face someone that approached from the direction of Haven. After a quiet word with a dark-haired man, the templar saluted and disappeared back towards the village. The newcomer sauntered over to her campfire, adjusting the sword on his hip out of his way, sat down on one of the logs adjacent to her and facing the way back to Haven. He held his hands out to the fire, warming them as he studied her as openly as she studied him.

“What are you doing out here, lass?” he asked.

“Minding my own business… Templar,” she mouthed, emphasizing the last word.

He snorted. “Don’t beat around the bush, do ye? I’m no longer with the Order.”

She shrugged. “I can still feel it within you,” she gestured.

He rubbed a forefinger across the tattoos on his chin as he studied her. “We got off on the wrong foot, lass. Name’s Rylen, former templar from the Starkhaven Circle.” He offered his hand to her to shake.

She tucked her hands further into her sides under her elbows.

He dropped his hand, his eyes flicking to the scars around her mouth and other signs of neglect that he could see. “Look, I understand that you don’t trust anyone.” He held his hands up before him when she gave him a withering look. “They just want to talk to you.”

“Am I prisoner?” she gestured weaving her fingers together like a cage.

“No.”

“Am I slave?” She grasped at an imaginary collar.

He frowned. “Maker, no!”

“Then I’m not at their beck and call.” She tossed another log on the fire signalling her intent to stay where she was.

Rylen sighed and looked around the abandoned camp. “Sitting here freezing our bits off isn’t going to find your friends. The Inquisition could help you with that.”

Eluned’s brows drew together. Templars. Inquisition. All headed by a religious organization. And then there was that title some people appeared to be calling her; the Herald of Andraste. Didn’t that have all kinds of warm and fuzzy connotations. He was right about one thing; she wasn’t going to be able to find the Valo-Kas without some help. Resigned, she extinguished the fire with a sweep of her hand and stood up.

“Neat trick, that,” Rylen said standing up. “Does this mean that ye’ll talk to them?”

She huffed and nodded.

“Wonderful.” He stepped aside to let her pass then fell into step beside her, touching his fingers to
her back to guide her.

Eluned recoiled violently away and glared at him.

He held his hands up, “sorry, I was just trying to be a gentleman. Message received; don’t touch.” He dropped his hands to his sides. “Would ye do me one favour, lass? Stay close on our way back. Not everyone is… ah… well, I’ll let the others explain but I’d prefer if ye stayed close.”

She gave him a slow nod and turned back to the path.

The crowd of people that had been gathered along the path from her cabin and through the village had dissipated in the few hours she had sat out at the camp, but that didn’t stop people from pausing whatever they were doing to watch as she returned to the village. Unlike previous times she had walked through the village, no one made any derogatory comments or attempts to approach her at all. Whether it was the glowering presence of the templar at her side or not, she was relieved not to have to deal with the attention. Rylen guided her to the Chantry and inside. At the far end of the building, he banged on the large wooden door with his mailed fist before opening it for Eluned. As she stepped into the room, he said to those that waited within, “I found the Herald. She hadn’t been informed that you wished to speak with her.”

Eluned turned sharply to glance at him as he closed the door behind her. He shot her a wink and a smirk, and tugged the door shut. She turned back to the four people present in the room.

Cassandra opened her mouth to say something and closed it. She shifted on her feet, her brow pinching momentarily. “Thank you for joining us, Herald. We have much to discuss.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m still struggling a bit with the non-verbal dialogue but I hope that it makes sense that Eluned’s silent words are displayed as “italicized text in quotes” whereas thoughts are italicized without quotes. Of course, if I can express some speech with ASL hand gestures (handspeak.com is super useful for this!) and keep the flow going, I try to do so.

Thank you for your continued investment in the story. I love getting to chat with all of you that leave comments after a new chapter is posted! It makes my day :)
(Re)Union

Chapter Summary

(Re)union

*Noun: the act or process of being brought together again; the action or fact of joining or being joined*

Chapter Notes

Okay, it's still *technically* Wednesday but it is earlier in the day than I would normally post so there you go Hopesbird! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Thank you for joining us, Herald. We have much to discuss.” Cassandra waved her up to the large table that stood in the middle of the room. Maps, parchments, and assorted items, including a large leather and metal bound book sat on the table. “I would like to introduce you to our Ambassador, Lady Josephine Montilyet.”

“A pleasure to finally meet you,” the pretty brunette replied with a pleasant smile. Eluned gave her a slight nod back.

“May I present Commander Cullen, leader of the Inquisition’s forces.” Cassandra indicated the only other person remaining in the room that she hadn’t yet met. He was dressed in the full plate cuirass with a red and black fur mantle on his shoulders that she had seen him in the day she escaped from Leliana. She could feel the same coldness from him that she had felt on Rylen and the templar that had followed her from the cabin earlier in the day.

“Such as they are. We lost many soldiers in the days following the explosion, and I fear many more before this is through.” He held his hand out across the table to her to shake. Eluned stared at him and tucked her hands under her elbows as she had with Rylen. He cleared his throat awkwardly and dropped his hand back to his side.

“And of course, you have already met our spymaster, Leliana,” Cassandra concluded.

“Yes, tactfully put,” Leliana sighed.

Eluned studied the four of them as they studied her. “*Why am I here?*” she mouthed.

“The Divine left a directive to restore the Inquisition of old, to restore order from the chaos that now stands. We will close the Breach, find those responsible, and…”

Eluned interrupted Cassandra, gesturing sharply, “*stop! You want to start a war?*”

“We are already at war. Its mark is upon you,” Cassandra protested. “The people are calling you the Herald of Andraste. You are already involved.”
“How am I the ‘Herald of Andraste’?”

“People saw what you did at the temple, saw how you stopped the Breach from growing,” Cassandra answered. “They have also heard about the woman appearing in the rift behind you when you were first found. They believe it was Andraste.”

“It’s quite the title, isn’t it? How do you feel about that?” Cullen asked.

“It’s utter bullshit.” Her heart pounded with anxiety, the mark on her left hand crackled in response. She glanced down at her hand with a grimace, rubbing her right thumb in to massage the left palm. She shook her head at the two warriors and started to back away from the table. She had seen enough of war and wanted no part of it. “They can stop calling me that. I will not be some religious icon at the front of an army to oppress people.”

“We can help you, Ellie,” Leliana said softly capturing her attention from the other two. “We can find out about that the magic placed upon you. We can protect you from those that still think you are responsible. All we ask is that you help us close the Breach. You are the only one that can.”

She considered the request. She waved her hand over the map in front of her and then made a gesture like horns. “Where are the Valo-Kas?”

They all looked puzzled by her gestures but Leliana’s face suddenly cleared in understanding. “The Valo-Kas?”

Eluned nodded. “Find them, bring them, and I will stay to help close the Breach. Only that.”

“If we find and bring the Valo-Kas back to Haven, to you, you’ll stay to help?” Leliana asked for the benefit of the others. “That’s fair, Ellie.”

Eluned studied them all for a moment, then nodded and spun on her heel exiting the room.

“Well. She’s… difficult,” the Commander commented as the door fell shut behind again. “Is she going to be a problem?”

“She’ll come around. From what the leader of the Valo-Kas had told Justinia and I, Ellie has had a very difficult ordeal she is still trying to recover from. Being held prisoner by us didn’t endear us to her.”

“Speaking of the Valo-Kas, Leliana. How exactly are we to find them?” Cassandra asked.

The spymaster gave a little smile. “I already know where they are. They are being held in Edgehall. They will be here in less than a day once I sent a raven with the orders to release them.”

“Leliana!” Josephine admonished.

“Don’t be naïve, Josie. You know how The Game is played. We need her on our side. We were going to release the Valo-Kas in any case so if we use their return as an incentive to get her cooperation, what’s the issue?”

“It was dishonest.”

“Regardless, Leliana is right. We need her on our side,” Cassandra stated.

Eluned stood outside the Chantry doors, pulling her scarf around her face, as she tried to decide what she should do with herself until she could be reunited with her friends. The anger that had sustained
her through the confrontation demanding the return of the Valo-Kas had faded away leaving her feeling adrift. People passing by noticed and addressed her with awe in their voices; the attention left her feeling anxious and raw as she stood there. She had spent so many years being invisible that she didn’t know how to cope with the constant attention. Some people started to approach her then suddenly veered off.

She started to hurry to her cabin but altered directions to visit the apothecary as the cold air made her cough and her throat ache. With all of the supplies from the Valo-Kas camp missing, she didn’t have any of the herbs and teas that Master Gradenigo had provided, but hopefully the apothecary would have some embrium and elfroot that she could make a tea with.

As she changed directions, she noticed that she had a shadow. She looked over her shoulder and spotted the first templar from earlier. He must have been why people had stopped from approaching her. She skirted around the back side of the tavern and ducked down the alley to cut across to where some of the other merchant huts were to see if the templar followed. Her eyes watered in the bright winter sunlight as she stepped out of the shadows and ran into a body.

“Sorry,” she gestured still blinking, momentarily snow blinded.

“It is quite all right, Ellie. I was hoping to run into you although not so literally.”

She flushed, recognizing the elf from her trip up to the temple. “Solas.”

“Do you have some time to speak with me?”

She hesitated and glanced back over her shoulder, the templar was at the far end of the lane. She pointed at the adjacent apothecary’s hut then back at him, “the apothecary, then you.” She just finished conveying her intent to him when a fit of coughing started again.

He followed her glance and spotted the templar. “Ah, I understand. I will accompany you then we can go speak in my cabin.”

Eluned nodded and Solas fell into step beside her as she continued to the apothecary. After a little bit of fumbling and some assistance from Solas to translate to the grumpy apothecary, Adan, they returned to his cabin with a small sachet of dried embrium and grated root of the elfroot plant. Solas handed her a mug of hot water, she sat with her hands curled around the cup inhaling the fragrant steam from the herbs as she waited for them to steep.

She kept her eyes averted but she knew that the elf was studying her. “The chosen of Andraste. A blessed hero to save us all. I am curious as to what kind you will be.”

She frowned and looked up at him, “not a hero. No interest in being one. And no interest in being their messiah.”

“But you intervened in a dangerous situation to save a stranger. Is that not heroic?”

“No, I was exploring, and I heard her call for help.” She shrugged, “I couldn’t just walk away.”

“Many others would have. Your compassion does you credit.”

“Perhaps I’m just foolish. Curiosity has gotten me into trouble before.”

“I have to admit, I am curious about you, myself.”

“I am not that interesting,” she gestured.
“I disagree. Your magic for instance…”

She raised a brow in question.

“There are spirits that lurk near you in the Fade, but not in the way I have seen spirits interact with the Avvar mages. You do not cast like any of the elven I have seen. Nor do you structure your spellcasting like a Circle educated mage, even those of Rivain or Tevinter, which while more liberal in their application, still have the earmarks of a Circle education. You could follow a tradition related to the Chasind, but when I spoke with you in the Fade and asked about your home, you always looked North even when disputing that there was no particular direction to reach your home.”

Eluned tried to remain calm but her cup rattled as she lowered it to the table.

His eyes caught the tremble in her hand then he looked at her directly. “You learned your magic in the Qun,” he concluded. “How long were you bound in chains because of your magic?”

She patted her head, made horns with her index fingers, made a gesture for putting something within something else, then put up both hands like a barrier before her.

He parsed her gestures. “Head. Qunari?” She nodded. “In. Wall.” His brows rose as he understood. “You’ve been bound since the Arishok was in Kirkwall?”

“Yes.”

“Over five years.” She blinked, shocked. “You didn’t know how long?”

She shook her head. “No,” she gestured then traced an arc back and forth with a hand over her outstretched arm. “No track of time.”

“No, I suppose you would not have been able to,” he said sadly. “I am confused. Your magic training was at the hands of the Qun which was for approximately five years, so either you are much younger than you appear, or you managed to hide your magic very effectively.”

She sipped her drink and kept her eyes down.

“I suppose there is one other option. Your magic did not manifest until later in life, but that is extremely unlikely to occur with anyone born in this world.”

Eluned’s eyes shot up before she caught herself.

“Ah. So it is true what you said in the Fade, you are not from this world.”

Her eyes widened in shock. She shoved the chair back from the table dropping her cup in her haste to flee from the elven mage. “How? I was dreaming!”

“Peace, da’len, I am no threat to you.” Tears suddenly welled up in her eyes as his words brought the memory of Gelasan to the fore. “You were dreaming but I am able to visit the dreams of others,” he reassured her, incorrectly attributing the cause of the tears. He picked up her spilt cup and refreshed it, placing it down on the table before her chair again. “I am sorry that I alarmed you. Please sit. I think we can help each other.”

She warily eyed Solas as she sat back down and picked up the refreshed cup of steeped herbs. “How?”

“First, am I correct that you were not from this world?” She nodded slowly. “The others want you to
join their Inquisition, do they not?

“Yes. I demanded they find the Valo-Kas. In return I would help them close the Breach.”

Solas nodded in approval; she established from the outset that she wouldn’t cave to their demands without making any of her own. “Very good, you negotiated yourself into a position of power.”

“I’m not interested in power.”

“Perhaps not; however, it will gain you leverage to use the Inquisition’s resources into researching how you got here and whether you can go home. I am interested in finding out what caused the Breach in the sky and placed the magic upon your hand.”

“You think whatever did this survived the explosion?”

“You did. I will not believe it destroyed until I see the shattered remains myself. In any case, I believe your origin and subsequent survival of this magic are related. Our objectives are aligned, we can help each other.”

She studied him closely, his expression was calm and open; either he was very good at hiding his true intentions or he truly was interested in aligning with her to find the answers they both sought. She just didn’t know him well enough to say one way or another, but one thing was certainly true; she needed an ally that had far greater magical knowledge than she possessed if she was to get any further with that which was buried in her flesh. Solas had already proven knowledgeable; first preventing the magic from killing her initially, and then how to apply it to close the rifts. She needed him to be on her side. “I don’t want the others to know where I’m from.”

“I understand. We can keep that between us.”

She nodded and extended her hand, “agreed.” If he could help her free herself from the mark and find her way home, she would exert whatever influence she could on the fledgling Inquisition to find those answers.

Solas gently took her hand, ignoring the tremble as she resisted the instinctive desire to flinch at the contact. Having seen her reactions first hand to being touched by others, he grasped the level of trust she was now offering. “Thank you for your trust, Herald.”

Eluned drew her hand away and rolled her eyes. “I’m nobody’s Herald. It’s Ellie.”

Two days later, Eluned’s presence was requested once again. As she walked through the Chantry, she could hear raised voices coming from beyond the closed doors at the end.

Cassandra’s voice rose in frustration, “enough magic poured into the mark…”

“Might destroy us all. Templars could suppress the Breach, weaken it so…” She recognized the voice of the commander.

“Pure speculation,” Leliana supplied as Eluned knocked and pushed open the door without waiting for acknowledgement.

“I was a templar. I know what they are capable of.”

“Unfortunately, neither group will even speak with us yet. The Chantry has renounced the Inquisition – and you, specifically” Josephine stated turning to Eluned. “Some are calling you the
‘Herald of Andraste’, and that frightens the Chantry. The remaining clerics have declared it blasphemy, and we heretics for harbouring you. It limits our options. Approaching the mages or templars for help is currently out of the question.”

“Easy solution; dispute the title.”

“Even if we tried to stop that view from spreading…”

“Which we have not,” Cassandra interrupted Leliana.

Eluned’s eyes opened wide. “Are you trying to get me killed?”

Leliana shifted her stance in annoyance, shooting a glare at Cassandra. “The point is, everyone is talking about you. People are desperate for a sign of hope. For some, you’re that sign.”

“And to others, a symbol of everything that’s gone wrong,” Josephine added. “The Chantry is telling everyone that you’ll make it worse.”

A knock at the door halted the discussion until the scout that appeared to hand Leliana a note exited again. She glanced through the note and tucked it into her sleeve. “There is something you can do. A Chantry cleric by the name of Mother Giselle is attending to refugees in the Hinterlands. She has sent word that she’d like to speak with you.”

“Why?”

“She has a better idea than I of the parties involved. Her assistance would be invaluable.”

“We will not send you to the Hinterlands alone. I will accompany you,” Cassandra offered.

“Look for other opportunities…”

Eluned held her hand up interrupting Cullen. “Wait. I said I’d help seal the Breach. Not parade around the countryside as some divine-touched mascot.”

“You said you’d help us seal the Breach,” Leliana continued smoothly. “We need help from others in order to do so. Whether you accept it or not, the people call you the ‘Herald of Andraste’. That can only help us obtain the assistance we need but only with your cooperation.”

Eluned raised a brow at her in question, raising a finger to remind them of the condition she had set. The return of the Valo-Kas.

“Speaking of the Valo-Kas. My scouts have spotted them. They should be arriving at the gates at any moment.”

Eluned narrowed her eyes at Leliana; she was getting manipulated by the spy mistress. She was going to go have a chat with Solas about their own strategy if the Inquisition was going to be trotting her out around the countryside. And she definitely wanted to make sure that she had the mage with her. Without a further word, she left the others and headed at a brisk pace through the Chantry. Shoving open the doors, she broke into a jog and headed for the gates.

“Hey Songbird! What’s up?” Varric called out to her as she passed his tent. She made a quick hand gesture in passing and kept going. He shook his head, not understanding her meaning. Shouldering Bianca, he followed not far behind.

She ran down the steps, across the terraced area by her own cabin and down the final set of steps out
the gate. Emerging through the trees along the path, she spotted horns. Sticking a couple of fingers in her mouth she let out a piercing wolf whistle which was answered in kind. As they walked out of the trees into the open area of the training field she quickly scanned the group. They looked tired, filthy, and generally worn out, but alive. She spotted Sata-Kas, Shokraker, Katoh, and some others that she recognized but didn’t know quite as well.

Where was Kaaras?

As the group spread out, Eluned finally spotted Kaaras supporting a limping Ashaad One. She rushed over, relieved. Kaaras handed Ashaad One over to another of the group and then grappled Eluned up in a hug, swinging her feet off the ground. “Ellie! You’re all right!” He put her down, his eyes instantly drawn to the strange magic he could feel emanating from her left hand. “Uh, well mostly all right. What is this?”


“We were patrolling below the temple when we spotted some suspicious activity soldiers in unfamiliar uniforms. There were multiple trails, so we split into groups to investigate and Shokraker sent Meraad, Hissra, and Sataa back to the temple to make sure that whomever or whatever wasn’t doubling back behind us. Meraad was to take the front and the other two flanking. It was a decoy obviously. All the trails led to one point at a cliff face below the temple. Not long after we all arrived at that spot, a huge explosion occurred. It knocked all of us unconscious but the cliff above us kept us safe with only minor injuries.”

“When we came to, we were surrounded by soldiers wearing the hairy eyeball,” Shokraker added with a gesture towards some of the soldiers wearing the Inquisition armour. “They hauled us off to Edgehall for questioning where we have been ever since the explosion.”

Eluned narrowed her eyes with suspicion. Leliana fucking knew where the Valo-Kas had been the whole time.

“You haven’t seen Meraad or the others?” Kaaras asked, drawing her attention again. Eluned’s eyes welled up as she shook her head sadly. If Meraad had taken the front position as Kaaras had said, then it was his body that crumbled into ashes under her hand at the temple.

“So they’re dead, then.”

She nodded, she flipped her hands over and pointed at the temple location, “dead qunari at temple.” She looked over at Katoh; the qunari woman’s chin wobbled as she fought back her own tears. She detached herself from Kaaras and walked to the other woman. “I’m sorry,” she gestured.

Katoh gave a little nod then to Eluned’s surprise she found herself being hugged by the woman. They would both miss the lovable, cake-stealing idiot. They released each other at the sound of a throat clearing.

Eluned turned around to find a very anxious looking scout standing outside the edge of the group. “Herald. Sister Leliana and the others request that you return to the Chantry.” His eyes flicked nervously over the huge horned warriors and rogues. “That is, if you are satisfied with the return of the Valo-Kas. Their belongings have been relocated to a new camp which I am to guide them to now.”

“Herald? Ellie, what is going on?” Kaaras asked, confused.

She rolled her eyes. “Really long story. I’ll find you after?”
Kaaras nodded before turning to follow rest of the Valo-Kas.

“Find out when we’re getting paid,” Shokraker called out as she walked past to follow the scout.

Chapter End Notes

I am in an art commissioning frenzy! This latest one is by the lovely Kawereen. It's glorious! I love the symbolism of the broken chains. She did such a lovely job on Eluned. :)
**Confrontation**

Chapter Summary

Eluned watched for a few moments as the scout led the Valo-Kas to their new camp on the side of the lake.

“Your friends are back?”

She looked at Varric and nodded. “All but three.”

“I'm sorry about that, Songbird. Where have they been?”

Her expression turned dark. “Held at Edgehall by Inquisition.”

“But Nightingale said…” He looked at her grim expression. “Well, shit.”

She sniffed. *Shit, indeed.* She needed to have words with the others about their lies. She headed to the gates and spotted the Templar that had been following her around the day she woke up. There had been another Templar as well, a woman. They seemed to be taking shifts following her.

She marched back into the Chantry and shoved the door to the back room hard causing it to crash against the stone wall. She heard blades being partially drawn before they realised that they weren’t under attack. They looked wary as she stormed in. *Good, they should be nervous.*

She immediately turned on Leliana. “You lied to me. You knew where Valo-Kas was all along.”

Leliana didn’t respond but she saw the fleeting guilty look on Josephine’s face. “You want me to work with you, but I can’t trust you with the truth.”

Cassandra pressed her lips together in disapproval, whether it was over Leliana’s actions or her accusation, Eluned couldn’t tell.

“You are right, of course,” Josephine said.

“Josie…”

“No, Leliana. The Herald is in the right of it. We can not expect her to risk herself and put her safety in our hands when we can’t even be upfront with her that we knew the whereabout of people she cares about.”

Eluned held Leliana’s gaze until the spymistress nodded. “Very well,” she sighed.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me?” They shook their heads. “Really?” She walked briskly to the door, flinging it open again. She grabbed the startled templar standing guard outside the door by the pauldron and yanked him through the doorway. He stumbled into the room with a crash of metal plate. She released him immediately and moved away, the cold void she associated with the Templars making her skin crawl. “Try again,” she gestured looking at Cullen.
He flushed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Ah, they are tasked to guard you.”

“Why?”

“For your protection. It is a precaution as there are still those that feel you are responsible for the destruction,” Cassandra answered smoothly.

“Fine. Assign a regular soldier, not a templar.”

Cullen shifted his weight and drew himself up to his full height. “No. Trevelyian, please return to your post.” The templar made a hasty salute and fled the room, closing the door behind him. “Both Trevelyian and Darrow are competent templars. We don’t know the source of the magic upon you and the risk of possession…” He shook his head, “I will not have the people of Haven endangered by an unsupervised mage.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I didn’t accept a demon when I was at my lowest, most desperate. I won’t accept one now. Templars feel awful.”

Cullen’s brows shot up in surprise.

He started to open his mouth to argue when Cassandra interjected again. “I have to agree with the Commander and insist on the templar’s presence in your company. It is not a statement on your competence as a mage, but we don’t know how that magic was placed upon you. The person or party responsible may come at you with hostile magic and a templar would be able to defend you.”

Eluned ground her teeth in annoyance. That was, finally, a reasonable argument for the templar guard and one that she couldn’t easily argue against. She needed to carefully consider what issues she was going to fight with these people to get her way when it counted as she discussed previously with Solas. She gave a brief nod.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Herald. I’m certain in time you will become more comfortable with their presence,” Cullen graciously replied.

*Becoming comfortable with one’s jailor? It was an insidious thing how one could become desensitized in that manner. Had she not finally accepted her own leash in the brutal hands of her arvaarad? She gave herself a mental shake; she would need to stay on her guard. Better to remain uncomfortable than become complacent and let another leash be placed upon her.

“If we have that resolved and you are satisfied with the return of the Valo-Kas, can we turn our attention to your meeting with Mother Giselle?”

Eluned stepped out of the Chantry, blinking at the bright reflection of light off the snow. Her head was pounding, and she just wanted some peace and quiet after listening to the four advisors bicker and argue in circles for hours. Truly she despaired of ever being able to get the Breach closed as she agreed to do. Talking to this Chantry cleric seemed pointless; it didn’t matter what the Chantry thought about her, they weren’t going to lend help any way. She rolled her eyes. Regardless, if she was going to play along with the plan to speak to this woman and if the scouting reports were accurate, there was no way she was going to walk into a war zone with less than a handful of people. She needed to talk to Shokraker and Taarlok about joining the Inquisition and accompanying her to the Hinterlands.

“Hey Songbird, going to the Valo-Kas camp? Mind if I tag along?”

Eluned nodded to Varric, waving for him to join her.
She had barely managed to introduce him to half of the Valo-Kas before Kaaras grabbed her hand and drew her through the camp to sit on a log by a tent at the far side. He noted that she didn’t flinch or draw away from the Vashoth mage like she did with everyone else.

The Valo-Kas were a friendly group and to his surprise, there were several fans of his writing among them. No sooner than Varric was introduced, someone was pressing a mug of alcohol into his hand and several others sat down and fired questions about his books. He answered questions good-naturedly all the while watching as Eluned and Kaaras sat facing each other, heads tipped towards the other as the healer’s hands glowed as he ran them over her. After poking at her left hand for a few more minutes, Kaaras stood up and Varric had an odd sense of déjà-vu seeing Eluned with her head bowed before the standing qunari. He quickly shook it off as they joined everyone else at the fire.

Bowls of hot stew were passed around to everyone including Varric and he noted that choice little tidbits of food kept finding their way around to Eluned without her noticing. He marvelled that the mercenary group, filled with huge gruff and boisterous fighters and rogues, had taken in the human mage and cared for her without diminishing her. For the first time since meeting Eluned, he could see some of her real personality as she sat between Kaaras and a warrior, introduced as Sata-Kas, their hands gesturing in a lively conversation filled with laughter.

As it got later and darker, the templar that had followed them out of the village and had hovered on the edge of the camp, previously ignored, took a step in. “Herald. It is getting late. It’s time to return to your quarters.”

The Valo-Kas went silent as they turned as one to look at the templar. He started to shift in discomfort but then straightened his stance holding their gaze.

Eluned slashed her hands in front of herself. “No. I sleep here tonight,” she gestured. She flicked her hand at him to signal for him to leave.

“I’m sorry Herald, but I must insist. The council doesn’t want you unprotected.”

Sata-Kas stood up from his spot next to Eluned and stalked over to the templar, looming head and shoulders above the human. Varric bit back a smirk as the templar drew himself up to his full height and visibly stiffened to prevent taking a step back under the glare of the Valo-Kas warrior. “We protect our own, templar. You are not needed here,” he growled at the human.

Varric watched, amused, for a couple of seconds before he slapped his hands on his thighs and stood up. “Thanks for dinner and drinks folks, but it’s time I turned in myself. Have a good night Songbird.” He turned and clapped a hand on the templar’s shoulder, “come on, you can escort me back to the village. She’s safe here for the night. You can come escort her in the morning.”

The templar resisted. Varric sighed and grabbed a vambrace, forcibly making the man turn or risk falling over. “Trevelyan, is it?” The templar nodded as Varric gave him a shove forward in the direction of the main gates. “You’re going to have to pick your battles a bit better. There was absolutely no way you were going to survive to get her out of there once she decided she was staying. She has entire merc group of Tal-Vashoth guarding her. Trust me when I tell you, nothing is getting to her tonight.”

“But the Commander…”

Varric sighed again, “look if Curly gives you a hard time about it, tell him to come talk to me. I’ll bet you a sovereign that he’ll thank me for preventing one of his men from becoming a red smear in the snow.”
“Not even one day!” The raised voice and the sound of a metal gauntlet crashing to the table’s surface had Eluned closing her eyes and flinching, waiting for the blow she knew was coming. There was a sharp inhalation of breath followed by a muttered apology before she released her own breath and opened her eyes and hands that she had clenched automatically.

“I thought we had agreed that the templars would accompany you when you moved about Haven?”

Eluned nodded. “Does that include standing over me while I sleep? When I bathe or visit the latrines?”

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck as a flush of colour crept up his neck. “Uh, no, that’s not necessary.”

“Then what’s the problem? One escorted me to Valo-Kas for the night, the other fetched me in the morning. Is Valo-Kas company not sufficient protection?”

“What? No! I mean, yes they are. The Valo-Kas a very capable…”

“Good, I’m glad you think so. I wish for them accompany me to Hinterlands.” Before anyone could start arguing with her, Eluned continued, “you are sending me into the heart of the mage-templar conflict with less than a handful of support. Your current forces are insufficient to quell the unrest there or to provide escort to get Mother Giselle here. The Valo-Kas can help.”

“That is actually a very sound idea,” Cassandra conceded. “The security is no longer needed in Haven at this time and would provide the Herald with protection on the road as well as additional support to deal with any hostile forces we encounter in the Hinterlands when we arrive.”

“We would need to speak with Shokraker regarding the revision of their contract if they are amenable,” Josephine added, making notes on her parchment.

Eluned grinned. “They’ll agree,” she gestured. She glanced over at Leliana who raised a brow a fraction at her gaze acknowledging her manoeuvres. Eluned gloated silently to herself. Yes Nightingale, I can manipulate as well to keep myself insulated with my own allies.

Eluned resisted the urge to grind her teeth in frustration; it took just over seven days to walk all the way to where the Chantry mother was staying in the Hinterlands for a one-sided conversation that amounted to a half hour discussion about Chantry politicking. Why a raven could not have been sent with the information they needed regarding the Chantry players, she didn’t know. She arranged with Cassandra and Leliana’s lead scout, a lovely dwarf by the name of Lace Harding, to have Mother Giselle and some of the Hinterland refugees properly escorted to the safety of Haven with half of the Valo-Kas company.

The more she learned about the Chantry; its systematic and persuasive indoctrination of the people over hundreds of years to see mages as malign creatures that were less than people, their blatant disregard of the abuses of mages at the hands of their jailors, and its overt racism against non-humans, she would have been more than happy to lob her version of magical napalm into each and every Chantry and be done with it. She understood, all too well, the rebel mages’ desire to destroy everything in their path with the first taste of freedom from the chains of slavery. She heard the whispers of vengeance in her own mind, especially when the opportunity came to launch that destruction at those same abusers.

But.
The civilians who just wanted to live their lives in peace, caught in the middle of the war; the death and destruction they witnessed at the Crossroad in the Hinterlands, burnt farms and destroyed homes, bodies cut down by both magical and mundane weapons, they did not deserve the horrors they were dealt. She tried not to look too closely at the destruction, it was too like the destruction she herself created in Seheron at the end of her arvaarad’s leash.

She insisted that they stay in the Hinterlands for a few more weeks after Mother Giselle was escorted to Haven. They could have returned but Eluned couldn’t stand the idea of sitting around to wait for Leliana to get the Chantry contacts organized to meet with them, not when she could be doing something for the people that were still in the Hinterlands. It’s almost fun tripping around the hills and forests hunting down rams, eliminating the bandits that tried to capitalize on the conflict and confiscate their stockpile of resources, and deliver it all back to the refugees in the Crossroads. No matter how she tried to duck their thanks, she found the people there are more inclined to bow to her and address her as “Herald”, or “Your Worship” than not.

“You are still discomforted by your title and the people’s attention?” Solas asked as he fell into step with her as they headed back to their camp after dropping off the last load of pilfered supplies to Corporal Vale.

“Yes. I was just helping. Anyone else would have done it.”

“But no one else did help until you, da’len. I know it causes you discomfort, but it gives them hope. Hope that someone finally cares about them and that is powerful.” He glanced around to see where the others were before continuing in a low voice. “It will help our cause.”

She considered his words and with a sigh, nodded. He was right. They needed as many eyes and ears as they could get that weren’t dedicated to the Chantry and the current political hierarchy. “I will endure, hah’ren.”

In the morning, they headed out to deal with rogue templars and rebel mages whose conflict had spilled out onto the King’s Road. The bodies of mages, templars, and civilians littered the road and surrounding countryside. Broken carts, tools, household items burned along with the homes as lingering magic kept travel treacherous as they worked their way forward clearing the road to make it safe for people to return.

The group split up to flank a bunch of templars and mages that were so consumed with killing each other that they didn’t notice the arrival of the others. Cassandra called out to them to lay down their weapons but was ignored.

Eluned signalled that she was going to skirt around a wall to get a better vantage point and ducked through some brush. She could hear the others just beyond the broken wall of stone, she hurried along the broken path to get to the opening she had spotted earlier. A clank of metal against a loose stone had her halting abruptly and casting her gaze around the area for a place to take shelter or at least put some distance between herself and the approaching templar. The templar stepped around the broken wall and raised his shield when he spotted her. Immediately she started casting drawing the flames into her hand… and they vanished. It was like her magic being cut off when the collar was activated but she could still feel the magic present. She quickly cast again and then suddenly she felt as if she had been doused in freezing water and slammed to the ground. The mark flared in a backlash, crackling up her arm. Everything ached, the blood in her veins felt simultaneously frozen and on fire. She stumbled to her knees, her fingers scrambling at her throat as she desperately gasped for breath but the existing damage to her throat choked her in her panic. Her blood pressure pounded in her head all but deafening her to the sound of the approaching feet.

“Well, well. You’re a much better offering than the usual apostates we’ve been slaughtering lately,”
he wrapped his gauntleted hand around her throat and yanked her to her feet, her toes scrambled against the loose stones as her hands scrambled at the hand around her throat. “I think I might have some fun with you before I send you to the Void.”

The templar threw her to the ground knocking the breath from her. He propped his shield against a broken chunk of masonry and placed his helmet and gauntlets on top. His sweaty hair fell into his eyes as he started to undo his sword belt, all the while keeping his eye on Eluned.

She rolled onto her side with a pained groan and spotted movement at the edge of the stone wall. She pulled herself up onto her hands and feet, kicking stones at him and making as much noise as she could as she crawled away to keep his attention on her. The templar had just finished removing his sword when he jerked once, twice and fell onto his face; two thick bolts from Varric’s crossbow stuck out of his back like porcupine quills.

Kaaras yanked the blade at the end of his staff across the throat of the templar as he hurried to her. Gently helping her up to a seated position, he scanned her with his magic looking for injury, healing the bruises and the scrapes on her throat from her own fingernails. He placed his hand across her chest and placed hers on his own. “Concentrate on my breathing. Match yours to mine. You were hit with a Smite, it hurts but it will pass.” She nodded as her breathing settled and she could draw breath without it catching in her throat. “Good. Here, it’s a restorative,” he said passing the potion offered by Solas to her, “it’ll help you back on your feet.”

“Thank you,” she gestured as she got back to her feet.

Cassandra approached, stopping to check the dead templar as she walked by. “Where is your staff?”

“She does not use one, Seeker.”

“All mages use a staff, Solas.”

“All Circle mages do, yes. Not all apostates use one and much can be done without.”

Cassandra’s lips thinned as she considered that. “Nonetheless, a staff will be procured as it can be used for defense if her magic is disrupted again.”

“A wise precaution. I’m sure that between Kaaras and I, we can teach the Herald how to use one.”

She grunted in acknowledgement. “We should continue to the next camp.”

They ran into a few more minor skirmishes before they reached camp, Eluned stayed close to Kaaras and he cautioned her not to use her magic unless necessary as she was still under the influence of the Smite and could put herself into mana imbalance if she wasn’t careful. Once at camp, Kaaras spoke quietly to her and sent her off to get cleaned up.

“Do you think it wise to coddle her so?” Cassandra asked watching Eluned disappear into the tent she shared with Kaaras. “She needs to toughen up if there is any hope that she will be able to close the Breach.”

Kaaras bit back his immediate retort and looked at Cassandra thoughtfully. “Ellie is one of the toughest people I have ever met. What she has been through…” he trailed off and gave his head a shake not wanting to reveal more than the story Shokraker had provided of Eluned’s origins. “I have seen her withdraw completely into herself until she became little more than an animated doll. What you call coddling is merely my effort to keep her present. If you don’t want her to break before she saves the world for you, you could show a little more compassion. Now if you will excuse me, lady Seeker.” He strode away to the tent leaving Cassandra blinking in surprise in the dressing down the
Tal-Vashoth mage just gave her.

When Kaaras emerged from the tent a few hours later after he and Eluned had eaten and she retired to her bedroll, Varric called him over to the fire gesturing for him to take a seat. “Is she going to be all right?” he asked nodding over to the tent where Eluned was sleeping.

“Yes. She’s tired and sore but she’ll be fine.”

“I overheard what you said to the Seeker; good for you. Songbird is fortunate to have a friend like you.”

“She needs as many friends as she can get.” Kaaras looked pensively at the tent he shared.

“What is it? Something wrong?”

“I’m just wondering if there will be nightmares tonight.”

“Does she often have nightmares?” Solas asked as he sat down beside them.

“Not as much as she did but some things, like being made helpless or that remind her of her captivity set her off. The – bandits – had managed to get their hands on a control collar and kept her in a mask. The first time she saw an Orlesian with their masks… that wasn’t a good night.”

As the evening wore on, both templars that guarded Eluned came to the fire to listen to Varric’s stories as did Cassandra. Kaaras looked at the tent as both templars stiffened and then he too sensed the gathering of mana as Eluned came stumbling out of the tent. Trevelyan started to slowly get to his feet.


“I won’t submit,” she gestured.

“Ellie, no one is asking you to. You’re safe.” He slowly approached and reached out to stroke his fingertips along her arms. “I’m Kaaras. You’re safe, it was just a nightmare.”

Eluned blinked, then focused on him. “I’m sorry,” she gestured as he pulled her into a hug.

“It’s all right. Come on, I’ll stay with you.” Kaaras turned her to the tent leaving everyone back at the fire to their own thoughts.
Fealty

Chapter Summary

Fealty

Noun: the obligation to be faithful to something to which one is bound by pledge or duty

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I noticed,” Solas said, falling into step beside Kaaras the following morning as they headed back to Haven, “that you reached out with your magic when you approached the Herald last night.”

Kaaras studied the elven mage for a moment before replying, “in my experience with her, she responds more positively to a mage when in that half-waking state.”

“Do you know why?”

“Specifically, no. From my knowledge of her, I don’t think she’s had much interaction with other mages, but she finds us safer. Templars seem to be particularly disturbing to her.”

Solas’ brows drew together, “I was under the impression that yesterday was the first time she had experienced a templar’s Smite.”

“Yes,” Kaaras answered slowly. He carefully continued, “the ones we rescued her from had a control collar. The Smite would have been a similar experience, I would imagine.”

“You are a good friend to look after her so.” He lowered his voice, “and protect her secrets.”

Kaaras startled and looked worried before he quickly cleared his expression. “I would defend her with my life. Even if she wasn’t the only person that could save this world.”

“Do not fret. I keep them as well. I merely sought your advice in case such an incident should occur in the future if you were unavailable.” After walking for a few more minutes, Solas asked, “have you witnessed much of her magic?”

“Ah, no. One of the Valo-Kas has a strong dislike for magic and voiced his opinion so she hasn’t demonstrated much beyond to light the fire if asked. As of this trip, some magic in combat. I needed to teach her how to keep her aura to herself, so others didn’t detect it.”

“I see,” Solas responded thoughtfully, considering what basic holes in her magical training confirmed for him. “I have seen only fire-based magic from her. Your own magic, while has the hint of the Circle to it, is more naturally structured. The Inquisition advisors will want her to be more widely skilled particularly in her own defense after this. I suggest that we volunteer to do so, otherwise, they may attempt to find a Circle mage to teach her. I do not think that the rigid, fear-based methods of the Circle will be of use to her.”

“I agree.”

Solas lowered his voice, “the mark makes her much more visible to the spirits of the Fade. She
already has three such beings attracted to her; it would not be wise to teach her to fear them.”

“What!?” Kaaras quickly looked around to see if he drew unwanted attention. Eluned continued to walk, unaware, ahead of them with Varric who was regaling her with a story. He lowered his voice. “What do you mean that there are ‘three’?”

“I thought you knew, acquainted as you are, with her nightmares. I am sorry to have alarmed you. There are three spirits that I identified in the Fade during the days she remained unconscious after sealing the large rift at the Temple of Sacred Ashes; Fury, Anguish, and surprisingly, Hope.”

Unbidden, a smile crossed Kaaras’ face. “Hope. That does not surprise me. To have survived what she has and to keep going…” He cleared his throat at the inquisitive look on Solas’ face. “I won’t spill her secrets, even to you, but in the time I’ve known her, I’ve learned one definite thing; she clings to hope that one day she’ll have a better life.”

Solas tipped his head, “then as her friends, we must do what we can to teach her, so she realises that hope.”

After returning from the Hinterlands, Leliana and Josephine arranged for a meeting with the Chantry leaders using the information provided by Mother Giselle. With the full company of the Valo-Kas, Eluned and the others left Haven once again and headed to Val Royeaux. As much as she didn’t want to meet with the religious leaders, if it brought help they needed to close the Breach, sooner rather than later, then she’d put in an appearance.

A guard captain stood beside one of the large golden lion statues that decorated the central tower of the market. He sneered as Eluned and her group approached. “Stand wary, guardsmen! The Inquisition is here… along with the ‘Herald of Andraste’.”

“That’s the mage they say killed the Divine?” one of the guards asked.

“Let her pass. The Inquisition is the Templars’ problem,” the first responded.

Eluned’s fingers twitched as she resisted the urge to pull her hood up over her head. She tucked her chin further into the scarf that draped around to cover her mouth and followed Cassandra. They continued to the far side of the market. A make-shift dais was set up before the gates to the docks. They could see a Chantry mother along with a cleric and several Templars waited for them, already addressing the crowd.

“I heard this so-called ‘Herald’ is actually a spy for the ox-men.” Someone scoffed in response.

“Let her pass. The Inquisition is the Templars’ problem,” the first responded.

Eluned stepped up beside Eluned and whispered a quiet word of reassurance to her before sliding into the crowd. It didn’t help calm her trembling but focusing on pulling her aura into herself as he suggested, helped to keep her from flying into a panic.

Leaving the Valo-Kas on the outside of the gates of the city had seemed like a sensible plan initially; they didn’t want to provoke the Chantry representatives with a mercenary show of force. Eluned was having second thoughts about that plan. Her two templar shadows stood behind her, disguised as it were, having given up the insignia of their former order in favor of the Inquisition’s. Cassandra stood at her side, both Varric and Solas slid into the crowd to keep an eye on things and provide support if needed. It wouldn’t take much at all for their small group to be overwhelmed and for Eluned to find
herself swinging from the gibbet located at the end of the market.

The Chantry cleric, Mother Hevara, riled up the already hostile crowd with inflammatory accusations. “Good people of Val Royeaux, hear me!” the woman called out to the crowd.

Eluned flicked her attention away from the accusations the woman threw in favor for listening to the sound of many plate and chain clad warriors marching into the market. The sound bolstered the confidence of the gathered crowd and that of the Chantry mother as she declared throwing her arms in the direction of the approaching troops, “you wonder what will become of her murderer. Well, wonder no more! The Templars have returned to the Chantry! They will face this ‘Inquisition’ and the people will be safe once more.”

“Breathe, Songbird,” Varric said out of the side of his mouth as he sidled up beside Eluned, having noticed she had become pale with the large Templar presence.

Eluned felt cold, muscles aching, in the oppressive presence of so many templars. She flinched as a templar struck Hevara, knocking the older woman to the ground, senseless. Her blood pounded in her ears, drowning out the argument that went on around her between Cassandra and the Lord Seeker who berated the Chantry officials and mocked the efforts of the Inquisition. She stared at the woman lying on the ground in her red surcoat, but saw Merilie, her blood red down the front of her from the hand that struck from behind to cut her throat.

“Da’len?”

Eluned gasped.


Eluned’s eyes snapped up into Solas’ blue ones and she shuddered as the memory released it’s hold on her. The pressure from the templars lessening as they marched away, abandoning the citizens without so much as a backward glance.

“Does the Herald have nothing to say for herself in her own defense?”

“The Herald does not speak.”

Eluned gave Solas a nod that she was all right and then stepped around, placing a hand on Cassandra’s arm. Crouching down in front of the prone woman, she pulled her scarf down from her face. Hevara gasped as she saw the scars and still gaunt appearance of her face. “I can not speak,” Eluned gestured tapping her own throat.

“Just tell me one thing,” the Chantry mother studied her, “do you truly believe that you are the Maker’s chosen?”

Eluned ignored Cassandra’s sound of frustration as she shook her head. “I do not claim the title others give me,” Solas translated her gestures when Cassandra did not.

Hevara glanced at Solas and then back to Eluned. “That is… more comforting than you might imagine. I suppose it is out of our hands now. We shall all see what the Maker plans in the days to come. There must be a way though this. Is it you? Is it the Templars? Is it the Maker’s will? There is chaos ahead, whatever your intentions.”

Eluned rolled her left hand over baring the sparkling green slash in her palm to Hevara, then gestured for Solas to translate, “my intentions... I just want to fix the sky, so I can live what remains of my life in peace.”
They left the city in silence. Everyone held their own council regarding the shocking actions of the Templars and the subsequent invites they had received on their way out of the city to meet with the First Enchanter of the Imperial Court and then the leader of the rebel mages. The mysterious hunt through the market for clues prompted by a secretive message delivered, by arrow no less, didn’t help set anyone in a calm frame of mind.

Cassandra stomped into the camp scowling in anger that sent the scouts scurrying out of her way and the Valo-Kas perking up in alarm. “Why must you always refute your title?” she growled leaving Eluned to trail in her wake. “Could you not just accept your role for the good of the Inquisition?” she continued to rant.

Eluned tried to reply but the warrior would not stop and face her. Finally, in frustration, she cast a wall of fire in front of Cassandra forcing her to stop. She would not chase after her like an errant child seeking their parent’s forgiveness.

Cassandra whirled around, hand on the pommel of her sword. “You dare?”

Eluned let the flames die down immediately. “Yes, I dare! If you can not do me the courtesy of facing me when you yell at me, then I will make you!”

The others of the group kept walking past into the camp, not wanting to get caught up in the argument between the two women. Varric stepped into Kaaras’ path as he moved forward to intervene, “turn around, Shepherd, you don’t want to get in the middle of that.”

“But…”

“Nope. Your little lamb and the Seeker gotta have this one out. Don’t worry, I don’t think they’ll kill each other.”

Cassandra paced in front of Eluned. “Why do you have to be so difficult?”

“She asked if I thought I was sent by the Maker. I will not lie.”

“Can you not play the part and offer some comfort to the people?”

“If the truth makes them uncomfortable, then they need to consider why. I will not tell them convenient lies so they can sleep at night.”

“I know speaking is difficult for you but a simple word…”

Eluned sighed. “Cassandra, did you ever consider why your Maker might send someone who can’t speak? Perhaps I am here to be a witness, an outside perspective.”

“A witness? To what?”

“The end of days. The Chantry’s rhetoric is ultimately responsible for all this chaos.” Cassandra stared at her, opening and closing her mouth to refute her claims but unable to. Eluned skirted around her and headed for the tent she shared with Kaaras.

Varric smirked from his spot at the fire as he watched Kaaras fuss over her. The smirk fell as he regarded Cassandra; the last time she looked that shaken was the day the Breach opened in the sky. What did Songbird say to her to rattle the stalwart Seeker?

Cassandra sat down at the fire and stared into the flames, all sorts of thoughts crossing her face. Varric shook his head, “quite the charming fellow we met today.”
“Has Lord Seeker Lucius gone mad? He was always a decent man, never given to ambition and grandstanding. This is very bizarre.”

“Do you think he can be reasoned with?” Varric asked.

Cassandra straightened as she considered his question. “I hope so. If not him, surely there are others in the Order who don’t feel as he does.”

“There might be. I recognized one of the templars today.”

“Darrow, isn’t it?” Cassandra looked up at the templar adjacent to her.

“Yes, Belinda Darrow, lady Seeker,” she unconsciously saluted with a closed fist over her heart. “I served in Starkhaven. I, and others, followed Knight-Captain Rylen when the Circles fell and he went to Kirkwall to help with the relief efforts there.”

“Thanks for that, Darrow,” Varric added.

She bobbed her head in reply. “As I was saying, I recognized one of the templars today from the Starkhaven Circle. Knight-Captain Fletcher. He’s a good sort; loyal to the Order, but I can’t believe that today’s display by the Lord Seeker would sit well with him.”

“Hmm, perhaps he could be approached,” Cassandra considered, “if we knew where they were headed.”

“What about you, Trevelyan? Recognize anyone today?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Liam Trevelyan replied.

“Say, aren’t you the eldest child and heir to the Trevelyan line? How did you end up in the Templars?” Varric asked.

Trevelyan grimaced. “I am and was. My family is very devout. I had a young sister, five years my junior. When she was nine summers old, she froze the water of the fountain in our courtyard. The things my mother said and did to my sister before the templars…” He shuddered. “My sister was dragged away, screaming and crying, with no idea of what she had done wrong.” He shrugged his shoulders, “two weeks later I managed to escape from under my parents’ watch and joined the Templars at the Ostwick Circle so I could watch over my sister.”

“What happened to her?” Varric asked softly.

“I couldn’t get to her in time. She… she died in the fire when the Circle fell.”

“I am sorry about your sister,” Cassandra offered.

Liam dragged his eyes from the fire and shuddered again. “The Chant says that magic is meant to serve man but surely the Maker didn’t want families to turn on their own with such viciousness. My sister didn’t deserve what happened to her simply for being born the way she was.”

Cassandra frowned in thought, as she considered the templar’s words, and suddenly found herself uncomfortable. Eluned’s earlier words echoed in her mind, “if the truth makes them uncomfortable, then they need to consider why.”

“Fuuuuuck.” Iron Bull looked at the note bearing three words in his hand once more before he crumpled it and headed back to the Charger’s camp from the dead drop.
It was bad enough that the Ben-Hassrath had ordered him to get close to the Inquisition and all the messed up, demon shit that was sure to follow, but they also wanted him to keep watch for a missing saarebas that may be hiding with the refugees around Haven. He was a spy, not an arvaarad to go hunting down rogue saarebas with all their freaky, magic shit. Saarebas are kept on leashes for a reason so how could you possibly lose one?

He rolled his shoulders and sighed. No matter, there weren’t that many Tal-Vashoth in the region so one with telltale scars shouldn’t be hard to spot. He growled with frustration under his breath.

“Hey Krem! Still wanna join the Inquisition?” he asked in a jovial tone that belied his true feelings.

“Sure, Chief!” the Tevinter mercenary replied.

“Good. Get your ass to Haven and invite them out to see us in action. Tell them I’ve heard good things and want to join.”

“Sure thing, Chief!”

Chapter End Notes

Dun, dun, dun... *rubs hands in glee* now it's going to get really interesting :)

For clarity purposes, in case the font messes up, Iron Bull’s note says: Saarebas ~ Inquisition ~ Vidmerkata (recover). I couldn't find a Qunlat word for recover, capture, or rescue so I devised my own from "convert not kill".

I have to share the very first fanart I've received inspired by something I've written, a portrait of Kaaras. I am so thrilled - thank you Beckily! I'm glad you like him as much as I do. :) Everyone should check out her story, Coalesce for more Tal-Vashoth goodness!
Chapter Summary

**Influence**

*Noun: the power to have an effect on people or things, or someone or something having such power*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The two additional meetings they had in Val Royeaux, one at midnight in the secluded courtyard of some minor noble and the other the following evening at the estate of Duke Bastien de Ghislain, fared little better than the meeting with the Chantry officials. At least, depending on one’s point of view. Eluned was of mixed opinion of the two newest people that been invited to join the Inquisition.

The mysterious notes, dressed in red handkerchiefs scattered around Val Royeaux courtesy of a friend of Red Jenny, had led them to the dark courtyard of the noble’s estate. They stood at the gates while Varric quietly worked at the lock.

“Ugh, we do not have time for this nonsense,” Cassandra complained.

“You have somewhere better to be?” Eluned gestured.

“It’s obviously a trap,” she argued.

“I think that much was obvious, Seeker,” Varric commented as the lock gave a soft click as the last tumble released.

“And someone made the effort to let us know.”

Cassandra hoisted her shield in front of her. “Just stay behind me until we know what we’re dealing with.”

A short alley gave way to an open area filled with crates and barrels. It looked like a simple delivery courtyard for the estate. Several guards lounged among the crates, playing cards and drinking from tumblers they had set on a makeshift table.

A guard stood up and stretched. “Gotta take a piss. Don’t touch my cards.” He looked up and yelped in surprise when he spotted the approaching group. The guards were quickly dispatched by Cassandra’s sword and shield, and Varric’s bolts. Eluned stayed back as requested, sticking close to Solas who cast barriers over everyone as needed. They headed through the door at the other end of the delivery area and into the proper courtyard of the estate.

A small fireball exploded against a pillar next to the door. A golden masked Orlesian man stood on the upper balcony of the courtyard. A guard flanked him.

“Herald of Andraste!” the nobleman called out making an extravagant gesture with his hands before placing them on his hips. “How much did you expend to find me? It must have weakened the Inquisition immeasurably.”
Eluned stepped out beside Cassandra, ignoring the warrior’s hiss of warning. If the fireball was any measure of what the pompous, masked noble was capable of, she had no cause for concern. She looked at the man and gave a casual shrug.

He faltered for a moment when no one responded to his allegations. Quickly, he puffed himself up, canting his hips to look casual, “you don’t fool me. I am much too important for this to be an accident. My efforts will survive in victories against you elsewhere.”

There was a shout and crash of a body or bodies hitting the ground before lithe blonde elf arrived dropping the guard standing watch. The noble turned in surprise. She pulled back her bow string, “just say ‘what’.”

“What is the –” The man gurgled as he fell, an arrow sticking out of one of the eye holes in his golden mask.

“Ewww. Squishy one, but you heard me, right? Just say ‘what’.” The elven archer walked over to the downed man and placed a toe against the underside of his chin to steady his head. “Rich tits always try for more that they deserve. Blah blah blah! Obey me! Arrow in my face!” she rambled on as she wiggled then pulled the arrow out with a wet squelch making a disgusted face as it pulled loose. “So, you followed the notes well enough. Good to see you’re…” Her gaze jumped from person to person before settling on Eluned. “All that talk and you’re just a person. I mean it’s all good, innit?”

Eluned stepped forward and pushed the scarf away from her face so she could speak with the elven woman.

Her eyes darted over Eluned’s face and she drew in a deep, audible breath as her hand started to rise to touch Eluned, then stopped. She blinked and dropped her hand. “The important thing is: you glow. You’re the Herald thingy.”

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“I glow?” Eluned asked, curiously.

A flicker of confusion crossed the archer’s face at Eluned’s silent words, disappearing as quickly as it appeared. “That’s what you do, innit? You walked out of somewhere and now you glow. Andraste’s Herald. True of not, it seemed like the easiest way to know if it was you.”

“Sure,” she shrugged. “Why am I here?”

“No idea. I don’t know this idiot from manners but my people said that the Inquisition should look at him.” She shoved her toe against the corpse and shrugged.

“Do you have a name?”

“One name. No, wait. It’s two. Friends of Red Jenny. That’s me. Well, I’m one. I’m Sera. Look do you need people or not? I want to get everything back to normal. Like you? I want to help… whatever this is. Inquisition.”

“Alright, Sera. You’re in.”

“Yes! Get in good before you’re too big to like.” She abruptly hopped over the stone ballistrade onto the cobbles below. Before Eluned and the others had a chance to figure out what had just happened, Sera popped around the wall again. “Hey, I heard you travel with the Valo-Kas. Dat true?”

Eluned nodded.

Eluned rubbed her knuckles across her upper lip and smothered her laugh. “Travel back with us and I’ll introduce you. You can get to know them on the road.”

Sera flushed and shifted her weight over her feet as she snapped her attention back to Eluned. “Uh… I have things I gotta do first. I’ll meet you in Haven instead, yeah?” She spun on her toes and without looking back, she waved over her head and called out in a cheery voice, “it’ll be grand!”

They stood in silence for a moment or two after Sera vanished bemused by the meeting with the erratic archer. “Herald. Why would you welcome someone like her to join us?”

Eluned stiffened at Cassandra’s words. “What do you mean, someone like her? I would think you would approve; she’s obviously a believer and she has contacts and resources to offer. She single-handedly accessed this estate and dealt with the guards, and she took out him,” she gestured over her shoulder with her thumb, “with a single shot.”

“I… Well, yes.”

“So is it her age or her race that you have issue with?”

“What! I have no issue with elves.”

“I am relieved to hear that, Seeker,” Solas commented drily stepping past her as they left.

The following evening found them at the estate of Duke Bastien de Ghislain. Brightly lit lanterns lined the walkway bordered by an immaculately kept garden that greeted the guests with a heady scent of roses and night-blooming jasmine. A few guests circulated within the pools of light and slipped into the strategically shadowed alcoves in the garden. Faint music echoed from where the majority of guest congregated to gossip, dance, and of course, indulge in the food and drink provided at the Duke’s expense.

Cassandra chewed on the inside of her cheek thoughtfully as she glanced at Eluned as they walked along the brightly lit path to the garden as they arrived at the Ghislain estate. The Herald could be quiet and withdrawn or sharp and impatient when confronted by crowds, and she didn’t know which to expect that evening. She was difficult to read at the best of times and the ever-present scarf draped over her hair and across the lower part of her face made it even more difficult to determine her mood. She, herself, had little patience for nobility but it would be beneficial to the Inquisition to acquire the favour of someone as well connected as the Enchanter of the Imperial Court and leader of the mages still loyal to the Chantry.

A footman at the door announced them in a loud voice much to Cassandra’s annoyance. She didn’t really want to draw too much attention to Herald if it could be helped. “Perhaps it would be best if I spoke with the First Enchanter?”

Eluned glanced at her and flipped her hand in a wave as she resumed looking around the room at the other guests. A gesture that Cassandra had learned indicated that Eluned didn’t care one way or another.

“You will remain here.” It was half statement, half question.

Eluned looked at Cassandra then plucked one of the sparkling glasses of alcohol off the silver tray of one of the discreetly circulating servants. She strolled away to a large water fountain in the middle of
Cassandra pursed her lips and hesitated a moment, undecided if she should say something more to the Herald. With a final glance at Eluned, she walked briskly up the stairs and further into the interior of the house to seek out the hostess of the party.

Eluned clutched the glass between her palms letting the cold drink soothe the aching flesh. She had gotten used to the constant tingling sensation in her right hand over the past four years but the muscles ached anew from the repeated attempts to grip a staff with fingers that didn’t respond properly. Cassandra insisted that she learn how to use a staff and had dragged her all over the Val Royeaux market place to try a large variety of staffs to find one that suited. None of them did; staffs that she could manage to grip were too heavy to hold for very long, lighter staffs tended to be too narrow and she couldn’t close her fingers on it. She had gotten some nasty jolts from some staffs that her magic seemed to conflict with. She didn’t see the point of a staff, but her arguments had fallen on deaf ears when it came to Cassandra.

She was tense and irritated, and the Anchor responded in kind. The magic in her left palm crackled against the glass she held. Green Fade light flickered and refracted through the sparkling beverage casting light around her. A masked woman gasped and quickly moved away. She sighed and placed the glass down on the edge of the water fountain while she pulled her gloves from where they had been tucked into her belt.

“You are the Herald?” a woman with a thick accent asked, interrupting her. “I have heard the most curious tales about you. I cannot imagine half of them are true.”

Eluned looked up at the woman. The Orlesian woman was wearing the most ridiculous hat, mask, and ruffled collar that Eluned had ever seen. Barely an inch of flesh between the tip of her nose and her upper lip was showing so she talked into the collar and had to tip her head up to see under the brim of her hat.

“Ah yes! Fascinating things they say,” her male companion chimed in. “Some say that when the Veil opened, Andraste herself delivered you from the Fade.”

The woman nodded enthusiastically, “the Inquisition is a ripe subject for wild tales.”


A crowd started to gather, interested to see what scandal was about to occur. The man stalked through the group, pacing in front of Eluned. “Everyone knows it’s just an excuse for a bunch of political outcasts to grab power, restoring peace with an army.”

Eluned crossed her arms turning to face him, her gloves still clutched in her right hand. There was no point in arguing with him even if she could speak.

He grew agitated when she didn’t respond to his accusations. “They say that you do the Maker’s will. A nameless nobody with foul magic dripping from your hands! If you were a woman of honour, you’d step outside and answer the charges.”

Eluned slowly unfolded her arms and let the mark in her left hand flare, casting green light across the man’s golden mask. The man whipped his hand over his shoulder grasping the sword hilt that protruded there. And froze. Literally. The other guests hastened to back away from the frozen man.
“My dear Marquise, how unkind of you to use such language in my house… to my guests.” A woman’s cultured voice spoke calmly from the top of the stairs. Heels strucked sharply against the marble steps as she walked down in a slow, measured pace. “You know such rudeness is… intolerable.”

“M-m-madame Vivienne. I humbly beg your pardon!” the frozen Marquise stuttered in fear.

Ah, so this was the mage of the Imperial Court, thought Eluned as she watched the woman descend the steps. She was dressed immaculately in what she could only assume as being the height of fashion, certainly the cloth had the deep luster that only very expensive fabrics could boast. Eluned was momentarily grateful for the scarf that hid her face as she couldn’t help the smirk that crossed her lips; she wasn’t certain if the mage’s headdress was meant to mimic Qunari horns or something else, but it was amusing nonetheless.

“You should,” Vivienne said, stalking around him. “Whatever am I going to do with you, my dear?” She gazed at the Marquise for a couple of moments to press her point before turning to Eluned. “My lady, you’re the wounded party in this unfortunate affair. What would you have me do with this foolish, foolish man?”

The Marquise and other guests gasped when Eluned drew her finger across her throat and then made a few more gestures. Vivienne’s brow rose ever so slightly in surprise.

Cassandra stepped around the frozen man. “The Herald says not to kill him but send him on his way. He’s learned from his error.”

Cassandra gave Eluned a hard look, she responded with a slight head tilt, ”close enough.”

Vivienne grasped the Marquise’s face and forced him to look at her, “by the grace of Andraste, you have your life. Do be more careful with it.” She snapped her fingers causing the icy spell that held the man to dissipate. He gasped and coughed. “Perhaps the next time you hope to sate your damaged pride with a public duel, your opponent will not be so merciful.”

He took the opportunity and quickly left. The nervous laughter of the other guests followed in his wake.

Vivienne turned once more to Eluned. “I’m delighted you could attend this little gathering. I’ve so wanted to meet you. I understand from the Lady Seeker that you are pressed for time this evening, so I shan’t keep you. I will meet you in Haven. Great things are beginning, my dear. I can promise you that.”

“Thank you, Enchanter Vivienne. We will look forward to your arrival,” Cassandra offered with a nod while simultaneously putting a hand on Eluned’s elbow turning her to the door.

As soon as they had cleared the doors, Eluned yanked her arm out of Cassandra’s grasp. She pulled her scarf away from her face and glared at the Seeker. “What was that about?”

“My apologies, Herald.” Cassandra lowered her voice, “the simpering of the Orlesians was beginning to make my head ache.”

Eluned stared at the other woman for a moment and then started to laugh.

Cassandra’s lips twitched, “can we please go?”

Eluned waved her hand towards the gates, “by all means.”
Eluned sighed with relief when she dumped her pack on the floor as soon as she entered her cabin in Haven. A fire had been lit not long before they arrived, the cold still sat in corners of the cabin but at least there was a fresh pitcher of warmed water sitting ready for her to take a swipe at the road dust from the last few days of travel.

She grinned to herself as she changed her clothes and rebraided her hair after her quick wash; she had spotted Sera perched on the walls of the village watching the arrival of the Valo-Kas. She’d make a point of hunting down the elf and dragging her out to the camp to meet them. She couldn’t wait to see how the elf responded when she met Katoh and Shokraker. She couldn’t wait to see how the elf responded when she met Katoh and Shokraker. She had wanted to go directly to the Valo-Kas camp when they arrived; however, the advisors had met them at the gate and requested that she join them as soon as she dropped off her things.

Josephine had mentioned that the First Enchanter had already arrived as well. Making better time with her carriage than they had with their inadequate mounts and a couple of carts. Eluned really hoped that Leliana and Cullen had made use of the efforts they made to secure the Hinterlands with the necessary watch-towers. If they expected her to traipse around the countryside closing rifts while they gathered the people they needed to help her close the Breach, she needed to move around more easily than on foot and the horses from the Hinterland farm would be a huge boon.

Doing up the last strap on her coat, she heaved a sigh and picked up the few bits and pieces she obtained at the rift she had closed on their way back from Val Royeaux that needed to be drop off with the researcher and headed to the Chantry. Belinda Darrow fell into step behind her as she walked through the village. As she walked past, more people gossiped about the templars leaving Val Royeaux and the presence on the First Enchanter than discussed whether she was guilty of killing the Divine. Perhaps the trip to Val Royeaux wasn’t a waste after all if it took the focus off herself.

She pushed open the door of the Chantry. The cavernous place echoed with some of the sisters reciting their scriptures. The heavy scent of incense immediately caught in Eluned’s throat making her cough. She always joked with her friends at home at she was afraid she’d burst into flames if she set foot in a church, it was amusing that she felt the same way stepping into the Chantry.

“My lady Herald. Do you have a moment?”

Eluned turned as Vivienne stepped out of an alcove. A table was set up behind her, brightly lit with some ornate lamps, covered with tidy piles of parchments and books. A plush set of chairs also graced the space as did a small table laid out with a delicate looking tea set and a small brazier glowing with warmth. She indicated the pile of books in her hand and the other end of the hall, then swept her hand back to Vivienne’s location.

Vivienne’s expression flickered, “of course, my dear. Go do what you need and I will speak with you after.”

Eluned continued down the Chantry and skirted around Mother Giselle who was speaking to a mage who replied with a strange monotone voice. She avoided making eye contact with either, not wanting to get held up with more chatter. She dropped off the few items on the table for the researcher, Minaeve, and entered the chamber at the head of the building. Darrow took up her position outside of the door as Eluned closed it between them.

Cassandra acknowledge her arrival with a nod. “The Herald has received an invitation to go meet with the rebel mages in Redcliffe.”

Cullen shook his head in disgust, “you can’t be serious about accepting it? You think the mage rebellion is more united? It could be ten times worse!”
“We don’t have much choice. The Lord Seeker has taken the Templar Order somewhere out of our reach for the moment. My reports have been… very odd.” Leliana replied.

“I could at least find out what they want. Our list of allies is a little thin to be choosy.”

“I agree with the Herald. We should meet with the mages as soon as possible.” They slowly, some grudgingly, agreed. “Now, regarding Dennett…”

Eluned gave a low whistle to get their attention. “Do I need to be here for this discussion? Vivienne wanted a word with me.”

“Of course not, Herald. You should go meet with Enchanter Vivienne,” Josephine stated.

Before any of the others could object, Eluned spun on her heel and ducked out the door. Darrow fell into step once again.

“Ahh, there you are, my dear. Please have a seat. Will you join me for a cup of tea?”

Tea did sound good. Eluned nodded and took the seat that Vivienne indicated. She wrapped her hands around the fragile china cup relishing the heat that seeped through to her palms.

The anchor gave a little flicker drawing Vivienne’s eye. “Does it pain you?”

She gave a little shrug, “sometimes. Solas helps.” She dropped her eyes as she took a sip of the tea.

“The elven apostate? Surely there is someone more knowledgeable to help you?” When Eluned didn’t answer, Vivienne replied, “I see.”

After a few quiet moments, she glanced at the templar that stood just outside the alcove. “It is good to see that you embrace the presence of the templars, my dear. It is important to show the people, as well as the other mages, their role in our lives. Even a mage of your… talents can be a danger. It is essential in these troubled times to show the people that the mages are obedient to the Maker’s will.”

Eluned sighed in disappointment. It was demeaning and downright oppressive to be under guard constantly just because she was different from others even if she bought the explanation that the templar was to protect her, which she did not. She had hoped that another mage would be an ally. She had hoped the First Enchanter would be more enthusiastic about not being under the constant watch of the templars, but then again, the enchanter had no templar guard. She placed her teacup and saucer on the little table lest the rattle give her away. “I accept the templars under protest. They are only here because we do not know who or what placed this magic upon me and may attack as a result. I am perfectly capable of controlling myself.”

“Of course, darling. But any mage, no matter how powerful, is at risk to possession.”

“So where is your personal templar?”

“I have no need of one. I have not been within the Circle for years.”

“Why the exception for you but not others? You just said that any mage is susceptible. Or is that only for those mages that do not have wealthy benefactors to keep them out of the prisons.”

“Surely, my dear, you do not consider the Circles a prison? They are a safe haven for mages. And institute of learning. Not all Circles are the same, I will grant you that, but mages are safer there. What Circle are you from?”
“No Circle.”

Vivienne made a moue of displeasure, “you are an apostate.”

“Technically, we all are.” Eluned stood up, “thank you for the tea, Madame Vivienne, but I must be going. I have other duties to attend to.”

“Of course, Herald,” Vivienne replied coolly with a tip of her head.

Eluned walked briskly from Vivienne’s alcove and threw open the door to the Chantry practically launching herself through it in her quest to get away from the other mage. How disappointing to find someone so elevated and privileged spouting the Chantry’s rhetoric to keep mages under its thumb. It was abhorrent. She snarled in disgust and flipped the scarf across her face as she exited into the glaring sunshine. The wind caught her scarf momentarily blinding her resulting in her crashing head first into a soldier that stepped away from the wall as the door opened.

Eluned went sprawling into the trampled snow. She yanked the scarf down from her eyes as she heard Darrow’s sword start to pull from her scabbard.

“Oh, I am so sorry!” the soldier took a quick step towards Eluned to help her up but stopped abruptly as he glanced at Darrow. “I didn’t mean to knock you down. I’ve got a message for the Inquisition, but I’m having a hard time getting anyone to talk to me.”

Eluned waved to Darrow to sheath her sword as she got back to her feet. She turned back to the soldier and beckoned with her hand and then pointed at him. “Who are you?”

He gave a slight frown, perplexed.

Darrow stepped up beside her, “Herald, with your permission?” Eluned nodded. “The Herald asked who you are.”

His eyes grew wide like saucers. “Cremisius Aclassi, with the Bull’s Chargers mercenary company, Your Worship. Our commander wants to work for the Inquisition.”

Eluned nodded. She remembered the Chargers mentioned by Shokraker back when the Valo-Kas was in Cumberland. She bit back her giggle remembering Katoh’s comments about the commander, Iron Bull. She gestured again.

“Why come to us?” Darrow translated.

“He thinks you’re doing good work. We accept contracts with whoever makes the first real offer but you’re the first time he’s gone out of his way to pick a side. We’re the best you’ll find. If you’d like to see what the Bull’s Chargers can do for the Inquisition, come to the Storm Coast and see for yourself.”

Chapter End Notes

You may notice that this story has just become part of a series. I've written a little piece, an origin story, about everyone's favourite saarebas. It's angsty. It may be a one-shot or I may add extra chapters as the muse strikes me but the focus remains on Eluned's story.
The soldier of the Chargers took his leave after Darrow directed him to the tavern to get a hot meal before he headed back to his company on the Storm Coast. Eluned hesitated, she could go back and inform the others of the invite only to get drawn into their debates. She gave her head a little shake, it could wait until the next day. She headed to the apothecary to pick up a bit of embrium tea for her throat and then headed to the tavern where she had last seen Sera disappear into.

“How can I help you Solas?” She nodded to him in thanks when he immediately set a cup of hot water from his kettle in front of her when he spotted the little package of herbs she carried from the apothecary. She waited patiently as he considered his words.

“Kaaras and I have been discussing your magical education.” She nodded to him to continue while she cradled the cup in her hands. “We have both noted that you are proficient with fire. However, we have not seen signs of any defensive spells. Do you know any?”

She shook her head. The Qun didn’t permit spells to be cast on their people, not even healing spells as she was well aware. Scars from intentionally inflicted wounds and those from battle, mostly arrows or other debris that made it past the warriors on the front lines, littered her own body.

“I see, it is as we thought. Kaaras had indicated some reservations about his own ability to instruct you. I do not wish to presume as you may prefer to take instruction from the Enchanter…” Eluned wrinkled her nose slightly at mention of the Circle mage. Solas smiled faintly at her expression. “However, I would be willing to offer my services in that capacity, should you wish it.”

“I would like that. Ma serannas, hah’ren.”

Solas cocked his head slightly in surprise, “you speak the Elvhen language?”

“No, I had some elven friends that started to teach me, before…”

“Why would you bother to learn the language of a lesser race?”

She recoiled in surprise, “do you consider your own race inferior?”

“The elves are a shadow of their former glory.”
“Perhaps, but that doesn’t mean that they are lesser than any other race.”

A curious look quickly flashed over Solas’ face before returning to his normal mild expression. “We can start tomorrow if that is acceptable to you. We can meet at the smithy to look for a suitable staff.”

Eluned sighed.

“You object to using a staff? Why?”

She hesitated and started to untie the leather bracers she wore keeping the long sleeves of her tunic in place. She pulled back the sleeve and showed him the metal cuff on her forearm with its attached ring. She tapped it and tapped the other arm, telling him she wore them on both.

He frowned, “you still wear shackles? The Seeker didn’t remove these when they released you from the cell?”

She turned her arm over and displayed the geometric pattern that made the Qunari symbol. She rested her elbow on the table as Solas ran his fingers over the cuff. He picked up her hand and turned it over to see the inside of her arm again. She jerked her elbow off the table and rotated her arm from the shoulder.

“That hurts you?” She nodded. “May I use magic to examine it?” Again, she nodded.

A tendril of magic crept over her hand and under the cuff. Solas frowned. The magic wrapped over the top of the cuff and Eluned cried out as the muscles in her hand and forearm spasmed and she jumped to her feet so abruptly that she knocked over the chair she was sitting in. She panted, cradling the arm against herself.

“They mutilated you,” he stated in anger. He picked up the chair and Eluned sat back down as he retook his own seat again. “Ir abelas. I did not intend on hurting you. Are there runes on the cuffs? It appeared that they reacted to the magic.”

Her brow pinched as she tried to remember what she saw that awful day. She nodded slowly, “there was something on the inside, but I was in so much pain and terrified at the time, I don’t remember what.”

“The pin that goes right through your arm, between the bones, that inhibits your range of motion. What of your hands?”

She touched her all fingers to her thumb on her left hand but could only touch the first finger and partially move the second finger on her right hand. She took his hands and squeezed them with her own; she could barely grip with her right hand, the left wasn’t that much better.

“Which is your dominant hand?”

She raised her right hand.

“No wonder you have resisted Cassandra’s attempts to have you use a staff for channeling your magic and as a line of defense. I will think on a solution, but I would still like to start your other training immediately.”

“Thank you,” Eluned gestured then wrapped the leather bracers back over the sleeves hiding the cuffs again. She stood up and moved to the door. “Solas, a question. There was a mage speaking with Mother Giselle when I went to meet with the others. She had a very odd monotone voice and I think a birthmark on her forehead. Do you know her?”
This time the expression on Solas’ face didn’t vanish, he scowled. “The one you are referring to is a Tranquil.” When Eluned failed to respond, he continued, “by Chantry law, any mage deemed to lack the ability to control their magic, or any mage that does not obey their templar jailors is rendered Tranquil. The Rite severs the mage’s connection to the Fade, their dreams, their magic. It is said to prevent a mage from being possessed and becoming abominations. It destroys one’s ability to feel, to have a sense of self. It leaves the mage as a hollow shell of themselves.”

Eluned stood shaking and pale against the door. She thought back over the conversation she had just had with Vivienne. *How could any mage, regardless of status, ever trust the Templars when they could essentially lobotomize a mage on a whim?* “That’s... barbaric.”

“Indeed.” He became very serious and intent, “it is imperative that we expand your magical knowledge. You are already suspect for being an apostate with no Circle history and have unknown magic buried within your flesh. We must ensure that your strength and control leave them little doubt to your capability. The alternative is unthinkable.”

Eluned nodded vigorously, “tomorrow. Thank you, Solas.”

She left the cabin and walked, lost in thought, along the path that passed the tavern. She focused on pulling her aura tight to herself in reflex to the presence of the templar at her back.

“Oi, Herald!”

Eluned continued to walk, not noticing that someone called her.

“Herald? Her…ack!” the voice cut off in an indignant squawk.

Eluned spun around to find the elven archer struggling to peel off the hand of the templar that had grasped her shoulder. She suppressed the instinctive desire to recoil from the templar after the latest eye-opening information. “Release her,” she ordered.

Darrow frowned, “you know her?”

“Yes. She’s one of our new allies from Val Royeaux.”

“Yeah, so get off jackboot!” Sera smoothed the shoulder of her brilliant red tunic as if it were the finest cloth instead of the ragged fabric it was.

“My apologies Herald. You hadn’t acknowledged her, and she was reaching out to touch you.”

“Wasn’t paying attention,” she waved off Darrow, turning back to Sera. “What can I do for you?”

“You goin’ to the Valo-Kas camp? Varric said you usually spent the evenings there.”

“Yes. Would you like to join me?” Sera flashed a big grin. “Come on then,” she gestured for the elf to join her. Eluned spotted Varric by his fire and gave a whistle catching his attention.

“Taking our new friend to meet the Valo-Kas, Songbird?” he asked with a sly grin.

Eluned grinned back and nodded. “Want to come?”

“Sure, why not. Taarlok wanted to pick my brain about contracts with the Merchant Guild.”

She introduced Sera to everyone and bit back the smile as the elf stammered and turned interesting shades of red as she stared, wide-eyed at Katoh. She caught Kaaras’ attention and waved him over to join her with Shokraker.
We’ve received a message from the Bull’s Chargers,” she gestured. “They wish to work for Inquisition. I know you are familiar with them. Should we consider hiring them?”

Shokraker considered the question. “I haven’t worked with the Chargers; both the Valo-Kas and Chargers are big enough groups that they aren’t usually hired by the same client, but I have met the Iron Bull. He’s a good leader. And they have a good reputation in Nevarra and Orlais. What do the others say about it?”

“I haven’t told them yet.”

“Why?” asked Kaaras.

Eluned rolled her eyes, “I just managed to get away from their arguments when I ran into the Charger’s messenger. I wasn’t eager to get back in, besides I wanted your input. I’ll inform them tomorrow.”

Eluned headed into the Chantry in the morning after meeting Solas for their first training session. It had gone well if you considered revealing gaping holes in one’s abilities as a success. Fortunately, Solas was a very patient teacher. After some – much – frustration on Eluned’s part, she had the very basic understanding on how to create a barrier. It was unlike any type of magic she had ever attempted to cast.

The Chantry was still quiet when she entered. A murmer of voices rising and falling could be heard from the far end where she knew the others were already arguing over the next move behind the closed doors.

“Herald.”

Eluned recognized the monotone voice from the previous day. She turned to face them, her eyes immediately drawn to the red sunburst brand that graced the woman’s forehead. She resisted the instinctive desire to flinch away from the woman; it wasn’t her fault she was the way she was.

“Apprentice Minaeve asked that you stop and see her. She has some research for you.”

Eluned nodded and the Tranquil glided away silently. She turned into the office that Minaeve shared with Josephine and gave a low whistle to announce her presence. She waved her hand towards the door and back to Minaeve, then let it fall.

“Oh good, Avexis managed to catch you. I have some information on…” she trailed off noticing Eluned’s attention was on the tranquil woman that entered the room and started organizing parchments on the table. “The Tranquil discomfort you,” she observed.

“I… I didn’t know about tranquility until yesterday. It’s not her that makes me uncomfortable but what has been done to her. That someone would do that to another.”

“I suppose it would seem harsh but as an alternative to possession or death, it would be preferable. I am still an apprentice myself. I’m not very good at magic, just enough power to be dangerous to myself or others. Given the choice, I may have chosen tranquility over the risks of the Harrowing if the Circles hadn’t fallen when they did.”

“You would choose that?”

“Perhaps. I’ve never liked spellwork. I prefer to study, I’d like to spend my days on research without the fear of possession. Most mages look down upon the Tranquil, denial of what a mage can
become, I suppose. It’s a shame really, I like the Tranquil better than most people. I protected the ones that were abandoned by the other mages when the Circle fell. Luckily, Seeker Cassandra took us in and brought us to Haven.”

Eluned felt ill. “It’s good that they have someone to care for them.”

“Thank you.”

Minaeve finished up the conversation with some of the findings she and the Tranquil had uncovered from the demon samples that had been recovered, but Eluned didn’t really hear her. She headed to the adjacent war room for the meeting with the advisors still thinking about what Minaeve had told her. The thought of having everything that made her – her - ripped away at the whim of another was terrifying. The Qun may have taken away her freedom, the autonomy to her own body, they may have controlled her access to her power and her ability to dream, but her mind, her emotions, even if they were centered around anger and fear at what had been done to her, they were still hers. She was still who she was and not some empty shell being directed by others like some horrifying meat puppet. She was able to escape the Qun and regain her self; there was no escape for the Tranquil.

“Herald?” a hand grasped her elbow firmly, startling her badly. She stumbled as she flinched, only staying on her feet because of the hand gripping her arm. She whipped her head around to look at who held her. “Herald, we’ve been trying to get your attention,” Cassandra told her, releasing her elbow.

“Sorry. Lost in thought.”

“Yes, we could see that.”

“Did you still wish to meet with the mages in Redcliffe?” Josephine asked, her quill poised over her writing board.

Eluned nodded. She ignored Cullen’s sigh of frustration.

“Very well. We’ll leave tomorrow,” Cassandra stated. “I will have Vivienne accompany us.”

“Solas as well. They may not be sympathetic to our cause if we show up with a Seeker and a Chantry-loyal mage.”

Cassandra pressed her lips together in disapproval but nodded in agreement.

“I still think we should approach the templars,” Cullen argued.

“Commander, the templars are still refusing any contact we have tried to make,” Josephine rebutted.

As they started to argue again, Eluned rubbed her temples at the approaching tension headache. There had to be another way; if the Lord Seeker wouldn’t talk to them then maybe someone else would but they had no idea who would be willing to listen. She rapped her knuckles on the table to get their attention. The others continued to argue. In frustration, she stuck her fingers in her mouth and let out a piercing wolf whistle that had the others covering their ears in pain. She addressed Cassandra, “Darrow.”

“What about Darrow?”

“She said she knew one of the templars at Val Royeaux. Send her to approach him on the pretext that she’s left the Inquisition.”
“That’s… actually a very clever idea,” Leliana commented, appraising Eluned. “One disgruntled templar showing up would raise less suspicion than other agents questioning the templars.”

Josephine jumped in, “if Darrow can find sympathetic templars, perhaps they can manage to leave. It might undermine the Lord Seeker’s position for us. At worst it will gain us a few templars more than we currently have.”

“I don’t like reducing your protection,” Cullen complained.

Eluned shrugged. “What is one templar? I still have Trevelyan and Cassandra. I have two mages, Varric, Sera, and the Valo-Kas. I think I’ll be fine without Darrow.”

“I agree with the Herald,” Cassandra said. “We should be fine.”

“Very well,” Cullen conceded.

“We’ve also received an invitation from the Bull’s Chargers mercenary group. They are interested in working for the Inquisition and have invited us to see them in action. Somewhere called the Storm Coast.” Eluned dropped the parchment she had written out with the details.

Josephine picked it up and added it to the other parchments on her board. “Why didn’t they contact us directly?”

Eluned smirked. “They tried but no one would give their envoy the time of day.”

Josephine flushed, “we will consider their offer. Thank you for bringing it to our attention.”

Leliana stepped towards the table and placed a marker on the map before them. “The Commander has had our soldiers press onto Master Dennet’s farm and has put up the watchtowers as requested to obtaining horses for the Inquisition; however, there is still an issue with wolves in the area. My scouts have investigated and discovered that there is a rift and a demon close to the farm that is corrupting the animals. No one else is equipped to deal with these as you are, Herald.”

Eluned nodded. It had been a few weeks since she had to close any rifts; a spike of anxiety made the anchor crackle in her palm. If the others noticed, they didn’t say anything.

As they broke up the meeting and everyone went their separate ways, Leliana fell into step beside Eluned. She watched the spymaster out of the corner of her eye. She knew that while the Breach was in the sky she was safe, they needed her, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that the other woman would happily stick a knife between her ribs as soon as she had no value to the Inquisition.

“There is one other matter I would like to discuss with you Ellie.”

Eluned was immediately wary of her name being used instead of the usual title. Leliana wanted something from her.

“Several months ago, the Grey Wardens of Ferelden and Orlais have vanished. Ordinarily I wouldn’t consider them involved in this, but the timing is… disturbing. The others have disregarded my suspicion, but I can not ignore it. Two days ago, my agents in the Hinterlands sent word of a Grey Warden by the name of Blackwall. If you have the opportunity, please seek him out. Perhaps he can put my mind at ease.”

“What is a Grey Warden?”

“They are an ancient order tasked with defending the lands of Thedas from the Blight. I believe
Josephine has a book on their history amongst her library if you want to know more about them.”

“What if he can’t give you information?”

“Then there may be more going on than we realize.”

Eluned retrieved the book from Josephine’s library. As well as the history of the Blights and the Grey Wardens’ role in them, Josephine had loaded her arms up with a copy of the Chant of Light, lineages of the houses of Ferelden and Orlais, and histories of the templar order and the first Inquisition. Eluned also spotted a book called the Tales of the Black Fox that seemed to be infinitely more interesting that the other books she currently carried and snuck it into the pile. She liked Josephine, but she couldn’t help rolling her eyes at the book selection as soon as she safely turned away from the ambassador. Most of the books were destined to be paper weights and perhaps the odd doorstop.

She stepped out of the Chantry and blinked at the harsh light of the sun reflecting on the trampled snow. She didn’t look forward to the walk to the Hinterlands, but the lower elevation did provide a relief from the constant snow and cold that graced the mountains around Haven.

She glanced at Leliana’s tent and noticed that she appeared to be having an intense conversation with two of her scouts, one of which appeared to be protecting an injury. She quietly walked over to listen.

“There were so many questions around Farrier’s death. Did he think we wouldn’t notice? He’s killed one of my best agents and knows where the others are.” She paused and shook her head then addressed the uninjured scout. “You know what must be done. Make it clean. Painless if you can.”

Eluned dropped the books on the table and grabbed Leliana’s shoulder spinning her around. “What are you doing?” She immediately let go of the spymistress but steeled herself from taking a step back.

“Butler betrayed us and murdered my agent!”

“Killing him is not the answer. You learn nothing by killing him.”

“I do not tell you how to do your job. Do not presume to tell me how to do mine.” She turned back to her agents, “do as I have instructed.”

Eluned growled in disgust. The scouts flicked their eyes at Eluned but saluted Leliana and turned away.

“Is there anything else you wanted, Herald?”

It was back to “Herald”, Eluned noted. “No, I have nothing more to say to you,” she gestured. She scooped up the books and stomped away to her own cabin.

Eluned was more than happy to put Haven at her back. The incident with Leliana had really unsettled her. She fully realised that they were at war, but to simply kill one of her agents without discovering why he had killed the other; it made no sense to her. She scowled to herself and she ran over the incident, wondering if she could have done or said something different to change Leliana’s mind.

“If you scowled any louder, Songbird, you might be able to scare the Breach into submission,” Varric quipped. “Something you need to get off your chest?”
She opened her mouth to reply when a chipper voice called out to them, “Your Worship! Welcome back to the Hinterlands!” Lace Harding, the dwarf scout she met on their first trip, hurried over to them. She fell into step beside Eluned. “Sister Leliana sent a raven to keep an eye on the Warden that we’ve caught glimpses of moving throughout the area. Last sighting was around Lake Luthias. We have a camp set up close to that area which I will take you to now unless you need anything at the Crossroads first?”

Eluned glanced at Cassandra in question. The Seeker shook her head. “Lead the way Scout Harding.”

The new camp was up in the hills with a view over the King’s Road and Fort Connor where the unfortunate incident with the rogue templar occurred during their first visit to the area. The Valo-Kas had gone onto the Crossroads since the mercenary group, Eluned’s five companions, plus one templar weren’t required to go find a single Grey Warden.

Sera excitedly threw her pack into the tent Eluned had selected for herself, then muttered something about bees before disappearing into the bushes. Eluned wandered along the edge of the camp while the others settled their packs before they headed up to the lake. She picked some clumps of elfroot and embrium as she admired the view. As she moved along the edge of the cliff, she noticed an odd sensation, a buzzing whisper in the back of her skull rather than something she heard. She paced back and forth to pinpoint where it was strongest and then pushed her way through some overgrowth. Before her was a post with some odd carvings. Stranger still, was a skull attached to the top of it. She whistled to the others.

Cassandra emerged from the brush, followed closely by Varric and Solas. Vivienne elected to remain behind making some comment about not muddying her shoes.

“What’s with the skull? And how in Andraste’s ass did you find it?” Varric asked, picking burrs out of his coat.

Eluned gestured at her head, shaking her hand and then tapping the back of her skull.

“Yes, I sense the vibration as well,” Solas commented.

Eluned looked curiously at the other two.

“I do not sense anything from it,” Cassandra replied.

“Nope, me neither. If you two are saying that you sense something, then I’m glad dwarfs can’t do magic. That’s just creepy.”

Eluned stepped towards the skull. A feeling of compulsion washed over her and she peered through the opening at the back.

“Wait!” Cassandra snapped, but it was too late.

The countryside rushed into view through the skull like a magical set of binoculars. The skull made a dry grating sound as she turned it on top of the post. Eluned gasped as a flash of light appeared. The light dimmed but remained glowing as she focused on it. “Map,” she gestured frantically, wiggling her hand over the other like a road meandering over terrain. She mimed writing and a piece of charcoal was stuck in her hand. She didn’t even look at the map that was held out to her as her hand automatically moved to the locations the skull illuminated as she scanned the countryside. With four spots marked on the map, she was finally able to step away from the skull.

“What were you thinking? That could have been a trap!” Cassandra scolded her.
“The skull illuminates certain objects in the distance,” Solas said stepping back from his own viewing through the skull. “I am not familiar with such magic”

“I don’t want to touch anything a skull lit up. Skulls don’t say ‘here’s a good thing’.” Eluned startled not having noticed Sera’s arrival as she stared through the skull.

Eluned ignored Cassandra’s rant and pushed back through the bushes and returned with Scout Harding. “Did you know about this?”

Harding frowned. “I haven’t seen anything like that, Herald, nor have any of the other scouts reported seeing these.”

“How long have the scouts been in this location?” Cassandra asked.

“A few days, lady Cassandra. There has been no activity in this area other than our own.”

“Hmph, very well. We have other matters that require our attention over a mysterious skull.”

Eluned shoved the map in front of Cassandra, tapping it and pointed to the four markings she had made. “We can’t ignore this!”

“There appears to be one at Fort Connor. Nothing was present the last time we were there, we’ll check on our way past to Dennett’s farm.”

Eluned nodded, it would have to do to sate her curiosity for now. If there was anything to find at the place she marked on the map, perhaps then she could convince Cassandra to look at the other locations. She absently scratched her nails at the base of her skull where she could almost still hear the whispering; goosebumps raced across her skin as she realised what she was doing and dropped her hand with a shudder. The skull deeply disturbed her.

She led the others back through the camp and up the trail to the lake as Scout Harding had indicated. Cassandra scoffed when she informed her that they were going to look for a Grey Warden. Solas, oddly, looked displeased. Eluned was inclined to return to Leliana and tell her to go fuck herself and her missing Wardens after their last conversation but if – and it was a big “if” – the Warden was able to shed any light on the location of the other Wardens or even the events at the Conclave, it was worth seeking them out.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know. I think I said that Iron Bull would show up in this chapter but the chapter ended up being monstrous by the time I covered everything I wanted to before I got to him, so *thwack* the chapter was chopped in half! Patience my lovely grasshoppers - he's coming!

Tranquility freaks the shit out of me.
Deceptions

Chapter Summary

Deceptions
*Noun: a statement or action that hides the truth, especially to gain an advantage*

Chapter Notes

If you read the previous chapter before Sunday (Oct 14, 2018), I urge you to go back and reread it. Based on some reader feedback, I fixed - I hope - the whole POV and conversation with Solas at the beginning of that chapter. It ended up adding over 400 words of new text.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lake Luthias glittered in the sun as a gentle breeze created tiny wavelets on the water. Eluned paused for a moment to enjoy the sight. If she could shut out the sounds of her companions and the sound of metal hitting metal, she could almost imagine being at a mountain lake at home. The thought twisted bitterly; she was no closer to finding home than she was the day she woke up outside of Kont-aar. Squashing the thought down ruthlessly, she scanned the shores of the lake and spotted a cabin on the far side. There were several people milling around outside of it. The clash of weapons came from there, but it didn’t appear that they were fighting. Eluned pointed it out to the others.

Cassandra narrowed her eyes. “Be cautious. We do not know if they are the one we seek.”

Eluned rolled her eyes, *of course she’d be cautious*. She followed the path that wound its way around the lake shore, along the way, she waded into the water to gather the plentiful blood lotus that grew, stuffing it into a small sack she carried just for that purpose. Blood lotus and elfroot made an effective healing potion and the Inquisition, as well as the refugees down at the Crossroads, could always use more healing potions. She fondly remembered Gelasan’s comments about combining the dried varieties of blood lotus with elfroot for a very pleasant high. She slipped some into her own pocket to dry later for her own personal use.

Varric snorted a laugh. “We can’t take you anywhere without picking plants. Are you sure you’re a mage because I think you were meant to be a florist.” Eluned smiled and threw a handful of reeds at him.

The shore gave way to a wooden jetty that led to a cabin on the far side of the lake. A man, with thick dark hair, grizzled gray at the temples and a most impressive forked beard, clad in a padded gambeson and a dented breastplate, paced in front of a few men that looked more like nervous farmers than warriors. “Remember how to carry your shields!” He demonstrated holding the shield at the correct level. “You’re not hiding, you’re holding. Otherwise it useless!”

Before they could make any introductions, a handful of bandits came howling out of the surrounding trees. Eluned felt a barrier fall over her from Solas as the she and the others engaged the bandits alongside the warrior and his farmer recruits. The bandits were no match for the combined strength
of the group. With the bandits down, she found herself roughly grasped by the shoulder and a sword blade held against her throat.

"Blackwall? Warden Blackwall?" she asked before he could draw the sword across her throat. She kept her hands out to her sides so the warrior could see that she was unarmed, or at least, unarmed as a mage could be.

His brow furrowed in confusion as he registered her soundless words. "Who are you? How do you know my name?"

"We are with the Inquisition," Cassandra said tersely. "Kindly unhand the Herald."

"The Herald?" Suddenly his heavy brows shot up as he realised who he held his sword on. He released Eluned abruptly almost causing her to stumble. "Maker’s balls! I mean, I beg your pardon, my lady." He turned from them and addressed his recruits dismissing them with words of encouragement to defend themselves before he turned back to Eluned. "Why are you here?"

"We’re trying to find out why the Wardens have disappeared and if it has anything to do with the Divine’s murder," Cassandra said.

"The Wardens and the Divine? That can’t be."

"The Wardens aren’t political, there would be no purpose to killing the Divine."

"But the disappearance is suspicious, is it not?"

"But what about the other Wardens? Where could they be?"

"I can’t imagine why they’d all disappear at once, let alone where they’d disappear to. I’ve been alone for months so it’s entirely possible that new orders haven’t caught up to me."

Eluned sighed and looked at Cassandra who shrugged in turn. She turned back to the Warden, "well thank you, Warden Blackwall. Be safe in your travels." She gave him a slight nod then turned away to rejoin the others and head back to the camp.

"Inquisition… Herald, wait." He walked briskly to Eluned. "The Divine is dead and the sky is torn. Event like these… Thinking we’re absent is almost as bad as thinking we’re involved." Eluned raised a brow, prompting him to continue. "If you are trying to put things right, maybe you need a Warden. Maybe you need me."

"What can one Warden do?" Eluned asked quite honestly. "Perhaps she should read the book on the history of the Wardens and the Blights after all if they are that formidable, she thought.

"Safe the fucking world, if pressed." He felt a flush of heat creep up his throat as Eluned was startled into laughter.

"Welcome to the Inquisition, Warden Blackwall."

It didn’t take long with three mages to triangulate on the item that the skull had illuminated around
the area of Fort Connor. Like the skull, the mysterious item buzzed and whispered to those that were sensitive to the Fade. Solas slipped past as Eluned bent to pick up the item, “allow me.”


“Skulls?” Blackwall asked.

“Yes, the Herald found a magical skull mounted on a post that highlighted, well, this,” Varric waved his hand at the faintly glowing object in Solas’ hand, “whatever this is. This is the first we’ve found.”

“I think the Inquisition should learn about these things before we fiddle with any more of them,” the gruff warrior stated.

“I’m not going to argue with you on that one.” Varric moved away, faintly discomforted by the finding.

“We should move on,” Cassandra said. “We have a rift and wolves to deal with and I’d rather we got to Redcliffe before the end of the day.”

When they got to the farm, Horsemaster Dennet’s wife, Elaina informed them that the wolves were coming from beyond the river where the rift they were told was located. “A new rift opened two days ago just on the ridge past the farm,” she pointed to the north.

Eluned looked at Cassandra to see what she wanted to do. When the Seeker didn’t say anything, she huffed and started across the farm. She had hopped over the stacked rock fence before the others caught up.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to go close the rift. It’s only been open for a couple of days. Should be easy to close.”

“That is not your decision to make.”

“Really Cassandra?” She waved her glowing hand in front of the other woman’s face. “You want to get the wolves dealt with and the rift in the river closed, then let’s get this one done and move on. I don’t want to have to double back if we don’t need to.” She turned and headed up the hill towards the rift, the others fell in behind her.

“She’s got a point, Seeker,” Varric said quietly as he passed her.

The rift was simple enough to close as Eluned suspected. She shook out the lingering sensation in her left hand when she felt the whispering at the back of her skull again. Turning from the now sealed rift, she walked along the edge of the hill and around a clump of trees to find another skull mounted on a post. She gave a low whistle and stepped up to peer through the skull.

“Herald! We just finished agreeing that we’d be cautious about these! Ugh,” Cassandra threw her hands up in the air in disgust. “I don’t know why I bother.” She pulled out the map and a piece of charcoal, thrusting them into Eluned’s hand. They had another five marks on the map.

The rift in the river valley was as high up as the rift had been in the Temple of Sacred Ashes but it wasn’t nearly as large; Eluned had to climb the waterfall to get closer. She could tell from the resistance that it had been open for a fair length of time, likely not that long after the Breach itself. The rift snapped and tugged as she connected with it, fighting her attempts to close it.
Come on, come on, she thought, gritting her teeth as she focused on pulling the edges of the rift together. A soft hiss and pop caught her attention as she continued to wrestle with the rift. Quickly glancing down, she noticed the ground around her feet starting to bubble green and black. She knew perfectly well what was trying to come up below her. Close, damn it, she growled. The rift pulsed, releasing the mark, it wasn’t closed but greatly reduced, another attempt would seal it.

She quickly took a step to move away from the bubbling ground when the terror demon erupted from underneath launching her into the air and off the edge of the waterfall.

“The Herald!” Blackwall yelled, scrambling over the slick rocks of the waterfall to try to intercept her fall.

Eluned flailed in the air as she desperately tried to remember how to cast a barrier. She slammed into the water driving the air out of her lungs as she submerged.

With the party momentarily distracted by Blackwall’s call, the powerful despair demon fled past Cassandra with a screech and blasted ice along the river where Eluned went under.

Everyone started shouting at once.

“Solas!”

“Arrows! Arrows!”

“Vivienne, fire!”

“Get that demon!”

“I have her!” Solas called. He grabbed Eluned by her coat, pulling her unconscious from the chilled water. His hand glowed as he pressed it to her chest and then quickly rolled her onto her side as she coughed up the water and gasped desperately for air. “Can you get up?”

Eluned nodded and shoved her soaked hair out of her face as Solas helped her to her feet. He kept a hand and a barrier on her as they worked their way back up the waterfall. She gritted her chattering teeth and reached out to the rift again closing it.

Blackwall called from below the edge of dry side of the rocks, “come this way, my lady, I’ll catch you if you want to slide down. You’re cold enough as it is without another dunking.”

Varric snickered, “how chivalrous, Hero. Are you going to catch Solas, too?”

“That will not be necessary,” Solas replied, helping himself down.

Cassandra wiped off her sword and sheathed it. “Are you able to continue?”

Eluned nodded. “Just give me a minute to thaw out.” She winced as she massaged her left hand and shook it out.

“Inscribe a heat rune on yourself, darling. You’ll dry off and warm up in no time.”

Eluned’s teeth chattered, she shook her head at the enchanter.

“It’s a basic utility spell, surely your education isn’t so lax to miss something as simple as this?” Vivienne traced a symbol over the shoulder of Eluned’s coat and warmth immediately permeated the leather drying it and the clothing underneath.
“Thank you,” Eluned gestured, biting back any further comments that crossed her mind.

“You’re quite welcome, my dear.”

They continued along the river and followed the path the Elaina had told them was the likely location for the wolves. Soon enough they saw signs of a very large pack.

“Is there any way we can do this without killing them?” Eluned asked as everyone readied themselves.

Cassandra frowned at her, lowering her sword. “You don’t want to deal with the wolves for the farmers?”

“I do, but Elaina said that they aren’t usually an issue. It’s only been since the Breach that they’ve been a problem. They might revert with the rift closed.”

“Fine,” Cassandra sighed. “We’ll see if their behavior has changed. If it hasn’t, we’ll have no choice.”

Eluned nodded. It was reasonable.

Solas gave her a curious look that she couldn’t ask him about as they moved on and encountered the first wolves.

The three mages did what they could to disable the wolves with fire, ice, and lightning to redirect, slow, and stun them but inevitably there were too many to contain. At the heart of the cavern the wolves had congregated they found a terror demon that had crazed the wolves into acting against their normal behavior. As soon as the demon was destroyed, the remaining wolves scattered, but the damage was done.

Eluned looked sadly at the wolf carcasses that lay strewn about the cavern.

“You tried. It matters that you cared enough to try, even if you could not save them all,” Solas said quietly, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Here, I found this at the back of the cave,” he placed a small necklace with a strange stylized pendant on it. “Perhaps it will protect you from wolves.”

“We passed a trail that leads back out to the Redcliffe Road. We can take that route across country instead of doubling back through the Crossroads,” Cassandra told them, consulting the map. “I’ll have a message sent back to our people to harvest these; no point in wasting the pelts.”

Everyone nodded in agreement with the plan. No one wanted to spend extra time and effort traveling if they didn’t have to.

“Hopefully we won’t have any more rifts today,” Eluned quipped, digging her thumb into her palm again.

When they hit the Redcliffe Road and walked up the hill to the village gates, Varric turned and gave Eluned an incredulous look. A large rift, pulsing and swirling, hung before the gates blocking their way forward. “If you’re not careful Songbird, your nickname is going to get an upgrade to Hawke. I didn’t think it possible for two people to have such luck.”

She gave him a sheepish shrug as they spread out to deal with the rift and demons.

“Agents of the Inquisition, Enchanter Vivienne, welcome,” Fiona greeted them as they arrived in the
tavern set up for their meeting. An Inquisition scout had directed them there after informing them that no one apparently knew to expect them.

“My dear Fiona. You look dreadful! Are you sleeping well?”

Fiona’s eyes hardened for a moment at Vivienne’s slight before she turned and addressed Cassandra. “What has brought you to Redcliffe, Seeker Pentaghast?”

“We came in response to your invitation… when we met in Val Royeaux.” Fiona’s eyes jumped to Eluned as she gestured, and Cassandra translated.

Fiona’s brows rose momentarily in surprise at the means of communication between the two, then quickly gathered herself, “you must be mistaken, I haven’t been to Val Royeaux since before the Conclave.”

“Well that’s very strange because we spoke with some who looks and sounds exactly like you,” Cassandra replied. “I recognized this person as you.”

“Exactly like me? I suppose there could be magic at work but why… Whoever, or whatever, brought you here – the situation has changed. The free mages have already pledged… themselves to the Tevinter Imperium.”

Cassandra looked shocked. “An alliance with Tevinter? Do you not fear all of Thedas turning against you?”

“I understand you are afraid,” Solas added, “but you deserve better than slavery to Tevinter.”

“Fiona dear, your dementia is showing.”

Eluned spun on Vivienne and made a sharp gesture between the mage and the door. “I will not open negotiations with insults. Wait outside.”

Vivienne raised her chin with a sniff and turned away without another word. Patrons in the tavern that had been creeping closer to listen in on the conversation scrambled to get out of her way.

“I’m sorry, but as one indentured to a magister I no longer have authority to negotiate with you. This – bargain – with Tevinter wouldn’t have been our first choice, but we didn’t have any other options. We are losing this war and I needed to save as many of my people as I could.”

The door to the tavern opened and a tense hush fell over the space as two men entered. Fiona stiffened when she caught sight of them. Eluned quickly turned her face away and pulled her ever present scarf up over the lower part of her face; if these men were from Tevinter, they would certainly recognize what the scars on her face were.

“Inquisition, may I present Magister Gereon Alexius.”

“The southern mages are under my command,” he said. He ignored the others and stopped directly in front of Eluned. “You are the survivor, yes? The one that fell out the Fade?” He studied her intensely. She held his gaze all the while resisting the urge to step back as the hair on the back of her neck rose. “Interesting.”

“We require the mages to help close the Breach. If you are leading the mages now, then let’s negotiate. I’m sure that we can come to an agreement,” Cassandra said.

“Ah, it is always a pleasure to meet a reasonable woman,” Alexius replied without taking his eyes off
Eluned to address Cassandra. Finally, he stepped away towards a table and sat down, gesturing for Cassandra to do the same. “Felix, would you send for a scribe please. Pardon my manners, this is my son, Felix.”

Felix briefly bowed before leaving the room.

Eluned stiffened as she felt a magically aura push and prod at her own, digging at her like it was trying to burrow under her skin. Sweat started to bead along her hairline as she strained to resist the persistent digs at her. She gave a slight gasp as a push became painful. Solas took a slight step toward her and placed a hand on her back, his aura automatically lending strength to her own and the questing one retreated.

Felix returned and as he did so, stumbled into Eluned who instinctively reached out to him as he fell. “Forgive me, my lady.” Felix said.

“Felix?” Alexius finally snapped his eyes away from Eluned as he fuss ed over his son. “I shall send word to the Inquisition. We will conclude this business at a later date. Fiona, come now. I require your assistance.”

“Are you all right?” Solas whispered to Eluned.

She nodded in reply, glancing around the tavern at the mixture of fearful and hostile faces. “Outside,” she gestured to the others.

“Well played, my dear,” Vivienne said once they had all regrouped in a secluded area. “Shun the loyal mage to appear sympathetic to the rebels. There is hope for you yet.”

“It wasn’t a play; insulting the other party puts them on the defensive and undermines your position in negotiation. Do that again and you can go back to your gilded cage and twiddle your thumbs until the world ends.”

Solas smiled smugly at the dressing down the enchanter received.

“So it’s true? They’ve pledged themselves to Tevinter?” Eluned and Cassandra both nodded. Varric swore, “Andraste’s ass… I’m trying to think of a single worst thing they could have done. And I’ve got nothing.”

Eluned glanced around and unrolled the piece of parchment she had clutched in her hand.

“What do you have there?” Cassandra asked, coming to read over her shoulder.

“Come to the Chantry. You are in danger.

“What did you get that?”

“The son, when he fell into me.”

“So we’re going to assume it’s a trap?” Varric asked.

Cassandra raised a brow at him. “I think that’s a safe assumption.”

“We still need to investigate, but we’ll be prepared.”

“Before you head to the Chantry,” Varric said, “you need to come and see this.” He led them back away from the tavern and back towards the main part of the village, then down to a little hut by the docks. “While you were meeting with the Grand Enchanter, we poked around, and we found
something.” He shot a sympathetic look at Eluned and pushed open the door. “You’re not going to like it.”

Eluned stepped into the hut. The whispering of a dozen voices prickled at the back of her skull making her head ache. Two shelves lined with skulls adorned one wall of the hut. Adjacent were stacks of the posts already decorated with runes of some kind, just like the two skulls they had already found. With a shaking hand, she picked a skull up off one of the shelves.

Cassandra stepped into the hut behind her and gasped.

“Here, read this Seeker.” Varric handed her a leather-bound journal.

Eluned heard Cassandra flipping through the pages. “Every ocularum is made from the skull of a Tranquil?”

“The Venatori created the oculara to search for something. What could be work so much effort?” Vivienne asked softly.

“Every skull was…? No, done thinking about it. Done,” Sera babbled and left the hut.

“I had hope they were safe with the rebel mages. I see that I was mistaken,” Vivienne said, her voice unexpectedly trembled.

“How is this possible? The notes say that to make the oculara, the Tranquil is possessed and their head struck off at the moment of possession. Mages are made tranquil to protect them from possession!”

Eluned slid to the floor with the skull wrapped in her arms; it was too much. She folded herself over and let out a muted heartwrenching wail before giving herself over to tears. Those poor souls; mages thrice-violated and murdered, and for what? Was there no end to the brutality even onto death?

“Come, my dear.” Vivienne’s hand gently slid under her elbow and pulled her to her feet. Another set of hands plucked the skull from her arms as Vivienne wiped the tears from her face. Eluned blinked and was shocked to see Vivienne’s eyes glassy with her own tears. “Your grief for them does you credit, but there is no more that we can do for them now.”

Eluned nodded and gave a wet sniffle that had Vivienne wrinkle her own nose in distaste. She paused with a thought and looked at enchanter. She gestured, “round up any Tranquil here. Sneak them out to Valo-Kas.”

Vivienne frowned slightly, not fully understanding.

“Ah, you want us to get them out of the village, Songbird? Can do. The Valo-Kas are still at the Crossroads, right?”

Eluned nodded.

They split up; Varric, Vivienne, and Blackwall to smuggle the Tranquil out of the village, and the others went with Eluned to the Chantry to answer the mysterious summons. The mark on Eluned’s palm flickered and spat as they approached the Chantry door.

Cassandra looked at the crackling mark with concern, “another rift. Be ready.”

The mage swung his staff into a demon slamming it to the floor as they walked through the doors of the Chantry. A moderately sized rift swirled and pulsed in the air over the altar. “Oh good, you’re
Eluned let out a harsh breath in relief and shook out her hands. The rift had behaved strangely, speeding up and slowing down time in different areas around the building. The rift at the gate had done something similar and had caught them off-guard until they realised what was happening. She massaged the palm of her left hand; it was truly aching now after sealing four rifts in a single day. She turned to find herself face the face with the most beautiful man she had ever seen. She stared at him.

Cassandra sighed as Sera stepped close to Eluned and giggling, stuck her fingers under Eluned’s scarf against her chin to close her mouth with a click of teeth. Eluned blushed hard and tore her eyes away.

“Fascinating. How does that work, exactly?” The mage’s eyes didn’t leave her, “you don’t even know, do you? Just wiggle your fingers and boom! Rift closed.”

“Another Tevinter,” Cassandra said, “be cautious of this one.”

He glanced at Cassandra for a moment, then focused on Eluned again. “Suspicious friends you have, but I get ahead of myself. Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of Minrathous.” He made the most ridiculously flourished bow Eluned had ever seen. “How do you do?”

Eluned gave herself a mental shake and bobbed her head. She spread her hands, circled the group, and then pointed at their location. “Why are we here?” she gestured.

Dorian’s brow rose slightly, “Magister Alexius was once my mentor, so I am sure my assistance will be useful – as well you can imagine.”

“So you’re betraying your mentor because…?” Cassandra demanded.

“Alexius was my mentor, as in, he is no longer. Look, you must know that there is danger, that much is obvious without the note. Let’s start with Alexius claiming the allegiance of the rebel mages out from under you. As if by magic, yes? Which is exactly right. To reach the mages before the Inquisition, he has distorted time itself.”

Eluned rubbed at the tension lines between her eyes.

“This is fascinating, if true…” Solas commented. “And almost certainly dangerous.”

“The rift you closed here? You saw how it twisted time around itself?” Dorian asked.

“Yes. The rift at the gate was like this one,” Eluned gestured and Solas translated.

“You catch on quick,” Dorian continued. “Soon there will be more like them and they will appear further and further away from Redcliffe. The magic that Alexius is using is wildly unstable, and it’s unravelling the world.”

“You’re asking us to take a lot on faith,” Cassandra said.

“I know what I’m talking about. I helped develop this magic,” Dorian stated. He paced a short distance, crossing his arms and resting his chin in a hand as he walked. “When I was an apprentice it was pure theory. Alexius could never get it to work. What I don’t understand is why he’s ripping time to shreds just to gain a few extra lackeys.”
Sera jerked her bow up as they heard footsteps on the stone floor.

“He didn’t do it for them. He did it to get to you,” Felix said walking into the hall and stopping in front of Eluned. “My father has joined a cult, Tevinter supremacists, called the Venatori. They are obsessed with you, but I don’t know why.”

“You can close the rifts. Perhaps there is a connection, they see you as a threat or are interested specifically in the magic you hold that effects the rifts.”

“Perhaps it is because you survived the explosion at the Temple of Sacred Ashes,” Felix added.

“You both are familiar with Alexius. Do you have any suggestions?” Cassandra asked.

Dorian addressed Eluned, “you know that you’re his target. Expecting a trap is the first step in turning it to your advantage. I can’t stay in Redcliffe, Alexius doesn’t know that I’m here and I would keep it that way. But whenever you are ready to deal with him, I want to be there. I’ll be in touch.” He headed to a side door to slip away unseen, turning at the last moment. “Oh and Felix, do try not to get yourself killed.”

“There are worse things than dying, Dorian.” Felix bowed to Eluned and left the same way he entered.

“We need to return to Haven immediately to inform the others,” Cassandra said.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve had some distressing news about my FIL this week so I hope I haven’t missed any major edits - apologies if I have. As always, thank you for your continued enthusiasm on my story, reading all of your comments makes my heart sing. :)


“It’s incomprehensible that a Tevinter magister has swooped in and has commandeered one of the most defensible castles in Ferelden without word spreading,” Cullen said, aghast.

“It’s a disaster. Does anyone know where Arl Teagan is?” Josephine asked.

“Madame de Fer spoke with some of the other mages while we were meeting with Magister Alexius,” Cassandra replied. “She was told that after some disagreement between the Arl and the magister, the Arl was escorted out of the town supposedly for his own safety. His current whereabouts are unknown. The magister…”

“Has outplayed us. We should concentrate our efforts on the templars,” Cullen argued.

“We can not leave a foreign power on our doorstep, Commander,” Josephine declared.

“We still haven’t received any word back from Darrow to make any approach to the templars,” Leliana added. “Until such time as we have any information on that front, we should consider our options with the mages.”

“I agree,” Cassandra replied. “If we dismiss the mages outright and Darrow’s mission fails, we are no further ahead then we were when we started.”

“I have some ideas on how we can access Redcliffe Castle. I can discuss them with you later,” Leliana said to Cullen.

“Very well. Is there anything else we need to discuss?”

Eluned handed a piece of parchment to Josephine to read out to the others. Josephine scanned the parchment and looked at her in surprise. Eluned nodded to her to continue. “The Herald has requested that any oculara found be examined to locate and collect the shards. Once all the shards for that oculara have been located, the skull is to be removed for later funeral rites. An Inquisition marker is to be left on the post to inform the Venatori that we have obtained the shards and prevent another skull being replaced there.”
Cullen rubbed the back of his neck and sighed, “I don’t see what the point of that is. It is a waste of Inquisition resources.”

Eluned slammed her fist down onto the table rattling the markers and startling the others. “They were murdered!” She trembled with rage. “Possibly dozens of Tranquil. Whatever the Venatori are looking for, I will get it first. Their deaths will not have been in vain.”

Cassandra glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. “The Venatori have gone to a lot of trouble to find these stones. In light of our other discoveries in Redcliffe, I think it is worth looking into ourselves.”

“I agree. If this ancient magic is tied to the Breach, or can offer some advantage against it, we need to know,” Leliana added with a thoughtful look to Eluned. “If nothing else, they deserve proper funerary rites.”

A knock at the door broke the tension in the room and Eluned breathed a sigh of relief as Shokraker entered. “The Valo-Kas must take a leave from the Inquisition for a few months. The Inquisition will not last forever, we need to keep the future in mind. We have a client with an annual contract that we wish to continue to honour.”

“I see,” Josephine replied. “That is certainly understandable. Will you return once that contact has been completed?”

“If there is still need of us, certainly. We would be honoured to do so,” she said, glancing at Eluned’s stricken face. “It has come to my attention that the Bull’s Chargers have expressed interest in joining. I am personally familiar with that group and their leader. I would encourage you to take them up on their offer. They are a reputable, solid company.”

“Thank you for your recommendation, Shokraker,” Cullen added. “We will give it serious consideration.”

Shokraker turned to Eluned placing her hand on the human’s shoulder. “If circumstances were different, I would have you join us Ellie. You will always have a place in the Valo-Kas. We do not leave for a few days yet so come to the camp as often as you are able before we leave.”

Eluned put on a brave face as she walked to the Valo-Kas camp for the evening meal with her friends. It would be the last evening she shared with them for a while, the Valo-Kas were leaving in the morning to head to Jader to catch the ferry across the Waking Sea into Orlais, and she was heading out with her group to the Storm Coast to meet the Bull’s Chargers.

After dinner, Kaaras took her hand and led her to his tent. “I can tell Shokraker that you need me to stay.”

She shook her head, “no, you’re their only healer and mage. You have to go, they need you.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, concerned.

She hesitated for a second but stood up straighter and gave him a sharp nod. “Yes, I’ll be okay.”

“Allright,” he said. He hesitated for a moment if weighing a decision, “I have some things you should have before I go.” She sat her down on the furs and took a cup of embrium tea from him while he sorted through a small chest. He pulled out a wrapped bundle and held it out to her. “I, uh, though you might want these eventually.”

Eluned took the bundle and unwrapped it. Her hands shook at the cloth fell away to reveal her mask,
collar, and control rod. Her face twisted in confusion and she dropped the bundle on the floor in front of her. Why would he keep these?

“I thought you might want them as a reminder, a reminder as to how far you’ve come,” he said, answering her unasked question. “You’re strong, Ellie. You survived that,” he waved his hand at the bundle. “If you doubt your strength in the future, just look at that.”

She picked up the bundle again and cautiously picked up the collar from the bundle. The metal felt cool under her fingers. She picked up the control rod as well and held them both, they didn’t hurt her. She survived them. She wrapped the pieces together, she’d hide them in the little trunk in her cabin, to pull out and look at if she needed. She looked at Kaaras and nodded. “Thank you.”

Eluned came down the gate in the morning. Stablehands were just bringing out the mounts for her group as the Valo-Kas were heading out. Cullen and Leliana had also come down to see the groups off.

Kaaras stepped away from the others and enveloped Eluned in a big hug. “I’m going to miss you, little sister,” he mumbled against her hair. He pulled back a bit and gave her a worried look, “are you sure you’re going to be all right? I can stay behind.”

She gave him a watery smile. “I’ll miss you too, but I’ll be fine,” she gestured, not entirely convinced herself about how fine she’d be but she needed him not to worry about her. “The Valo-Kas need you, so you should go.”

Sata-Kas, Katoh, and Shokraker all came for hugs which made it even harder for Eluned not to cry. Eluned cringed as Ashaad Two growled something about “pathetic bas” as he walked passed; he never did warm up to her like the others.

Kaaras threw his arm around her and pulled her into his side, turning to face Cullen. “Keep her safe, Commander. If anything happens to her, you’ll answer to me.”

Cullen flushed, “we’ll keep her safe. You have my word on it.”

Kaaras studied him for a moment then gave him a curt nod. Hugging Eluned again, he said, “stay safe. Stay behind Cassandra and Blackwall; let them take the hits. As soon as we finish this contract we’ll be back.”

“Kaaras!” Shokraker called.

“Go,” Eluned said, pushing herself out of Kaaras’ hug.

He brushed her hair out of her face and gave her a quick peck on the forehead before jogging after the others. At the edge of the treeline, he turned and gave a last wave before disappearing down the hill.

“You gonna be okay, Songbird?” Varric asked as she turned to her new mount and made some last-minute adjustments to her tack.

She gave him a nod which turned into a shake of her head as a hiccapped sob escaped. Varric smiled sympathetically and patted her on the back. “Don’t worry, we’ll look after you and they’ll be back before you know it.”

The trip out to the coast had been rough initially but true to his word, Varric and the others all helped
to cheer her up. Varric told stories, Solas continued to instruct her in magical theory and application, and Sera played silly pranks. Cassandra and Blackwall provided the gruff counterpoint to the merriment, although Blackwall, unlike Cassandra, had a ready laugh and a tale of his own to share on occasion. Eluned was happy to see Lace Harding waiting for them when they rode into the main camp on the Storm Coast; the dwarf scout didn’t stare or make her feel awkward for not speaking like some others had. She pulled her hood up higher on her head to keep the rain out of her eyes and gave a low whistle in greeting.

“Your Worship, good to see you again,” Lace replied. She tipped her head to indicate to Eluned to follow her and filled her in on everything that was going on in the area, including the location of the mercenary group they had come to meet.

Eluned led her group in the direction Harding had indicated the mercenaries were located. They headed down the steep path from the camp into the valley below and followed the rocky trail to the beach. As they approached the shore, the sounds of fighting became louder. Eluned hoped that this was the group they were here to meet and not a messy conflict of rogue templars and mages. She had had enough of that in the Hinterlands.

The qunari captain was easy to spot as the lieutenant had mentioned. He reminded her a bit of Meraad the way he swung his great axe with glee through a swath of Venatori. He was a huge wall of grey muscle and the widest spread of horns she had seen during all her time with the Qun. A whispered sense of recognition formed in the back of her mind as she watched him; the shape of his horns seemed the vaguest bit familiar, but she’d been surrounded by horned qunari for years and his horns couldn’t be that unique. If nothing else, there was probably a qunari or more with the same bloodlines that had a similar growth pattern. It didn’t necessarily mean anything.

She shrugged off the doubts, pulled her scarf up over her face, and flicked her hand over her shoulder to her group and joined the fight. She still wasn’t proficient with casting barriers so left covering their group to Solas and manipulated the enemy forces with fire that left the stones on the beach steaming in the rain as the others took them down.

“Chargers! Stand down!” the qunari captain bellowed, turning to face the late additions to the fight. He was, in fact, the biggest qunari she had ever seen, towering over everyone else on the beach. The eye patch over his left eye also gave him an oddly rakish air that well suited his position as the leader of a mercenary band.

“Come on Herald, let’s go meet this captain,” Cassandra urged. The two women headed towards the qunari. “Iron Bull, I presume?”

“Yeah, the horns kind of give it away,” he replied with a chuckle. He and Cassandra discussed terms of the Chargers joining the Inquisition. Eluned studied the members of the mercenary group and tried to ignore that he hadn’t taken his eye off her while he talked to Cassandra. His behaviour while seemingly open and friendly had pushed the doubts back into the forefront of her mind and was setting off all sorts of alarm bells.

“You’re not just getting the Chargers, you would also be getting me. You need a frontline bodyguard – I’m your man. Whatever it is – demons, dragons… The bigger, the better.”

Cassandra nodded thoughtfully as she appraised him.

“There’s one other thing. Might be useful, might piss you off. Ever hear of the Ben-Hassrath?”

Eluned’s head snapped around and she recoiled violently from him. She slashed her hands across in front of her to Cassandra, “no”. She whirled heading to the path up the beach, hurrying away from
Iron Bull’s brows snapped up in surprise at her reaction. *Surely it couldn’t be… “Saarebas shoh!”* he ordered.

Eluned stopped walking abruptly like she had walked into a glass wall, the blood draining from her face leaving her pale and shaking.

“*Sala ebost hass-toh Qun!*”

A tremor shook Eluned’s form as she unwillingly turned toward him and brought her hands behind her back. A ragged moan from her startled them all as she dropped to her knees on the stones and bowed her head.

He stepped forward before Cassandra could stop him hooking his fingers under her chin and pulling the scarf from her face revealing the telltale scars. Eluned kept her eyes down and averted from his gaze. His hands dropped to his sides and he took a step back in shock. “Fuck! The *Herald* is bas-saarebas?” he asked in disbelief.

Blackwall stepped up to flank the kneeling woman, weapon in hand ready to defend her but completely confused as to what was going on. Varric shook himself out of his shock and stood ready at her back, while Solas threw a barrier over everyone and crouched in front of her blocking her view as he spoke quietly to her.

Cassandra stiffened, “she’s a mage, yes, we know. She was freed by the Valo-Kas from a band of Tal-Vashoth bandits and travelled with them openly. She had been with them for weeks before the Conclave.”

“*Bah!*” He made a disgusted noise, shaking his head. “She’s not *just* a mage like your Southern mages, but bas-saarebas. Shokraker wouldn’t have made that mistake but likely spun the tale to protect her.” He thrust his chin in Eluned’s direction. “She’s conditioned to obey an arvaarad or *someone* who knows what strings to pull to take command of her. No Tal-Vashoth bandits would accomplish that.”

Solas managed to coax Eluned onto her feet and drew her away from the discussion to head back to camp, leaving the others behind.

“What’s to stop you from doing just that?” Cassandra demanded, keeping her eyes on the Iron Bull as she regripped the hilt of her sword in case he made a move to stop Eluned from leaving.

“Look, there’s a hole in the sky spitting out demons and shit. There are bigger problems than the Qun’s squabble with Tevinter, and she is the only one that can fix it. I’m not going to report that I’ve found her back to my superiors, but we need break her conditioning.”

Cassandra mulled it over, torn between protecting the obviously traumatized woman and looking out for the needs of the Inquisition. She cast a brief glance at Varric who answered her look with slight shake of his head and a shrug. “*Fine,*” she finally relented, sliding her sword back into its scabbard. “But if you make any untoward moves against the Herald, I will end you and ship your horns back to Par Vollen.”

Iron Bull gave her a toothy grin, “don’t worry about the horns. Just make sure my axe gets sent back; that’s the only part that matters.”

With the Chargers issued their orders to pack up their gear and the newly breached cask of alcohol to
head to Haven, the Iron Bull accompanied Cassandra back to the Inquisition camp. The others of the Herald’s group had either gone with the Herald and the elven mage or followed soon after while he and Cassandra finalized a few items of concern. The Seeker stopped to speak softly to the bas-saarebas – the Herald – when they got to the camp. He noticed the pressed lips and dropped hand when the mage flinched as her shoulder was touched. The Herald barely acknowledged the warrior after that, giving only the faintest of nods in reply as she disappeared into her tent.

He studied the rest of the group as they travelled. Blackwall, the Grey Warden, seemed confused by the turn of events; he must be the least familiar with the Herald and therefore had to have been the most recent one to join the group. Sera, the elven archer, went out of her way to try to cheer up the Herald only to end up sulking in hurt silence when her efforts were ineffective; she was young and didn’t know how to adapt when her usual brash methods failed her.

The dwarf and the elven mage were different, they seem closer to the Herald and more protective than the rest. Of all of them, they’re the only two the bas-saarebas doesn’t instinctively recoil from. She became more withdrawn as they travel which makes the dark smudges under her eyes look more like bruises, she looked like she hadn’t slept at all or her sleep was plagued by nightmares. The fact that she doesn’t scream in her sleep makes him suspect that the elven mage, Solas, is warding her sleep. He’d seen soldiers that had served in Seheron that behaved like that before they turned themselves in for re-education; if they didn’t just go beserk and get cut down in battle. He’d been there himself, but the magic he saw her display wouldn’t be anything the Qun would bother to cultivate for Seheron, unless she was hiding her true power.

He watched silently from his tent when she emerged from her own in the early hours of the morning. She pulled her cloak around herself tightly, but the trembling persisted no matter how close to the fire she placed herself.

The dwarf, Varric, noticed and frowned. “Come on Songbird, you gotta eat. You gotta keep your strength up,” he cajoled her softly. “Don’t worry about the qunari, Bianca and I know how to take care of them.”

Iron Bull smirked; the dwarf’s crossbow was an impressive piece of engineering that the Qun would love to get their hands on, but a few bolts, unless the dwarf was a crack shot, wouldn’t be enough to take him down. He could tell from the way Varric behaved that the Herald isn’t the first person he’s been with that had the weight of the world on their shoulders. If the intelligence was accurate, he was with the Champion during the Arishok’s ill-advised invasion of Kirkwall and when the Chantry went up by the hand of the possessed bas-saarebas.

Varric sighed after a few moments, filled a mug of broth from the pot over the fire and held it out to her. “Don’t make me sit on you and force it down your throat. It would be completely inappropriate, and I will absolutely do it,” he mumbled, shoving the mug into her hands. “Here.”

He watched as she absently sipped from the mug a couple of times then placed it down on the log where she sat and retreated to her tent. Varric glowered at the half full mug and then turned the glare on Iron Bull as he sat down across the fire from him. “You could have at least waited until she had finished before driving her away.”

“I take it she’s not usually like this?”

Varric looked worriedly towards Eluned’s shared tent, “no, I’ve never seen her this low. Not even when the Seeker dragged her up the mountain right after she woke up in the cells.” He gave his head a shake and pushed a piece of half burnt wood into the fire. “Shit, I wish Kaaras was going to be at Haven when we got back,” he muttered.
“Kaaras?”

“Yeah, the healer for the Valo-Kas. He dotes on Songbird like she’s his kid sister.”

“I have to ask; Songbird?”

Varric chuckled, “she whistles.”

For four and a half days, the Herald had ridden her horse in silence, swathed in her cloak with the hood pulled far up over her head that no one could see her face. Her head hung forward and swayed with the horse’s motion like she slept. A day from Haven, just past Gherlen’s Pass along the western edge of Lake Calenhad, Iron Bull sucked in a breath as green magic crackled to life in her left palm, the Seeker brought them all to a halt. He watched as the Seeker and Solas gathered around her speaking quietly, her hands flashed as they asked questions, then she rode forward with the others falling into position around her as they rode down a rough trail and halted at her signal.

It’s as if the bas-saarebas had been issued an order by her arvaarad, she moved forward unflinchingly following whatever direction the demonic green magic in her palm guides her. Iron Bull felt the crackle of magic of the rift as it responded to her presence before he even sees it. With a burst of speed that surprises him – saarebas don’t move with speed – she dodged around a rage demon and positioned herself close to the rift lifting her hand toward it.

“Stay close to her,” Solas said as they hurry forward. “When she engages the rift, she becomes vulnerable. She can’t defend herself.” He cast a barrier on the Herald and then turned his focus on the rage demon.

He gritted his teeth and followed after her, he is to be her bodyguard after all even if he really, really doesn’t like demons. Like a good saarebas, she held her position and did her job which would be great from the protected lines of the antaam, but in the chaotic mess around the rift he realised that it’s a huge problem. He worked around her slicing through the demons that are drawn to her as she focused on the rift, spinning around as he hears her hiss at a wraith closing in on her. Solas lands a barrier over her first before the wraith lands its attack. With a roar, Iron Bull lunged past her and hacked the wraith into floaty green bits as the rift slams shut above him.

He reached out to steady the bas-saarebas as she wobbled on her feet in the aftermath of closing the rift. She recoiled violently from him, falling as she caught her heel on a stone.

“You’re going to have to earn some trust, Tiny, before she’d ever going to let you near her,” Varric said stepping passed him and giving a hand to help the Herald up.

“We can camp here for the night,” Cassandra announced, pointing to a clearing just over the ridge. “There’s a good hot spring just passed the trees for anyone that wants to wash.”

With the camp set up, Iron Bull continued to watch the bas-saarebas. The Seeker spoke quietly to her, too quietly for him to hear. The smaller woman ducked into her tent and emerged again with a bundle of clothing and a piece of cloth for a towel before disappearing silently along the narrow trail through the bushes to the pond.

Iron Bull observed the others and when no one was looking, slipped quietly down the trail to follow the bas-saarebas. He wasn’t following to be a voyeur but rather, concern. It was obvious by the group’s behaviour that her demeanour had changed radically, and they were unsure of how to handle her. Saarebas, when separated from their arvaarads often killed themselves. The fact that she hadn’t already was a good sign, but how far did she regress now that he had triggered her? He felt a
creeping pang of guilt that he had unsettled her and now he was concerned at what she might do.

He silently reached the trailhead where it opened into the little clearing around the hot spring. Steam rose from the water obscuring the view but not so much that wouldn’t be able to see her. Her clothing and the towel sat on a rock a few feet in front of him, but there was no sign of her. He glanced around trying to spot her with no success. He swore softly and was about to step away from his concealed location when she rose from being fully submerged in the water. The hot water streamed down as she pulled her soaked hair over one shoulder fully revealing her bared back. The evening sun illuminated the unnatural red and black marks criss-crossing her back from shoulders to the tops of her buttocks. He sucked in an involuntary hiss at the sight; he knew exactly who she was. The Qun very rarely ever kept bas-saarebas, usually preferring to kill them or render them safe with qamek. The handling issues of dealing with non-qunaris, due to size alone, was troublesome and inefficient enough to not make the effort worth the return, but there was one noteworthy instance at binding a viddathari mage. Her.

Iron Bull couldn’t believe his dumb luck, although he couldn’t say at this point if it was good or bad. The survivor of the explosion at the Conclave, the fucking Herald of Andraste, the bas-saarebas the Qun wanted back so badly, was Vatasala. If it wasn’t for the nauseating swirl of green in the sky, the kindest thing he could do would be to cut her throat and keep her from the hands of the Qun. While they wouldn’t resort to using qamek; her magic had proved far too valuable to the Qun, there were plenty of other things they could do to ensure that she never got free again.

He gave himself a shake, he wasn’t there to stare at her. As she started to bring her bath to an end, wringing her hair out and twisting it up on her head, he ducked off the path as silently as possible and circled back around the camp unseen.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Saarebas shoh! - (Qun) mage stop/halt
Sala ebost hass-toh Qun! - (Qun) Show your will [obedience to the] purpose of the Qun

I've had some distressing news about my FIL this week so I hope I haven't missed any major edits - apologies if I have. As always, thank you for your continued enthusiasm on my story, reading all of your comments makes my heart sing. :)

Edit to add (March 20'19) fanart by the lovely Beckily! I'm so chuffed about this piece! Thank you so much ❤️
“What’s this about, Seeker?” Varric asked as he and Solas entered the Chantry dungeon. Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine were present, as were the other of Eluned’s companions.

“We’ve asked the Iron Bull to tell us what he knows about the Herald. We thought it important that all of the Herald’s companions understand who she is so better to protect her.”

“All right.” Folding his arms and leaning against the wall, he glanced warily at the qunari that was standing in the corner.

“When I was in Seheron, I saw a tiny bas-saarebas a couple of times in the field. Brought in to deal with pockets of resistance – Fog Warriors, ‘Vints, Tal-Vashoth – those that we couldn’t shake loose. Saarebas aren’t normally named but this one was a bit different. They called the bas-saarebas ‘Vatasala’.”

“I have heard reports of this ‘Vatasala’ but we didn’t know that it was a mage,” Leliana commented.

Varric groaned and thumped the heel of his hand against his forehead, now understanding the weird sense of déja-vu he experienced in the Valo-Kas camp several weeks earlier.

“Do you know something about this Vatasala, Varric?” Cassandra demanded, her eyes narrowing dangerously as she studied the dwarf.

“Yeah… I’ve heard of her,” Varric replied. “I didn’t know that she was Vatasala, but I do know about her.”

Leliana whipped her head around and narrowed her eyes at him. “You have?”

“And you didn’t think to tell us earlier?” Cassandra demanded at the same time.

“There was nothing to say!” he protested. “Look, when I went to Seheron three years ago with King Alistair to look for his father, we saw this little human mage all dressed up and leashed like their other saarebas. I asked the Arishok about her and he said that ‘Vatasala was none of my concern’. He shrugged apologetically, “after that, we were a little busy with that insane Tevinter magister and his weird blood magicky, dragon shit, and I didn’t think to look into it further.”

“And you didn’t recognise her here?”

He threw his hands up. “I never got a good look at her before; she was masked and in armour kneeling by her arvaarad, and then at a distance in the field.”
“What do you know about her?” Leliana demanded of Iron Bull.

“Vatasala. ‘Soul of fire’, named so because of its, her,” he corrected himself, “capacity for fire. I’ve seen plenty of fire mages, but she is something else.”

“She is a fair to middling mage at best,” Vivienne sniffed. “If that’s the best the Qun has to offer, the South has no reason to fear the Qun.”

He shook his head, “no ma’am, I doubt you’ve seen what she can do; the South isn’t any friendlier to mages than we are and she probably hid that from you too.” He turned his focus back to the others, “you know how Antivan Fire grenades work creating an inextinguishable fire that sticks wherever it touches? Now imagine that cranked up to the intensity of dragon’s breath. She’d walked calmly onto the field and started this little fireball in her hands then flicked her hands down and it vanished. Seconds later it was like the sky turned to lava and dropped on the field. Everything was turned to smoldering ash in an instant.”

“Like at the Temple of Sacred Ashes,” Cullen growled.

Iron Bull looked at the former templar and shook his head. “Nah. I went up there to take a look. You can tell that the temple blew outwards from a central point. Completely different that what she did in Seheron.” He took a deep breath, “any way, one of the guys that had taken shelter with me gasped and she turned and looked right at us. Her eyes glowed and then like snuffing out a candle, the light in them died and she turned and walked off the field as calmly as she entered it. Creepiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Cullen stiffened, “is she possessed?”

“There were rumours but only that. Nothing confirmed.”

“So we don’t know…” he started, shifting his hand on the pommel of his sword.

“No, she’s not,” Varric answered. Cullen started to open his mouth to argue. “You’re not the only one familiar with possessed mages, Curly.” Cullen closed his mouth, mollified.

“I have visited her in the Fade on several occasions. I saw no evidence of possession,” Solas added.

“And you think that the Herald is this ‘Vatasala’?” Cassandra asked, turning back to Iron Bull.

“I wasn’t entirely sure until I saw the marks on her back on our trip back from the Storm Coast. They’re distinctive and she’s most definitely Vatasala.”

“Marks?” Cullen questioned.

“Yeah. Whip marks that opened the skin and then coloured with charcoal and bloodstone, making them permanent markings.”

Josephine covered her mouth with a hand, horrified.

“What do you propose we do?” Leliana asked.

Iron Bull leaned against the stone wall of the Chantry cells thinking carefully, he nodded his chin at the shackles attached to the ring in the center of the floor. “This where she was held after she fell out of the Fade?”

“Yes.”
“Good. We should have her join us here.”

“I really don’t think this is a good idea,” Varric cautioned, shifting uncomfortably, after Leliana sent one of the runners to get Eluned.

Eluned walked into the dungeon slowly looking around at everyone gathered, noticing that their new Ben-Hassrath ally stood in the corner watching her. It couldn’t be a coincidence that they had all gathered in the dungeon instead of the war room as they normally did. The shackles on the floor were present. She stood there for a moment and when no one said anything to her, she gritted her teeth and held her hands out for the shackles. Of course, the Ben-Hassrath had told them who and what she was, and they were putting her back in chains.

“No, you’re not a prisoner. We’re not sending you away,” Leliana told her.

She looked around, confused, at the others and noticed that Cullen was shifting uncomfortably with his hand on his sword pommel. Behind her, someone cleared a blade from a scabbard. Her eyes widened. They were going to execute her? She flicked her eyes around trying to assess her chances of getting away alive. She was completely surrounded and everyone, and she’d bet that included Josephine, was armed. She was fairly confident that Varric would be good on his word and take a shot at the qunari, but she doubted he’d go against the others. Solas was always quick to defend her but against these odds, she knew he was too shrewd to not consider his own survival if it came down to it. With or without their help, there was no way she was getting out alive even if she fought. All that awaited was a messy death and potentially the deaths of those she considered friend. At least if she submitted, they’ll give her a cleaner end than the Qun ever would and no one would be caught in the crossfire. She pulled the scarf from her neck, releasing a deep sigh she closed her eyes, dropped to her knees, and tipped her head back baring her throat to them. Hopefully it would be quick like it was with Merilie.

“Andraste’s tits, no. No!” Varric took a step forward, glaring over her shoulder. “No, you’re not going to die. I said this was a bad idea.”

“How did you know?” Cassandra asked him, nodding to Eluned.

“We returned a saarebas to the Qunari back in Kirkwall. Ketojan said he wanted to return. We didn’t know that they’d kill him outright. He bared his throat the same way she just did.”

Eluned raised her head and looked around at the others with narrowed eyes, her shoulders shaking. “What is this?” she hissed at them, clenching and unclenching her hands. “Taunting the saarebas to see if they’ll snap? Perhaps you should find a collar and the Ben-Hassrath can read the Soul Canto to lecture us on our purpose.”

“It’s not like that, Herald…” Josephine said trying to diffuse the situation.

“No? Either you trust me,” she whipped her hands out and summoned fire that flared and licked up her arms, “or you fucking kill me!” she snarled at them.

“Tal-ebost hass-toh Qun?”

She whipped her head around to address the Iron Bull. “No! The Qun can go to hell and you with it,” she spat at him.

Varric calmly walked over to Eluned, ignoring the flames writhing in her hands and hooked his hand under her elbow to help her to her feet as the flames died. “Come on, Songbird. Let’s go get you something to drink. I think we could both use it.”
“You knew she’d react like that,” Leliana spun on Iron Bull who calmly re-sheathed his dagger after Eluned and Varric left the prison cells. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“I wasn’t entirely sure what her reaction was going to be. She hasn’t killed herself which most saarebas that have fully embraced the Qun would do if they couldn’t return, but I needed to see how she responded when pushed into this situation.”

“She could have killed us all!” Cullen shouted.

Iron Bull shook his head. “She was calculating the odds of her survival if she fought before she bared her throat.” He gave Cullen a look. “She’s broken. Asala-taar, soul sickness. She doesn’t want to die; she says she’s not obedient to the Qun, but she won’t necessarily fight to prevent it if acceptance will give her a clean death.”

“She fights well in the field,” Cassandra argued. “She’s not reckless.”

Iron Bull nodded. “Yes, because that’s what she’s been trained to do. She still wears the leash whether she realises it or not,” he said tapping his fingers against his temple. “She may not have handed it to you, but as you saw on the Storm Coast, its still there. The Qun could easily pick it up. That’s dangerous.”

Josephine tapped the feathered end of her quill against her chin, “how do we help her?”

“The Qun treat saarebas as mindless tools; they have no choices, no comforts, no socialization. She needs to be treated as an individual. Encouraged to make decisions and take the lead on occasion. Does anyone know if she’s eating and sleeping regularly?”

“She sleeps but has nightmares that disrupt her sleep,” Solas commented. “The nightmares have been worse since the trip to the Storm Coast.” The accusation was clear.

“Saarebas eat when someone gives them food. They sleep when they are confined. When she was with the Valo-Kas, it wouldn’t have been any different than on the road with you, but in Haven, after what we just witnessed, I doubt she’s looking after herself.”

“Surely by now, she’ll have adjusted enough to take care of her basic needs? She was with the Valo-Kas for some time and has been with us for several months,” Cullen commented.

Iron Bull gave him a speculative look. “Vatasala had been bound for years under one of the most brutal and unstable arvaarads I’ve ever encountered; his name means ‘Face of Death’. He rose through the ranks of the Ben-Hasrrath as an interrogator and became known for his ruthlessness and utter lack of fear with captive ‘Vint mages. After that, he was made arvaarad. He always had the most docile saarebas… if they didn’t kill themselves first. I wouldn’t give that arvaarad a half dead nug I didn’t like. Do you think a handful of months would be enough for you to overcome that level of torture and confinement?”

Cullen flushed and muttered a response as he looked away from the intense scrutiny the qunari was giving him and avoided the knowing gazes of Leliana and Cassandra.

“Look, I got a message that a saarebas was missing. The dwarf was correct; ordinarily an unguarded saarebas is executed the moment they’re found, but worse for her, the Qun wants her back. The orders are for the missing saarebas to be returned. I’m not going to say anything about her to my superiors, but her leash has to be severed. For her own good and that of the Inquisition.”

Leliana’s gaze sharpened on him, “can we expect others to be looking for her?”
Iron Bull nodded. “Absolutely. My job, first and foremost, was to get in with the Inquisition and report back what was being done about the Breach. I was informed to watch for a saarebas that might be hiding here. There will be others whose primary orders are to find her.”

“Is that going to create a conflict of interest for you?”

Iron Bull held Leliana’s gaze. “Yes, it does, but the Qun’s conflict over Seheron will be meaningless if the world is swallowed up by the Breach and the ones responsible for it go unchecked. She’s the only one that can prevent that from happening.” He gave a lazy shrug, “I’ll leave if that’s your decision but as much as your spies are well trained, I doubt they’ll see a Qunari agent before I do.”

Eluned sat in Varric’s usual corner of the Singing Maiden tavern and pressed herself against the wall trying to stop the shaking that had her in its grips. With a quick word to Flissa, Varric returned to the table with two mugs of beer in hand, depositing one in front of her before placing one in his usual spot and sitting down.

He took a long swallow of his beer and watched her sit there without moving to take the drink. He sighed and nudged the mug closer to her. “I need to apologize to you and not just about today.”

She stared at the mug and didn’t respond to Varric’s words.

“Herald? Songbird?” he prompted her. “Ellie?”

She blinked and flicked her eyes up to him in surprise, he never used her proper name.

He nudged the mug towards her again. “I need to apologize. I saw you years ago in Seheron, right before the siege of Ath Velanis. I was there with King Alistair and I remember seeing you, asking the Arishok about you…” he trailed off.

Her brows pinched together, then slowly she nodded, tapping a finger against her temple. I remember.

He looked ashamed, “I’m sorry that we, that I, didn’t look into your situation afterwards. That I didn’t do anything to help.”

“No apology, Varric. You didn’t know.”

“But still…” he looked away.

She rapped her fingers on the table to get his attention. “Not responsible. Not at fault. Okay?”

He sighed. “Okay.” He picked up his mug and found it empty. A glance across the table revealed Eluned’s own mug still full to the brim. “Are you going to drink that?”

She scrunched up her nose in distaste and shook her head, she really didn’t care for the Fereldan beer. Varric laughed then as Flissa arrived with two bowls of stew. Grabbing Eluned’s mug he pulled it to himself, “Flissa, be a doll and bring the Herald a mug of mead. I think she’ll like that better.”

The door opened letting in a cold draft and was quickly closed as the patrons complained. Their complaints silenced abruptly when they saw the responsible party was Solas. He scanned the room, spotting Varric with Eluned, and came over after placing an order and sat down beside her.

“Coming to slum with the locals, Chuckles?”
“I wanted to see how the Herald was doing after that… interrogation.”

Eluned didn’t look up but continued to push her stew around the bowl, squishing the few vegetables into a pulp against the sides.

After a couple mouthfuls of his own stew, Varric rested his spoon on the edge of his bowl. “As much as that was ill-advised, it wasn’t about them not trusting you.”

Eluned raised her brow and gave him a sceptical look.

“Master Tethras is correct. They trust you. What happened with the Iron Bull has them worried, they are concerned about your safety,” Solas reiterated Varric’s assessment of the situation. He paused while his food was delivered to the table, waiting until the server walked out of earshot to make a gesture and cast a silencing barrier around them to prevent their conversation from carrying. “The Iron Bull informed us that the Qun is looking for you. He will not be the only one that received orders to locate you.”

Eluned pushed the bowl of stew away as her stomach rolled with the news. She swallowed hard as anxiety spiked making her hands tremble as she yanked her cloak around herself and tucked her hands into her armpits. The Qun would find her, it was inevitable as the Inquisition made her too visible. She felt like every set of eyes in the place was suddenly focused on her.

“No one wants to hand you over to the Qun, including the Iron Bull. We will all do our part to protect you.” He gave a slight nod, thoughtfully, “you and I will step up our training exercises. You must be able to shield yourself from physical and magical attacks or invasive curiosity like the magister, if nothing else to buy you time until assistance arrives.”

She agreed; it was never in the Qun’s interest that she be able to defend herself, she was woefully lacking in knowledge on how to do so.

“Whoa, wait. Did you say the magister attacked? Did you tell the Seeker about this?”

“No, it was exceedingly rude inspection between mages, a violation of privacy moreso than an attack intended to injure. The Herald was aware of the situation, I merely bolstered her defense. If she chose not to share it with the Seeker, that is her business.”

When he looked ready to protest, Eluned quickly changed the subject and asked, “Varric, would you teach me how to disappear?”

“You mean like Sera and I do?” he asked.

She nodded.

“It’s not magical but alchemical.”

“That is a very good idea,” Solas commented. “If her magic is disrupted like it was by the templar, at least the Herald can use an alchemical method to make herself less easy to find by an enemy.”

“All right, I can do that. Whatever we can do to keep you safe, Songbird, we’ll do it.”

A soft voice called out, “my lady?” A laden tray was set on the table near the fire.

Eluned rolled over and pulled the blankets tighter over her head against the cool air of the cabin. It couldn’t be morning already; perhaps if she pretended to sleep, the servant would go away. She
knew that she couldn’t just ignore the world around her; too much was dependent on her, too much had been revealed the previous day to pretend that life was simple, but for a few moments she just wanted to lose herself in the warm cocoon of her blankets.

“My lady, I’m sorry to wake you, the lady Ambassador has requested your presence in the Chantry.” After a few moments of no response from Eluned, she continued, “lady Josephine sent you breakfast with her compliments.”

A strange thumping noise prompted Eluned to peel back the blankets enough to see into the room. The servant, the elf that had dropped the box of potions on the first day she woke in the cabin, was stirring up the coals in the fireplace, coaxing them into life with a new stick of wood. “There is a nice pot of proper tea, porridge with cream and fruit preserves, but I can get something else for you if you don’t like the selection the lady ambassador made.”

She huffed to herself, as much as she wanted to lose herself in sleep and ignore the world around her, she couldn’t in good conscience snub Josephine’s efforts. Of all of them, the Antivan was the only one that made any effort to treat her as a person. A loud grumble from her traitorous stomach finally made the decision for her. She still had enough problems eating with the lingering effects of atrophied muscles in her jaw that she couldn’t eat much but being with the Valo-Kas and the Inquisition had gotten her used to at least attempting to eat something on a regular basis for which her stomach was now protesting. Pulling the blanket from the bed, she sat up and gingerly placed her bare toes on the floor.

“Oh, wait a moment, my lady!” the elf hurried over and yanked wool socks over Eluned’s feet then handed her the tea before she could protest. She turned back and started sorting through the clothing Eluned had thrown off the night before. “The lady Ambassador asked for a volunteer from the three of us that look after the noble pilgrims that came to Haven to be your lady’s maid. The other two were too frightened to volunteer, they’ve only ever seen you from a distance but had heard fearsome stories about you.” She shot Eluned a hasty glance, “not from me, my lady.”

“You’re not frightened?” she asked.

“I was when I first met you, when you woke up after closing the Breach, but not any more.” She glanced at Eluned and blushed, “well, not as much.” She knelt in front of a chest, flipped open the lid, and gave a piece of fabric a yank. An object rolled out and hit the floor in front of her knees with a heavy thud. The elf picked up the decorated metal rod and froze, she looked at Eluned, her eyes were huge and unblinking. “I’m so sorry my lady, I didn’t mean…” she started babbling.

Eluned got up calmly and walked over to where the elf cowered on her knees and scooped up the control rod, collar, and mask, and the fabric they were wrapped in without touching the elf. She returned to the bed and covered the pieces up with the fabric.

The elf kept apologizing, “I can tell lady Josephine that you’d rather have someone else.”

“Stop. What is your name?”

“Dehari, my lady.”

“Dehari. It’s fine. There is no need to speak with Josephine. I will put these elsewhere, so they don’t distress you.”

It didn’t seem possible, but the elf’s eyes widened further as her brows shot up when Eluned expressed her concern for the elf’s comfort. She asked quietly, “is it true my lady? Were you a slave?”
“Yes.”

Dehari sat silently, thoughtful, then gave a little nod as if she had come to some sort of decision. Rising to her feet with a small armload of clothing she had gathered, she turned and dropped a curtsy to Eluned. “The lady ambassador and the others will be expecting you in the Chantry when you have finished breaking your fast. I will see to your laundry, my lady.”

After Dehari left, Eluned looked around the cabin to find a secure spot to store the bundle of items. With a Ben-Hassrath agent in the village, she didn’t need word getting out that she had those items of oppression so readily at hand. Not that she thought her new lady’s maid – she shook her head at the thought – would say anything but security wasn’t the highest. From her bed she noticed a small gap between the stone chimney and the outer wall of the cabin. It was only visible from the head of her bed, it wasn’t visible from the door, the desk, or the arranged chairs around the fireplace. She dragged a chair to the wall and shoved the bundle into the space after checking that they wouldn’t fall out of reach. The fabric was dark, the bundle was well concealed.

After finishing her breakfast, she dressed and left her cabin. She glanced around furitively but didn’t spot the qunari, he must have been quartered outside the village walls with the rest of his mercenary group. She’d find out where they were and would give their camp a wide berth. She looked out over the palisades with a pang of loneliness for Kaaras and the rest of the Valo-Kas, they’d been gone for barely two weeks with another four to go and she missed them unbearably. She turned and trudged through the snow heading up to the Chantry waving to Varric as she passed by his fire.

The war room was uncharacteristically quiet when she opened the door. The others looked up expectantly from the map or whatever held their attention as she took her position at the side of the table. An awkward silence followed, until Josephine spoke up. “Good morning Herald. Did you sleep well?”

Eluned resisted the urge to squirm as all eyes focused on her, she felt like an insect about to be pinned down onto a specimen board. “Much as usual. Thank you for the breakfast, the jam was good,” she gestured.

“Oh, you’re welcome,” Josephine murmured with a small smile.

Silence fell again.

Cassandra cleared her throat. “We wish to apologize for what occurred yesterday.” Eluned caught both Cullen and Leliana shifting their weight but for entirely different reasons; Cullen was uncomfortable, embarrassed, and Leliana didn’t like that they were giving ground. “We didn’t do what we did to hurt or humiliate you, but out of concern for your well-being.”

Eluned gave her a look of disbelief.

“The Iron Bull said that you were conditioned to respond a certain way, in ways that you yourself might not have even been aware of. I would have deemed his information as suspect but after how you responded on the Storm Coast to his command… and then bared your throat…” Eluned crossed her arms and looked away from them all.

“We needed to know so that we can help you,” Josephine finished.

Eluned pressed her lips together, she was still pissed off at them for putting her into a position of humiliating herself before all the people that were supposed to be her companions, letting her think that she was going to die at their hands and giving her enough time to choose to give up. It stung that they didn’t have enough regard for her to let the qunari pull her chain in relative privacy.
“Well now that’s over with, we have some questions for you,” Leliana stated. Josephine shot her a look that was ignored. “Why were the Qunari in southern Thedas?”

Eluned shrugged.

“Were they coming the infiltrate the Conclave?”

She shook her head and shrugged again.

“How many were with you?”

She shrugged, “fifteen, I think.”

“Where did you land? What route did you take? Who joined and who left.” The questions went on and on in circles for hours.

Cullen sighed, exasperated. “You traveled with them daily. Constantly in their presence. How do you not know about their plans?”

Eluned glared at him in frustration, “you wear your sword at all times. Do you discuss strategy with it? Do you inform it of the reason before you draw it from its scabbard? Or do you simply wield the weapon then put it away when you are finished? I was bas-saarebas; ordered to kill, punished if I did not, and chained away until they had need of me again. I had been sleeping for years until we ran into the Valo-Kas!”

“We haven’t done better in that respect, have we?” Josephine interrupted before Cullen could respond, “the Herald has no love for the Qun. If she says she doesn’t know, I’m inclined to believe her.”

“Josie…”

“As do I,” Cassandra added.

There was a quiet knock at the door, Josephine ignored Leliana to answer it. “Why don’t we take a break? The mid-day meal is here. We can sit down together and eat, then return to business once we’ve had a chance to refresh ourselves.”

Eluned turned to the door, only to be escorted to a seat by Josephine. Resigned, she pulled off her gloves, tucking them into her belt, sat down on the offered chair, and accepted a trencher of food. Conversation was stilted, she assumed because of her presence; the others were old acquaintances of varying lengths. After a little while, she realised that the others had stopped talking entirely and were watching her. She flushed, “what?”

“Apologies, Herald, do you have difficulties with your hands?” Josephine asked when the others remained silent.

Eluned nodded. She hesitated then unwrapped the leather bracer around her left arm and pulled back the sleeve of her tunic revealing the fetter around her arm.

“Why is the Herald still shackled?” Josephine demanded.

“I had forgotten you wore those,” Cassandra muttered.

“You knew?” Josephine gave Cassandra a scathing look and turned back to Eluned, “why did you not say something?”
Eluned rotated her elbow and revealed the bold geometric pattern of the Qun that decorated the outside of the metal. The others immediately understood why she hadn’t.

“Harriott should be able to cut them off easily enough,” Cullen commented.

Eluned shook her head. She scanned the table and picked up a piece of string that was used to tie a bundle of parchments. She threaded the string under the shackle and then looped it back again. She held her arm out to Cassandra and offered her the string ends. “Pull.”

Cassandra frowned in confusion and gently pulled the loop of string. It stuck.

“Harder.”

Cassandra’s frown got a little deeper, but she pulled harder. Suddenly the string pulled free and in two pieces. Her brow shot up. “I don’t understand…”

Eluned flipped her arm over to bare the inside and stuck her finger through the ring on the shackle, mimicked hitting the ring with a hammer, then turned her arm over and laid her fingers across her arm parallel to the ring. “Goes through. He said that the only way I could remove them would be to cut off my own hands.”

Someone, most likely Josephine, gasped.

“That’s barbaric!” Cullen exclaimed.

Eluned snorted. “You think?”

“Surely with magic…”

She interrupted Leliana, “Solas already tried. They resisted,” she tapped the cuff, “and caused me a great deal of pain.”

“This is why you resist using a staff?” Cassandra asked irritably. “Why didn’t you say?” Eluned rolled her eyes.

Leliana hummed, “I may know of someone that can help. I will make some inquiries.”

The door slammed open starting everyone; a scout stumbled in, exhausted and sweating despite the cold weather. “Sister Nightingale, forgive the interruption but we have a situation. An urgent message just arrived by raven.”

Chapter End Notes

**Translation:**

Tal-ebost hass-toh Qun? - (Qun) Are you obedient to the Qun?

Good lord, I’ve written 105K words on this story and haven't closed the Breach yet!
Leverage

Chapter Summary

Leverage

Noun: the ability to influence situations to gain strategic advantage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Leliana took the parchment from the scout who hastily saluted and exited the war room. “It appears that some of our soldiers have been captured by Avvar tribesman calling himself the Hand of Korth.”

“Where?” Cullen asked studying the map spread on the table.

“Here,” Leliana moved one of the markers to the southern end of the map, “in the Fallow Mire. It seems that the Avvar are seeking a meeting with the Herald of Andraste and are holding our people hostage until you arrive. They will be executed otherwise.”

Cullen sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, “how many people are we talking about?”

“I can’t be sure. I can send a raven to Scout Harding to investigate. She should be back in the Hinterlands by now, that puts her two days ahead of the Herald to the Fallow Mire.”

“The eight of us can leave at first light,” Cassandra replied.

“Oh, might I request that Madame de Fer remains here?” Josephine asked. “She’s helping me with a delicate situation with one of the noble houses.”

“Fine. I will see to our supplies, and the Herald can go notify the others of our departure. Including the Iron Bull.”

Eluned shook her head. “No, I don’t want him near me.”

Exasperated, Cassandra retorted, “there is no one better to prevent the Qun from getting anyone close to you.”

“You believe him?” she asked incredulously.

“Well yes. He has sworn to protect you.”

“He’s a spy! They all fucking lie!” she spat looking pointedly at Leliana.

“He’s better able that any of us to recognize agents from the Qun,” Cassandra argued. “He will accompany us.”

“Then tell him yourself!” Eluned spun on her heel, yanked the door open and crashed into someone standing on the other side.

“Oh hello, it’s you again. I was just looking for someone in charge.”
She gestured sharply with her thumb over her shoulder and dodged around to hurry from the Chantry. Eluned yanked the cloak more tightly around herself and pulled the hood up against the cold as she hurried through the village not bothering to go around to the stairs but instead dropping off the edge of the terraced space into Varric’s camp space and continued without a word.

“Hey Songbird, what’s…” Varric trailed off as a harried templar hurried past trying to keep up with Eluned who disappeared through the village gates.

Once clear of the training field and into the trees, she started to run. She ignored everything: the tree branches that whipped her hood from her head, the branches that tugged her hair loose from its braid, the branch that scratched her cheek, and the templar that crashed and clanged behind her as he tried to keep up in his heavier armour. She didn’t stop until the stitch in her side brought her to a halt. Then she started casting.

Trevelyan stood at the edge of the treeline watching as Eluned blasted snow, rocks, and trees with fire. He restlessly gripped and re-gripped his sheathed sword, shifting his weight nervously. Volatile, emotional mages attracted demons. Demons created abominations. The Breach spat out demons and were attracted to the mark the Herald bore. He debated whether he should Silence the Herald and wished, not for the first time, that he wasn’t assigned to watch her. He jumped when a large grey hand came down on his shoulder.

“Go back to the village,” Iron Bull said with a tip of his head back along the path. “I’ll keep an eye on her.”

Trevelyan risked a glance at the him, unsure if he was trying to make a joke about his single eye and whether he should laugh or not.

“Go back to the village,” Iron Bull said again. “I’ve got this.”

“The Commander…”

“The Commander knows I’m here to guard the Herald.”

The templar flinched as a tree exploded into splinters and ash. He swallowed hard and nodded. “It’s your pyre,” he muttered.

Iron Bull laughed and slapped him on his back, nearly sending him to his knees. With the templar retreating, he turned back to watch the light show.

Eluned continued to cast until she was shaking and sweaty, she hadn’t cast with that ferocity since leaving Seheron. Around her, the snow had melted in a large circle and the ground steamed. Still frustrated, she dropped to her knees and silently screamed, then dropped her chin to her chest and panted for breath.

“Are you finished with your temper tantrum yet?”

She immediately spun around on her knees and shot a fireball at where she heard the voice coming from. Iron Bull easily sidestepped the shot having anticipated that exact response. Eluned jumped to her feet and stomped toward him, talking and gesturing wildly in her anger.

“I don’t know what you are saying,” he said mildly.

“Then let me use smaller words. Fuck. Off.” She gestured at him with both middle fingers.

Iron Bull smiled. Most humans, elves, dwarfs, cowered from him even as they were thinking about
bedding him. She didn’t. She had fire and not just the magical variety; it was a wonder that Tal’atkata hadn’t broken that. Then again, it was likely how she survived him.

He reached out to swipe at the bloody scratch on her cheek, but she jerked back out of his reach. “Don’t touch me,” she hissed at him.

“Are you always this much of a pain in the ass?”

“Would you rather I was in chains?” she spat back at him.

He smirked, “nah. I prefer rope or scarves. Something silky.”

The fire in her eyes snuffed out as quickly as the blood drained from her face, leaving her trembling and pale. She bolted for Haven, nimbly dodging his reach even if he had attempted to grab her. Not that he would; grabbing a hold of a frightened, wounded animal was a certain guarantee of more injuries on both sides of the hand.

The sun hadn’t even started to breach the horizon when Dehari came and woke her up. Eluned sat shivering wrapped in a blanket against the early morning chill of her cabin, cradling a hot cup of tea as the elf finished tucking the last few clothing items into a pack for her.

“There’s an extra pair of woolen socks and Master Harritt sent along an oiled cloak that’ll help keep you dry. I hear that it rains contantly.” She glanced nervously at Eluned and lowered her voice, “I also heard that there are still darkspawn roaming the Wilds even all this time after the Blight.”

Eluned remembered reading something about darkspawn in the book about the Wardens that Josephine had lent to her. She shook her head, “I don’t think we’re going there.”

She shivered, “well that’s good, Your Worship.” She squeaked in response to a metal gauntlet thumping on door but hurried to answer it.

Cassandra brushed past the elf and strode into the room. “Are you ready to leave yet, Herald?” She looked around the cabin, her eyes coming to rest of Eluned sitting on the bed still wrapped in a blanket. She pressed her lips together, displeased. “Be at the gate in ten minutes or I will send someone to fetch you.” She turned on her heel and left.

Eluned sighed, she knew exactly who Cassandra would send. She finished getting dressed and shouldered the pack with a quick parting glance up to the hidden bundle at the back of the chimney. She gestured her thanks to Dehari and left the warmth of her cabin for the sharp cold outside. She yanked her scarf around her face, the cold air caught in her throat and made her cough.

Horsemaster Dennet and his stablehands had readied the horses for the group and stood waiting in the early morning light. Cullen and Leliana were talking with Cassandra while the others settled their supplies onto their horses. Eluned was surprised when she noticed that there was an eighth person in their group, knowing that Vivienne was remaining behind to work with Josephine. It wasn’t Trevelyan, the templar remained to the side looking faintly relieved not to be travelling with them.

She glanced at the mystery person but couldn’t tell who they might be, they were bundled up as much as she was. She had no more time to consider it as Cassandra called for them to mount up and leave.

She gave her horse a scratch on the neck before swinging herself up into the saddle. With the oiled cloak rolled up behind the saddle with the rest of her things, she tucked the thick felted cloak around her legs, making sure the cloth laid smoothly under her knees to prevent pinching and to keep the cold air from creeping in. She pulled her hood up and fell into line beside Solas.
They hadn’t been out on the road for very long before Varric sidled his pony up beside the newcomer. “Didn’t we run into you in Redcliffe? The ‘Vint magister selling out his mentor?’”

Dorian gave a dramatic, resigned sigh. “All right. Let’s say this once. I’m a mage from Tevinter, but not a member of the Magisterium. I know southerners use the terms interchangeably, but that only make you sound like barbarians. As I told your Herald, Alexius was my mentor as in he hasn’t been for years.”

“Riiiiight. So why are you with us?”

“Felix had warned me that his father had ordered his Venatori to do a search of the village and surrounding area. He didn’t know what specifically his father was searching for, but I couldn’t risk being found out. Good timing for me to join you for a little excursion.”

“You know where we’re headed, right?” asked Varric sceptically as his eyes scanned the mage’s fine clothing.

At the southern end of Lake Calenhad they turned off the Imperial Highway and headed south towards Honneleath to avoid Redcliffe and Magister Alexius’ agents. From Honneleath, they headed southeast across country to the Fallow Mire and the village of Callow Hill where the Avvar held Hargrave Keep with their Inquisition hostages. Two days from their destination, the clouds moved in and a constant drizzle started to fall. The oppressive weather started to get on everyone’s nerves and tempers grew short. Eluned buried herself into her cloak and tried to ignore the grumbling from the others; Varric complained about the weather, Cassandra growled about his complaining, Iron Bull and Dorian traded barbs regarding their respective countries, and Sera sulked after being reprimanded for putting worms in someone’s bedroll. Only Solas and Blackwall refrained from complaining.

As they got closer to the village the road started to erode, they had to slow their pace to safeguard their mounts’ soundness. Relieved, they finally saw the light from a couple of campfires that flickered defiantly in the relentless drizzle of rain. “Well, this is all very pleasant,” Blackwall muttered as he looked around.

Varric slid off his pony with a very audible splash of mud, “ugh, this shit is going to ruin my boots.”

Sera wrinkled her nose while remaining on her horse, “smells like arse here.”

“Fields of mud,” Dorian helpfully chipped in as he dismounted from his own horse. “What do they call this? A ‘bog’? Lovely word.”

“Better hike up your skirt, mage boy,” Iron Bull growled at him, purposefully splashing as much as he could.

“I’m not wearing a skirt,” Dorian retorted with a sniff, yanking his robes away from the splatter.

“You trip on that bustling whatever, don’t come crying to me.”

Eluned whistled, shot them all a glare and yanked a finger across her throat in warning. She slid off her horse as Scout Harding approached.

“Thank you for coming, Herald. Maybe you can solve this mess. Our missing patrols are being held hostage by Avvar. Barbarians from the mountains.”

“What are they doing in a bog?”
“That’s the thing. Their leader… he wants them to fight you. Because you’re the Herald of Andraste.”

“What do they have against Andraste?” Cassandra asked.

“Well… The Avvar think that there are gods in nature. As in, the sky has a god, and the forest. The Avvar say that you’re claiming to be sent by one, and they’ll challenge the will of your god with their own. Personally, I think their leader’s just a boastful little prick who wants to brag that he killed you.”

Eluned snickered at Harding’s assessment of the Avvar leader. “Will they talk?” she gestured.

“I wouldn’t count on it. These Avvar don’t seem to value diplomacy. Getting to our troops won’t be easy. You’ll have to fight your way through undead – wait… you’re not squeamish about undead, are you?”

Eluned stared at the scout – of course there would be zombies in a creepy-ass bog. She shrugged, “it doesn’t matter. We’ll get them out.”

“I appreciate it, just try to stay out of the water. The Avvar are holed up in the castle on the far end of the village. Maker willing, the Inquisition’s people are still alive.”

“We’ll leave the horses here and proceed on foot. Harding, please have a couple scouts follow at a safe distance behind us once we clear the way. We’ll want to set up another camp so we don’t have to backtrack and lose time getting to the hostages,” Cassandra ordered.

“Yes, serah,” Harding saluted and went to issue orders to the scouts.

The water was murky and dark, insects buzzed around biting at them as their footsteps disturbed the marshy ground along the narrow winding path. Rotten vegetation and other – suspicious items - stuck out of the water.

“Just remember, anything poking up from the water could be a horrible monster acting like a stick,” Bull said.

Eluned ducked her chin into her scarf to hide her smirk that the biggest person in the party was the one warning them all about monsters in the deep. Her foot slipped off the path and she stumbled into the edge of the water. The water rippled and there was an unholy screech as undead rose from the water. Well, now they knew why Harding advised them to stay out of the water.

Solas held out his hand and helped her back onto the path even as he pulled his staff from his back. “Your fire will be effective here.”

The battle was short with the efforts of the three mages as well as the arrows and bolts provided by Sera and Varric, respectively. The warriors in the party were left to pick up a few stragglers that attempted to sneak up on them from behind.

“It’s so wet. Why haven’t the dead rotten away?” asked Blackwall as he wiped the grey-black sludge from his sword.

“It’s not surprising that there are undead here, there are no shortage of corpses for the demons to possess.”

“It appears that these poor souls have succumbed to a plague,” Cassandra commented as she knelt to look at a body. She pulled out a small container and a blade and gingerly rolled a corpse over.
“Eewww, what are you doing? Parts are gross!” Sera squealed.

“Don’t be childish. We need to know what made these people ill – the Tranquil can determine that,” she replied meticulously tucking the sample into a small flask and secured it shut.

“Uh Seeker, I’m not eating anything you cook while we’re here.”

“You never eat anything I make, Varric.”

“That’s because you burn the shit out of it. Even the Maker wouldn’t be able to identify what it had been after you get a hold of it.”

Eluned bit back her smile at Cassandra’s snort of disgust.

“Come, we need to find a suitable place to camp for the night. We’re losing light fast and I don’t want to be stumbling around in this muck with the undead in the dark.”

Once settled around the campfire, and after a dinner not prepared by Cassandra, Eluned sat down between Sera and Dorian. “Are demons the only way to create undead?” she gestured to him.

“Demons are not the only way to animate them, no,” replied Solas. “However, a demon is sentient enough to do so without outside assistance.”

Dorian caught on to what she was asking and continued, “usually a practitioner of the necromantic arts, such as myself, will make use of wisps to animate a body for a short duration. The Nevarran Mortalitasi do something similar; however, the wisps remain within the body indefinitely.”

“Ugh, must we discuss this now?” Cassandra complained. “I do not like the undead, reminds me too much of the visits to the Necropolis my uncle insisted upon. The smell of stale incense still makes me want to vomit.”

“And I was desperate to go as a child.” Dorian shrugged, “ah well, there goes that childhood fantasy.”

“Aren’t wisps sentient?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

Eluned glanced between the two mages as they sized each other up.

“Wisps are remnants of spirits that have slipped the through the Veil,” Solas replied. “Anywhere that there has been a great deal of death, the Veil will thin permitting wisps and other spirits to pass through.”

“Solas, I take it you study spirits?”

“I do.”

“Back in my homeland, we keep spirits as servants.”

“So I’ve been told,” Solas replied stiffly.

Eluned got up and slipped away from the fire unnoticed, disappearing into the tent uncomfortable with the tension between the two mages.
“The things they can be made to be are quite marvelous. You should see them.”

“The Tevinter Imperium is not the safest place for an elf.”

“Ah. Yes, point taken.”

Iron Bull shifted from his seat across the fire to the log next to Dorian, nearly unseating the smaller human as it shifted beneath his weight. “Hey ‘Vint. You’re from Minrathous, right?”

Dorian twisted around slightly to face him. “Most recently, yes.”

“Hear any gossip or stories from your countrymen about Seheron?”

“Some. Is there something in particular you’re fishing for?”

“I’m just curious if you’ve heard of Vatasala?”

Dorian scoffed, “are you serious? The Qun’s pet demon? It’s nothing more than a tale to frighten naughty children in the dark of night!”

“So no truth to it, then?”

“Alexius once mentioned that the Vatasala came up as a topic of debate in the Magisterium. Half the house dismissed it as Qunari propaganda, and the other half was ready to hire Crows to hunt it down or capture it for Tevinter. The last rumors were that it had vanished as if it had never existed in the first place.”

Iron Bull leaned forward and watched him intently, “what do you think they’d do if they found out it was still around?”

Dorian looked around and noticed that everyone else was completely focused on their conversation; any activities they had been doing, forgotten. He fidgeted, “ah, I suppose it might renew their interest. Vatasala was instrumental in bringing down Aurelian Titus after all. He was a madman, of course, but he was one of ours. Personally, I thought it good riddance. Are you trying to bait me into an argument on the relations between our two countries?”

“I’m just curious what you’d do if you found where it was?”

“If this Vatasala, whomever or whatever it is, has found its freedom from the Qun, I would not be the one to send it back into captivity under Tevinter. I love my country, but this is one instance where I think the better side of it would not be on display.” Dorian looked around and noticed, uncomfortably, the number of bared blades. “Why are you asking me this?”

Iron Bull looked at Cassandra who nodded, “because you were sitting next to her.”

Dorian whipped his head around and his eyes stopped on Sera who was now the next person beside him. “Not me, you daft git,” she gestured over her shoulder in the direction Eluned had gone. “He means the Herald.”

“You can’t be serious? That skittish, silent little thing is…? Venhedis! You walked her into the middle of the Venatori cult!” His eyes shot around the fire. “If I had answered differently, I’d be a pretty corpse for the demons as well, wouldn’t I?”

Iron Bull slapped him on the shoulder as he stood up, “good thing you’re smart as well as pretty.”
The undead swarmed around the far end of the drawbridge blocking the way through the barbican and into the keep proper. For every undead they cut down with magic, arrows, or sword, another stepped up into its place.

“Ugh, these corpses are relentless. They are just preventing us from our mission,” Cassandra grumbled as she shoved another corpse back with her shield.

Eluned nodded and turned to Solas, she mimed pushing the undead apart. He shifted his stance to cast the new spell shoving the undead back. Slowly the path between the undead opened across the drawbridge.

“Go! Forget about these undead – we need to focus on getting to the hostages,” Cassandra yelled. “Just go!”

They raced across the drawbridge.

“Get back,” Blackwall called. The portcullis came crashing down pinning a pair of undead underneath it.

Iron Bull slammed his axe down taking both their heads in a single swipe.

“Ew, parts. Parts!” Sera jumped out of the way as the heads rolled down the slope from the gate.

“Come on, let's go,” Eluned gestured. They quickly headed through the keep to main hall.

“Herald of Andraste! Face me, I am the Hand of Korth.” A mountain of a man, painted with clay tinted blue and white, with a set of downward curved horns mounted on a helmet stepped forward pushing a struggling person before him. The green light of the mark reflected off the hostage’s breastplate, illuminating the eye symbol of the Inquisition.

Eluned placed her hand on Cassandra’s shoulder halting her. She stepped in front and through the shattered door into the crumbling main hall of the keep.

“Herald…” she warned quietly.

Eluned raised her left hand letting the anchor spark and flare in the gloom of the ruined keep as she continued forward. She let her eyes flit around the shattered hall, her lips barely moving as she silently cast her targeting spell that Crooked Horns taught her years ago, finding the archers that hid behind columns and warriors that readied themselves to rush into battle.

The green reflection on the breastplate flickered as the hostage suddenly started to struggle, and then fell limp after a loud crack bounced, echoing, off the wet stones of the hall.

Eluned blinked. In the space of two heartbeats it took for the scout’s lifeless body to fall, Eluned saw first an elven woman, then a human man; their throats cut and running with their life’s blood as they crumpled to the sunbaked stones of the Qunari courtyard.

“No!” Eluned screamed soundlessly in rage. Fire sparked and grew in her hands, rapidly forming into a writhing ball. Waves of heat rose around her rippling the air as she watched the Avvar leader stride towards her raising his huge warhammer to strike her. She flicked her hands down extinguishing the fireball.

“Herald! No!” Cassandra yelled. Iron Bull grabbed the Seeker and yanked her back as she struggled to reach Eluned.
Fire poured into the hall, flowing like water down the stairs, around the columns flushing out and igniting all the Avvar with the intense heat of a forge. The Hand of Korth staggered and stumbled as his legs disintegrated into ash beneath him. His hammer dropped to the ground and he pitched forward into the flames that lapped at Eluned’s feet.

“Maker,” Dorian gasped.

The fire gutted as Eluned walked through the hall. She pushed open the door and found the other Inquisition hostages huddled together.

“It’s the Herald!”

“She came for us!”

“Maker bless you, Herald.”

Eluned turned away and let the others check over the hostages as she wandered back out of the hall. In the doorway they had originally entered, a large form stood waiting.

“So you’re the Herald of Andraste. I am Sky Watcher. My kin wanted you dead, Lowlander, but it’s not my job. No fears from me.”

Eluned pointed at Sky Watcher then back into the fortress where the ash of the other Avvar lay and shook her head, “why weren’t you with the others?”

“Our chieftain’s son wanted to fight you. I’m called in when the dead pile up. Rites to the gods, mending for the bleeding, a dagger for the dying. That’s what I do. I don’t pick up a blade for a whelp’s trophy hunt.”

She pointed at him and spread her hands with a shrug, “so why are you here?”

“Trying to figure out the holes in the world. Never seen anything like its like. They spit out angry spirits. Endless. What the sky’s trying to tell us, I don’t know.”

“They are caused by the Breach in the sky,” Solas explained, stepping up beside Eluned. “Magic gone wrong.”

“I know that, Lowlander. I’m talking about the Lady of the Skies. Do you not know her? Can’t you see the warnings she writes through the bird flocks in the air?”

“Interesting, how widely Fereldan beliefs diverge.”

“Call me Fereldan again, elf, and see how far you get,” Sky Watcher growled at him. He turned back to Eluned, “the spirits have been whispering about you and I wanted to see for myself.”

Eluned gave him a wary look.

“The spirits flock around you. Do you not hear them?”

She stiffened—there always were spirits in her dreams—but she didn’t respond to his question. Instead, Solas answered, “the mark she wears is a connection to the Fade. It draws their attention.”

Sky Watcher shook his head. “The spirits say you’ve travelled between worlds, Herald. Through an ancient door between.”

Solas narrowed his eyes as he considered the Avvar augur’s words. “Are you speaking of an
Eluvian?”

He flicked his eyes to Solas, “older than that, dreamer.” He turned back to Eluned, “the spirits say you must find another path, that way is shut.”

Chapter End Notes

Well I didn't quite manage to make it by the end of the day on Wednesday... but Happy Hallowe'en everyone!

Thank you for your comments and kudos - I love getting your feedback. :)
Portent

Chapter Summary

Portent

*Noun: a sign or warning that something, especially something momentous or calamitous, is likely to happen*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trip back through the Fallow Mire was silent, everyone lost in their own thoughts after they witnessed for the first time what Eluned could truly do. Apart from coordinating among themselves to deal with a rift, very little was said for the entire trip back to the camp. For the entire time, Cassandra fumed.

“What were you thinking? You could have killed us all!” Cassandra yelled throwing her shield down next to her tent.

“Seeker, this might not be the time or the place.”

She ignored Varric’s words of caution and spun Eluned around by her shoulders, giving her a hard shake. “What were you thinking?”

“I—*I saw the horns. And then—I was back there. Merilie screamed when they broke her arm.*” Eluned’s eyes remained unfocused, standing motionless in Cassandra’s grip. “I *had—I had to show them, reveal my magic. If my life would buy hers and that of her unborn child, they could have it. But they killed them anyway.*” Cassandra’s hands dropped from her shoulders, horrified. “*I just wanted them to burn.*” Eluned turned and ducked into her tent.

She pulled off her muddy boots and coat, dumping them at the entrance of the tent, and wrapped herself in her bedroll. She cleared her throat roughly and blinked back the tears of frustration that pricked in her eyes. *I’m free of the Qun, so why do I feel worse,* she thought. It seemed like every time she went out on the road with these people to do something good, something happened to make her relive all the pain and suffering she experienced when she was enslaved. She should be feeling better! The worst of it was that she couldn’t really just be herself with these people like she could with the Valo Kas, she felt like she needed to keep her guard up even with Varric and Solas.

She chided herself, she should to go out and try to socialize with them, but her stomach churned with acid at the thought of the scrutiny she’d be under after lighting up the keep as she had. Instead she punched the pack she used for a pillow and pulled the blanket up around her ears. She missed Kaaras; they were still at least another three or so weeks away if they managed to keep on schedule. She would just have to get the Breach sealed so could join the Valo-Kas permanently and get as far away from these people as she could. She closed her eyes and tried to lose herself in sleep.

“Herald?” a quiet voice called from the other side of the tent. Eluned pulled her blanket over her head, hoping that the scout would move on.

“Sod off,” Sera grumbled from the bedroll next to her.
“Herald. A message has come from Haven for you.”

Eluned sighed and tried to extricate herself from the bedroll without further disturbing her tent mate. She glanced across to the other side of the elf and found Cassandra was already gone, or perhaps had not yet come to bed—she was disoriented as to the time, it felt like she hadn’t slept at all. She huffed, *if Cassandra was up, why couldn’t she deal with the message?* She stuck her head out of the tent flap.

“Herald.” The scout saluted her, handed her the rolled parchment and spun on his heel back to his post.

“Whaz goin’ on?” Sera mumbled from under the covers.

Eluned angled the unrolled parchment towards the sliver of light leaking into the tent. She recognized Leliana’s handwriting. They had a message from Redcliffe. As much as she preferred to get the mages and finally close the Breach, the magister made the hair on the back of her neck stand up, and that was before his invasive prodding with his magic. Discomfort or not, it was still better than have a wall of cold void in the shape of templars at her back.

She changed her clothing, wrinkling her nose at the mud stiffened clothes she slept in, and paused to pull on her clean boots and coat. Someone had cleaned them for her while she slept. She ducked out of the tent and headed to the campfire where Cassandra sat, handing her the parchment then sitting down with a cup of tea.

Cassandra unrolled the message. “Magister Alexius has sent an invitation. You still wish to approach the mages for assistance?”

Eluned nodded.

“The Commander will not be happy with this choice.”

Eluned shrugged. She didn’t care if he didn’t like it; she was the one that had to close the Breach and she’d rather have the power of the mages with her than whatever non-magical magic the templars offered. She shook her head at their hypocrisy.

“We’ll need to return to Haven with all haste to make our plans before we head back to Redcliffe. Let’s wake the others and get started.”

Eluned dropped off her pack and muddied equipment, only stopping at the cabin for a quick change of clothing before heading to the Chantry to meet with the others. She pushed open the large doors of the Chantry and noticed the presence of additional Tranquil that hadn’t been there before. She was pleased, it looked like Minaeve had gathered them to help with research after they had been smuggled from Redcliffe. As she got closer to the war room, she could already hear the raised voices within. All speech halted when she entered.

“Ah, welcome back Herald,” Josephine greeted her with a warm smile. “Lady Cassandra has been filling us in on your successful mission to the Fallow Mire.” Eluned ignored Cullen’s sharp snort of derision, obviously he did not think favourably with how she handled the Avvar warrior. Josephine shot him a warning look. “As you know, we’ve received a message from Magister Alexius Gereon, addressed to you, the Herald of Andraste, specifically.”

“He was so complimentary that we are certain that he wants to kill you,” added Leliana, watching her reaction.
Eluned shrugged. “He can get in line,” she gestured.

“It is most certainly a trap.”

“We don’t have the man power to take the castle!” Cullen scowled and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Redcliffe Castle is one of the most defensible fortresses in Ferelden. It has repelled thousands of assaults. We should give up this nonsense and go get the Templars!”

“Have we heard from Darrow?”

“No, we have not,” Leliana answered.

Cullen turned to Eluned, “if you go in there, you’ll die. And we will lose the only means that we have of closing these rifts. I won’t allow it.”

Eluned raised her eyebrow, he wouldn’t allow it? “We have no choice. We can not wait.”

“There is the other way in as I discussed with you, Commander.” Leliana turned to Eluned, “there is a secret passage into the castle, an escape route for the family. It’s too narrow for troops but we could send agents through. It will only work if the magister is focused on something—or in this case—someone, else. You.”

“It’s too risky,” Cullen argued. “We can’t in good conscience—"

Eluned rapped her knuckles on the table to interrupt them. “I’ll do it.”

Dorian pushed open the door and entered cutting off any arguments. “Fortunately, you’ll have help. Your spies will never get past Alexius’ magic without my help so if you are going after him, I’m coming as well.”

“That’s settled then, we leave first thing in the morning,” Cassandra stated.

The following morning, Eluned, all her companions, and a large compliment of Leliana’s scouts headed to the Hinterlands. They moved quickly, stopping only long enough to rest their mounts before continuing.

Dorian eyed up Iron Bull, “I hope it doesn't bother you to travel alongside a "Vint, Iron Bull.”

Iron Bull shot him an amused glance. “That what you are? You people all kinda look the same to me.”

“I'm also a mage. Would you prefer me bound and leashed?”

Eluned stiffened making her horse jig sideways abruptly bumping into Solas’ mount. “Herald? Are you well?” he asked softly, concerned with her sudden pallor.

“I’d buy you dinner first.”

“Hopefully before you sewed my mouth shut,” Dorian retorted.

“Depends how much you keep yapping.”

Eluned’s horse neighed in protest as she roughly steered the animal to the side of the road into the bushes and leaned out of the saddle to throw up. Solas maneuvered his own animal beside and reached over to steady her as her horse shifted nervously under her.
Varric glared at Dorian and Iron Bull. “Would you two knock it off!”

Trembling, Eluned pulled herself back upright and roughly dragged the corner of her cloak across her mouth and steered her horse back on the road. She scratched at the horse’s withers in apology and to calm herself.

“Can you continue?” Solas asked handing her a piece of dried ginger root from a small pouch.

Eluned nodded as she shove the herb in her mouth, ignoring the looks for the others in the group.

Prior to reaching the populated area, Dorian and the scouts split off heading across country while Eluned and the others carried on to the Crossroads. Once in the village, she and Cassandra talked to the Corporal for the latest movements from Redcliffe, while the others wandered around town to gather any gossip they could.

“Something wrong?”

Solas flicked his eyes at Iron Bull, “a man in the village. Something in his manner troubles me.”

Iron Bull grunted, “the baker with the squint and the red nose? Yeah, spy. Probably Venatori.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He watched all of us. A normal guy'd focus on you or Madame Vivienne, because staff, or me, because horns. He had a dagger up his sleeve, which no baker needs, and the knot on his apron was tied Tevinter style. He’s probably sent a message to Redcliffe that we’ve arrived.”

Solas looked at him with surprise, “you are more observant than you appear.”

Iron Bull snorted, “the good spies usually are.”

They all regrouped at the edge of the village at the foot of the Redcliffe road. “So what do we know?” Cassandra asked.

“The Venatori have spies in town so it’s likely they know we’re here.”

Cassandra nodded thoughtfully. “Who do you want to take with you, Herald?”

Eluned pointed at her and at Solas.

“I should come too,” Iron Bull stated.

Eluned shook her head. “Too obvious we suspect a trap. Alexius has already met Cassandra and Solas, no surprises.” He opened his mouth to argue, she gestured sharply, “no.” He grunted in annoyance.

While the rest headed to Redcliffe village, Eluned, Cassandra, and Solas continued to the castle. The road was strangely empty. She would have expected to see people, at the very least Tevinter soldiers or someone, watching the approach. She looked at Cassandra, worried, “do you think they suspect that we’re onto them?”

She watched, disconcerted, as the muscles jumped in Cassandra’s jaw. “It's hard to say.” She glanced at the Herald. “We can turn back if you don’t want to proceed.”

Eluned shook her head. “No, we go on.”
The portcullis was up when they approached the castle from the main road. There were a few guards watching their approach that were clearly Tevinter, they openly wore styled armour and insignia from that country that stood out over the regular Fereldan armour one normally expected at the Arl’s castle. The outer courtyard of the castle was muddy, guards stood around several smoking fires attempting to stay warm in the cooler southern climate. Their eyes followed the three riders as they entered.

A young stable boy hurried forward to take their horses. His frightened eyes jumped from person to person as he took the reins of the horses.

“Is the Arl in residence?” Cassandra asked the stable boy.

He glanced warily over his shoulder towards one of the populated fires before turning back to her and shaking his head, “no, serah. My lord hasn’t been seen in some weeks.”

The portcullis clanged as it started to lower.

“Let us hope our friends are successful,” Solas murmured.

“Indeed,” Cassandra held her hand out to usher Eluned ahead of her to the stairs into the keep.

A pair of guards stood at attention, armed and clad in armour, and a steward wearing Tevinter livery awaited them. He glanced at the three of them, “the magister’s invitation was for Mistress Treherne and no one else.”

Eluned had no real feelings about the Tevinters; she had over-heard some things when she was with the Qun and had fought against them as bas-saarebas, but she had no extensive interaction or reasons for animosity towards them. However, approaching the three that waited for them now, the guards with their strangely winged helmets and pointed armour, she felt distinctly uneasily. She made a bunch of random gestures and the steward frowned in confusion.

“The Herald does not speak so we come to translate and negotiate on her behalf,” Cassandra replied.

“Fine you can come but the elf—”

Eluned gestured again.

“Where I go, they go, or you can explain to the magister why his invited guest was turned away at the door,” Solas translated. “Your choice.”

After a few moments of standoff, the steward huffed in frustration but led them to the throne room. The Tevinter guards that had been at the door closed it behind them. Eluned looked around the large hall, pillars lined the sides of the space with a long gallery above on either side. It gave her a strange sense of déjà vu for some reason. Between each pillar stood a Venatori guard in full armour and armed with various bladed weapons.

At the end of the hall a massive fireplace blazed, Alexius sat casually on a throne atop a raised dais awaiting them. Felix stood slightly behind to his right, and Fiona, the former Grand Enchanter, stood to the left at the foot of the dais, nervously wringing her hands.

“My lord Magister, the agents of the Inquisition have arrived.”

“My friend, it’s so good to see you again.” Rising from his seat, Alexius welcomed Eluned, his gaze flicked over Cassandra and Solas. “And your associates, of course.” He waved at his steward, dismissing him. He was good, he covered up his annoyance, but Eluned had spent five years
carefully watching others to gauge their moods; her life had depended on it. “I’m sure we can work out an arrangement that is equitable for all parties.”

Eluned gestured. “I couldn’t refuse such a warm invitation. Shall we proceed?” Solas translated.

Fiona frowned and turned to Alexius, “are we mages to have no voice in deciding our fate?”

“Fiona,” Alexius said in tone one might use on a recalcitrant student, “you would not have turned your followers over to my care if you did not trust me with their lives.”

“If the Grand Enchanter wishes to take part in these talks then we’ll welcome her as a guest of the Inquisition,” Cassandra told Alexius.

“Very well,” Alexius stated returning to his seat on the throne, crossing his legs with the air of casual indifference of someone used to power. “The Inquisition needs mages to close the breach, and I have them. What do you offer in return?”

“Nothing. I’m going to take the mages and leave.”

“And how do you imagine you’ll accomplish such a feat?” Alexius said with an amused tone.

“She knows everything, Father,” Felix said stepping forward.

“Felix,” Alexius sat up stiffly and addressed his son. His demeanor became guarded, “what have you done?”

“Your son is concerned that you’re involved in something terrible.” Eluned gestured stepping forward. Behind her, Cassandra made a soft sound to warn her to stay back.

“So speaks—the thief. Do you think you can turn my son against me?” Alexius stood up and started pacing before the throne. “You walk into my stronghold with your stolen mark—a gift you do not even understand—and you think that you are in control?” He stepped toward Eluned aggressively, staring down at her. “You’re nothing but a mistake,” he spat.

“Father listen to yourself! Do you even know what you sound like?”

“He sounds like the villainous cliché that everyone expects us to be,” Dorian answered as he revealed himself. He walked into the hall and stood beside Eluned, giving her a quick smile of reassurance.

“Dorian,” Alexius said, flatly. “I gave you a chance to be a part of this, but you turned me down. The Elder One has power that you could not believe. He will raise the Imperium from its own ashes.”

“That’s who you serve?” Eluned asked.

“Did he kill the Divine?” Cassandra demanded at the same time.

“Soon he will become a god. He will make the world bow to mages once more. We will rule from the Boeric Ocean to the Frozen Seas.”

Dismayed, Fiona protested, “you can’t involve my people in this!”

“Alexius! This is exactly what we discussed that we didn’t want to happen. How could you support this?” Dorian asked.
Alexius turned his back on Dorian and paced towards the blazing fireplace behind the throne. Eluned held her breath as she watched out of the corner of her eye, one of the Venatori guards stationed between the pillars in the room slump to the floor.

Felix clutched at his father’s sleeve. “Father leave the southern mages to the Inquisition and let us go home!”

“No, Felix. It is the only way. The Elder One can save you.”

“Save me?!” Felix dropped his hand from his father and took a step back. “I’m going to die, you need to accept that.”

“There is a way. The Elder One promised if I undid the mistake at the temple… Seize them Venatori! The Elder One demands this woman’s life.”

Before anyone could move on Eluned, there were gasps and gurgles as the Venatori guards dropped to the ground dead; killed by the Inquisition agents that had slipped in behind them.

“No, no!” Alexius raged, stepping back. “You… are a mistake.” He raised his hand and revealed an amulet that twisted, suspended over his palm, lit with a green light not unlike the Breach. “You should never have existed!”

“No!” Dorian shouted, swinging his staff. Magic crackled and clashed around Eluned, and she felt pulled as the magic flared around, blinding her.

Eluned woke to find herself being dragged out of some filthy water by a pair of strong hands hooked under her armpits. She dug her fingernails into the hands and thrashed trying to break free. Her captor yelped, releasing her and she fell from his grip onto the stone floor. She spun onto her knees, calling fire to both hands.

“VEnhedis!” he hissed, shaking his hand. “It’s Dorian!” He stuck his bloodied hand against his mouth, then grimaced as he realised that it was wet from whatever they landed in.

She released the breath she didn’t realise she was holding. “Sorry. You scared me.” She looked around the dimly lit hallway that looked like it belonged to a dungeon or some less-than-savoury location. “Where are we?”

“It’s probably not what Alexius intended but it appears that the rift has moved us—to what?”

“We were in the castle hall.”

“Let’s see, if we are still in the castle, it isn’t—oh, of course! It’s not simply where but when! Alexius used the amulet as a focus—it moved us through time.”

“What! Forward or back? How far?”

“Those are excellent questions. We’ll have to find out, won’t we?”

“Just one question matters: how do we undo this?”

“I agree. Let’s look around and we can figure out how to get back—if we can.”

They waded through the water in the dungeon, Eluned refrained from looking too closely at the debris that floated in their passing. The air was unnaturally warm, it pulsed thick like blood gushing over fingers with the desperate beating of a heart running out of time and had the sickly, sweet stench
of rot and mildew. She breathed carefully through her nose, breathing through her mouth might have minimized some of the smell but the thought of drawing in that air across her tongue made her stomach want to rebel even worse.

Dorian glanced at her as they checked around the corner of a corridor. “I’m sorry. About earlier,” he said quietly, “that was incredibly callous of me, with the Iron Bull, and I apologize for my thoughtlessness.”

Eluned gave him a stiff nod.

“What were—How long?”

“Does it matter?”

He studied her for a moment, “no, it doesn’t. I’m doing a terribly good job of putting my foot in it, aren’t I?”

She gave him a look, the corner of her mouth quirked up, and nodded. She wouldn’t hold a grudge against him for his fumbling; he had an air about him like the greatest difficulty he faced in life was whether to have the red wine over the white, but at least he was making an effort and she couldn’t fault him for that. She sighed and held up her hand with her fingers spread.

“Five?” he questioned. His brows rose, “five years? Maker, how did you—”

She put up a hand to silence him, she could hear someone speaking. She listened at a door and then carefully opened in.

“Andraste blessed me, Andraste blessed me… My tears are my sins, my sins, my sins…”

Eluned recognized the mage that was chanting from the village but now he looked ill, his skin had taken on a strange pallor and a red glow flickered in his eyes. “What did they do to you?”

The mage continued to chant, rocking back and forth, oblivious to them standing before him.

“I don’t think he is aware of us, Herald,” Dorian said, gently drawing her from the cell.

“You—are alive?” a breathy voice called out from another cell. “How? I saw you disappear into the rift.”

Eluned picked her way around the debris, unidentifiable matter, and broken masonry to get to the adjacent cell. “Fiona? Is that red lyrium growing from your body? How?”

“The longer you’re near it, eventually you become this. Then they mine your corpse for more.”

Eluned clapped her hand over her mouth and swallowed hard. It was horrifying. The red lyrium whispered and hummed in her skull like the beginning of a migraine headache. She backed away from the cell bars.

“Can you tell us the date? It’s very important,” Dorian asked stepping to the side to let Eluned put some distance from the enveloped woman.


“9:42? Then we’ve missed an entire year!”

Eluned clutched at his sleeve, “Dorian, we have to get out of here. Go back in time.”
“Please. Stop this from happening. Alexius serves the Elder One, more powerful than the Maker. No one challenges him and lives.”

“Our only hope is to find the amulet that Alexius used to send us here. If it still exists, I can use it to reopen the rift at the exact spot we left, maybe.”

“Good.” Fiona gasped. She was obviously in an immense amount of pain.

“I said, maybe. It might also turn us into paste.”

“You must try!” She looked to Eluned, “your spymaster, Leliana, she is here.” Eluned resisted the urge to make a face at that news. “Find her, quickly before the Elder One learns you’re here.”

“Is there… is there anything we can do to help you?” Eluned asked even though she was confident that they couldn’t.

Fiona shook her head, “there is no saving me, but I do not want to linger… the pain—”

Eluned took an involuntary step back, “I only have fire… Dorian, can you… I can’t—” She turned away.

“Yes, it’s all right,” Dorian said stepping around her. Fiona sighed, then her laboured breathing silenced. Dorian stepped up beside her, his hand gently on her back to lead her away from the cell. “Come, let’s find your spymaster.”

They pushed through the cell door and into another corridor. “Alexius has made a dreadful mess of this place, hasn’t he?”

“Didn’t see this part of the castle.”

“It was covered in the tackiest carvings of wolves and dogs I’d ever seen.”

Eluned shrugged, “Fereldans.”

She peeked through another door and heard the quiet rumbling of someone singing a drinking song. She pushed the door open further as saw the Iron Bull, new and older scars littered his body, the horn on the right side of his head was broken and jagged. The patch he normally wore was gone baring the collapsed, ragged scars of his missing eye. His remaining eye gave off a reddish glow of the red lyrium infection in his blood.

He slowly looked up at the creak of the door. His remaining eye widened in surprise, “you’re not dead? You’re supposed to be dead. There was a burn on the ground and everything.”

“No, we’re not dead. Alexius’s spell sent us into the future,” Dorian told him.

“Well it’s my present and in my past, I definitely saw you both die.”

“I’m no more dead than you,” Eluned gestured.

Iron Bull growled in disgust, “now dead and not dead are up for debate. That’s wonderful.”

Eluned pressed her hand against the lock and channeled fire into it to melt the mechanism.

“This conversation has taken a turn for the moronic. Just come with us; we’re going to fight Alexius.”
“Why? You want to see what other tricks he’s learned?” Iron Bull asked, pushing open the now unlocked cell door.

“If we find him, we might be able to get back to our own time and stop all this before it happens. Exciting, yes?”

“Alexius isn’t the one you need to worry about,” Iron Bull stated. “It’s his Elder One. He has a demon army at his disposal. You ever fought a demon army? I don’t recommend it.”

“We’ll fix this,” Eluned gestured. She stepped back to let him pass when he reached out with a hand wrapping his fingers gently around the back of her neck. She jumped but found her trapped between him, the cell bars, and the dungeon wall.

“I forgot how skittish you were—are,” he murmured as he gently rubbed his thumb across her lips. “If you make it back, know that you can trust me. I never had any intentions of betraying you to the Qun.”

She ducked under his arm and out of his reach putting Dorian between them.

“Perhaps we should get moving?” Dorian asked.

They crept through the dungeon, cell by cell of horrors; red lyrium growing on corpses, creeping along the floors, walls, and ceiling. Eluned couldn’t tell if the cries and whispers she heard were real or in her mind from the lyrium. Judging from the flickering muscles in Dorian’s jaw, and the clenching fingers of the Iron Bull, she wasn’t the only one bothered by them.

They went up the stairs and through another set of doors when they could hear someone, a woman, reciting the chant. “The light shall lead her safely through the paths of this world and into the next. For she who trusts in the Maker, fire is her water.”

Eluned put her hand on the door latch to open it when a larger grey hand covered her own. She jerked it back. “Let me go first, in case they’re not alone.”

The door creaked open, light flickered from weak torches reflecting off the lyrium making the wet floor look covered in blood.

“As the moth sees light and goes toward flame, she should see fire and go towards Light.”

“Seeker? That you?” Iron Bull called out as he stepped through the doorway, his arm stretched out to keep the two mages behind him.

Cassandra looked up from where she sat on the wet stone and spotted Eluned behind him. She gasped. “You’ve returned to us! Has Andraste given us another chance?”

Eluned stepped into the room and walked to the cell. She reached out and pressed her hand against the lock, channelling fire within to melt the tumblers like the previous one.

“Maker forgive me, I failed you. I failed everyone. The end must be upon us if the dead have returned.”

Eluned opened the door, crouched down in front of Cassandra. She shook her head. “You didn’t fail me Cassandra. I’m not dead,” she gestured flipping her hands over. “I never died.” She beckoned to Dorian to explain.

“Alexius sent us forward in time. If we can find him, then we may be able to undo this.”
“Go back in time? Then can you make it so that none of this ever happened? Andraste, please let that be true.” Cassandra stood up and despite being a prisoner for a year, used her strength to assist Eluned to her own feet.

“We ran into—Fiona,” Dorian looked to Eluned for confirmation, “she said that Leliana is still alive.”

“Then we must find her.”

Eluned carefully checked the other cells looking for anything that could be used as a weapon for the Seeker or Iron Bull while Dorian filled Cassandra in on what she needed to know about the events. Most were empty except for the red lyrium that infested everything, broken crates, furniture, and other garbage. As she drew close to one cell at the opposite end from Cassandra’s, she could hear the buzzing of insects. She cautiously drew closer.

“Herald, don’t—” Cassandra called out as Eluned cried out and thrust her hand against the lock. Eluned waved the flies away that crept across the eye gone milky in death. The grey skin was mottled and misshapen from the lyrium that grew beneath and erupting through the flesh. She ran her hand across the familiar horns, brushing the thinned black hair away from the ruined face.

Cassandra gently lifted her back onto her feet, “there’s nothing that can be done for him now but undo this and you can save him, the rest of the Valo-Kas, all of us from this fate.”

“What did happen after we disappeared?” Dorian asked.

“Empress Celene was assassinated and in the ensuing chaos, Orlais fell under the heel of a demon army,” Cassandra replied.

Iron Bull growled, “fucking demons.”

They slowly worked their way up through the dungeons until they heard someone interrogating a prisoner. “There is no Maker. The Elder One has taken all that is His and will soon rule from His city.”

“That still doesn’t make him a god,” the prisoner defied him.

“That’s Leliana’s voice,” Cassandra exclaimed rushing forward.

There was the sound of something hitting flesh and a woman cried out. “There is no god but the Elder One,” the interrogator declared. “The Maker is dead! Say it.”

Cassandra carefully opened the door where they heard the voices coming from behind and peered into the room. Eluned clapped her hands over her mouth, a woman that looked like Leliana if she had aged multiple decades hung by her hands in chains. The Tevinter agent grabbed her by the hair at the front of her face and roughly pulled her head up, holding a knife to her throat, “you will break!”

“I will die first!”

He lowered his blade; Cassandra gave the door a hard shove open making it crash against the stone wall behind, startling him. Leliana hoisted herself up by the chains and wrapped her legs around the Tevinter’s throat as he turned to face the intruders. “Or you will.”

The Tevinter agent struggled frantically to no avail. Leliana twisted her legs and a resounding crack
echoed off the stones as the dead man fell to the floor. They hurried forward to release her from her chains. “You’re alive! Good, you need to end this. The magister is probably in his chambers.”

“You aren’t curious as to how we got here?” Dorian asked.

“No.” Leliana glared at them with such venom that Eluned recoiled from her, “this is all pretend to you, some future that you hope will never happen. I suffered, the whole world suffered. It was real…”

“They know that,” Cassandra said quietly as she worked on the chains with Dorian.

Eluned wrapped her arms around herself very aware of Iron Bull’s constant observation of her even as he rummaged through the crates and boxes to retrieve weapons for them all.

“Hey,” he said quietly, “I meant what I said earlier, you can trust me.” She looked at him and tipped her head to the side sceptically. He sighed, “look, if you trust nothing else, you have to stop the demon army from rising. It starts with the Empress. We don’t know who was responsible for her murder but once Orlais fell— The Inquisition was crushed. Anyone who refused to convert was killed. There is nothing left.”

The condition of the castle didn’t improve as they made their way up to the courtyard and outside— Eluned gasped when they exited the dungeons. When they had arrived at the castle, the sun was shining, and the Breach was miles away. Now, the Breach filled the sky from horizon to horizon, the dark sky writhed in the malignant green glow of the pulsing, swirling vortex.

“Without you here to close the Breach, it continued to expand. There was nothing we could do to stop it,” Cassandra said.

“Come, we must not delay,” Leliana urged them across the courtyard and to the stairs that led to the main keep, “the General will be making his daily visit at any time.”

“Don’t think you need to rush on my account, Leliana,” a hoarse voice replied casually. Venatori archers and soldiers stepped up along the staircase and the courtyard to surround them. Cullen raised his hand to his forces to hold their positions.

Eluned suddenly found herself pressed against Iron Bull’s back.

“Ah, Herald. Alexius has been bleating about your return. It appears that he has finally been correct about something.” Cullen paced around their group, his right hand grasped his bared sword, and his left hand, Eluned shuddered to look at it. His left hand was a twisted claw of red shards that encased his arm from fingers to shoulder.

The Iron Bull kept himself placed between Eluned and Cullen, his free arm wrapped around her to keep her there.

“You needn’t protect her Bull; I’m not going to kill her, the Elder One wants her alive. I’ll have her no matter what you do. In fact,” he stopped opposite Iron Bull, “I’ll make you a deal. You hand her over and I’ll let you go free.”

Everyone stiffened as Iron Bull considered the offer, “you’d let me go free?”

“Yes. Just step aside and you’ll go free,” Cullen said indicating the path to the castle gates with his monstrous red lyrium hand.

No one moved for a span of heartbeats as they all stood appraising each other. Lightning ripped
across the sky with a roll of thunder and armour shifted and creaked. Suddenly the hand in Eluned’s back turned into a fist grasping her coat and pulling her out from where she was hidden. She squealed in surprise as Iron Bull shoved her to her knees just in front and to the left of him.

“Take her.”

Chapter End Notes

Yay, you get the chapter early! I have miserable shit to deal with on the regularly scheduled posting day so in case I don't have time or the desire to be online tomorrow—here you go. Not to worry you, my lovely readers, my FIL is fine as am I—perhaps not emotionally, but it is to be expected.

In other news, I decided to do NaNoWriMo this year and I chose to use the continued saga of EYP for that purpose rather than put this aside for a new project. That means, if I manage to do it, I'll have a very nice buffer of 50K words put into the story. Not that I'll post extra chapters :P although there might be a gift wrapped bonus at the end of the year. This also means that I have to start thinking about the romance part of the story. Dun dun dun...

As always, thank you so much for your kudo, comments, and enthusiasm. It truly makes my day and I often come back and reread your comments when I struggle with getting the story down.
Anticipation

Chapter Summary

**Anticipation**
*Noun: implies a prospect or outlook that involves advance suffering or enjoyment of what is foreseen*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Take her.”

Everyone started protesting at once.

“Bull!”

“Vishante kaffas!”

“What are you doing?”

Eluned stared into Cullen’s eyes, the red glow of the lyrium infection tainted the golden hazel they had been before; he hadn’t broken his gaze on her from the moment she was pulled out from behind Iron Bull. She flinched back as Cullen stepped forward, a blade swept up from her right and slammed into Cullen sending shards of red lyrium and blood flying. Iron Bull shoved her down onto the ground and readjusted his grip for another swing at Cullen nearly cleaving his head from his shoulders.

Magic and arrows flew.

Swords clashed on shields.

Blood ran.

Someone pushed her back down every time she tried to get up and join the fight. When the courtyard fell silent, hands grasped her and pulled her to her feet finally breaking her gaze with the now dimmed glow in Cullen’s eyes.

“Are you all right, Herald?”

Eluned nodded to Cassandra while keeping a wary watch on Iron Bull.

“You could have warned us, you great ox!”

“And say what ’Vint? Excuse me Cullen while I confer with my colleagues to come up with a strategy to kill you.” He snorted in disgust. “He never took his eyes off her and the Venatori heard the order that she was to be taken alive. It was the best way to catch him off guard and take the rest out with the least risk to the Boss.”

Eluned cautiously approached Iron Bull, she raised a tentative hand and patted him on the chest in
thanks. He captured her hand under his own, trapping it against his chest. “Remember what I said. You can trust me.” She pulled her hand out and Iron Bull watched her retreat with a bittersweet smile on his face.

“Enough. We must get to Alexius now,” Leliana ordered them as she took the stairs two at a time despite her obviously poor physical condition. The woman was running on pure rage.

Venatori soldiers, demons, and open rifts within the castle hampered them, slowing their progress but not halting it. They breached the doors to Alexius’ sanctuary. He stared at them as they broke through the door, his bloodshot, weary eyes finding and resting on Eluned. “Here you are finally. I knew that you would appear again but not when. I knew that I hadn’t destroyed you. Yet another failure on my part. But it doesn’t matter now, all we can do is wait for the Elder One to arrive. He comes for me, for you, for us all.”

Eluned surreptitiously watched from the corner of her eye as Leliana stalked the shadows around the edge of the room.

“Was it worth it? Everything you did to the world, to yourself? It doesn’t have to be this way, Alexius,” Dorian pleaded, drawing his attention. “We can undo this. Help us!”

Alexius paced back and forth plucking at the tattered sleeve of his robe, shaking his head. “No. No. It’s too late for that. Much too late. He comes for us all.” He stopped before something, someone, that sat huddled next to a chair.

“I tried to undo it. Stop her from being at the Temple,” Alexius resumed pacing frantically, raving at his failures. “I couldn’t stop the darkspawn attack that infected Felix. Couldn’t find the event to stop it all. The Breach is the catalyst to this magic and I can’t change what came before. I failed to save Felix.”

Leliana slipped up behind Felix and hauled him to his feet, holding her knife to his throat. Felix lolled unresisting in her grip, his face sunken and grey as he slowly succumbed to the Blight sickness that ravaged him.

Dorian gasped, “that’s Felix? Maker’s breath, Alexius, what have you done?”

“I saved him,” he held his hand out to Leliana to plead with her, “please don’t hurt my son. I’ll do anything you ask.”

“Give us the amulet and we’ll let him go,” Cassandra replied.

Eluned drew a sharp breath as she saw Leliana’s expression change. “I want the world back,” she declared and pulled the blade across Felix’s throat. He gurgled and fell at Alexius’ feet.

“No!” Alexius howled with rage and grief.

Eluned gave her head a shake to lose the sensation of the time magic and shake the memories of her companions being slaughtered before her. They fought valiantly to the last to keep her free of the Elder One, whomever or whatever that was, until Dorian could reverse the magic used by Alexius to send them there in the first place. She looked around the hall and found all her companions had arrived while she and Dorian had been in that bleak future. All of them alive and well.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” Dorian said as Alexius started to back away and dropped to his knees.
Eluned stalked over to him, drew back her fist and struck him in the face, splitting his lip. She bared her teeth at him to cover up her hiss of pain from breaking her knuckle.

“You won,” he said dejectedly. “There is no point in extending this charade.” Felix crouched before him. “Felix.”

“It’s going to be alright father.”

Tears welled up in Alexius’ eyes, “you’ll die.”

“Everyone dies.” He helped his father up and followed as he was escorted away under guard by the Inquisition soldiers.

Solas made his way to Eluned and started to examine her hand, his magic enveloping her hand in a soothingly cool, blue glow.

Varric joined them. “Nice right hook, Songbird. Next time, don’t tuck your thumb inside your fist.”

“Indeed,” murmured Solas.

“Well, I’m glad that’s over with…” Dorian was interrupted by the loud metallic clank of plate-clad soldiers marched into the hall; these were not Inquisition forces. “Or not.”

“Grand Enchanter, imagine how surprised I was to learn you’d given Redcliffe Castle away to a Tevinter magister.”

“King Alistair,” Fiona exclaimed. She twisted her hands together nervously.

Eluned pulled her hand from Solas with a brief nod of thanks. She stepped down from the dais she shared with Dorian, and moved to stand with Cassandra, facing the man that stood before them now. She studied him as he berated Fiona, having a weird feeling of déjà vu from his voice.

“Especially since I’m fairly sure Redcliffe belongs to Arl Teagan,” Alistair said sarcastically.

Fiona bowed her head, “Your Majesty, we never—intended…”

“I know what you intended,” Alistair shifted on his feet and cocked his head while he studied her. His tone softened, “I wanted to help you, but you’ve made it impossible.” He dropped his head with a shake. When he looked up again at the mage, he had a new sternness in his gaze, “you and your followers are no longer welcome in Ferelden.”

Fiona looked aghast. “But… we have hundreds who need protection; children, elderly, ill and injured. Where will we go?”

Eluned stepped forward, beckoned Cassandra to join her, then addressed Alistair and Fiona. “We came for mages to close the Breach.”

“And what are the terms of this arrangement?” Fiona asked. Several brows rose at her temerity to negotiate when she was in no position to do so.

“Hopefully better than Alexius gave you, yes?” Dorian replied, giving Eluned an optimistic look.

“I’ve known a lot of mages. They can be loyal friends if you let them. Friends who make bad decisions, but still. Loyal,” Varric offered.

“I suggest conscripting them,” Cassandra said. “They’ve proven what they’ll do, given too much
freedom.” Eluned shot her a disgusted look. “You will be leaving under the custody of the Inquisition,” Cassandra informed the former Grand Enchanter.

Fiona looked dejected. “It seems we have little choice but to accept whatever you offer.”

Eluned gripped Cassandra’s arm to get her attention and shook her head. “Alliance. We will not enslave as Alexius had or imprison the mages as the Chantry did.”

“Alliance—”

“Alliance,” Eluned said firmly. “Or you can find someone else to close the Breach for you.”

Cassandra scowled, “fine. We will discuss this later.”

“I would take that offer if I were you,” Alistair said. “One way or another, you are leaving my kingdom.”

“We accept.” Fiona bowed her head to Eluned. “Let us hope that the rest of the Inquisition honours your promise, Herald. I will gather my people; the Breach will be closed, you will not regret giving us this chance.”

“How many mages are capable of assisting?” Eluned asked her.

“About a hundred, but—” she paused, flicking an eye to Alistair who remained to listen. “I wonder if there is another matter you can assist with?”

“What is it?” Eluned prompted her.

“In the past few weeks, many of my people have gone missing, both mages and—Tranquil. I’ve been unable to investigate myself, Alexius has kept me too close.”

“We have the Tranquil,” Eluned touched her fingertips to her forehead. “Those that survived.”

“Survived?”

“Yes. The Venatori have been forcing demon possession upon the Tranquil and executing them,” Cassandra elaborated.

“Maker’s breath!”

“That’s—that’s not possible.” Fiona protested, horrified. “Tranquility protects a mage from possession.”

“Apparently not. We smuggled out the remaining Tranquil weeks ago to protect them.”

“I thank you for that. I thought that they would be safe, one more mistake I have made,” she said bitterly.

“And what of the missing mages—do you have any clue as to what happened with them?”

Fiona looked worriedly to Cassandra, “yes. About two weeks ago, another Tevinter mage, a woman by the name of Calpernia arrived with orders for Alexius to provide her with a contingent of mages. He was quite upset but had to comply.”

Dorian, who had previously remained silent, interjected, “think. Was there anything specific about the mages that were taken?”
Fiona’s brow pinched as she considered the question. “The majority of mages were ones that are competent with elemental magic.” She paused in thought. “The others, about a dozen, are very knowledgeable or skilled with barriers and binding spells.”

Dorian’s expression changed to one of worry. “The latter group could have been in relation to the possessed Tranquil, but the others—”


Eluned tipped her head to the side and raised her brows in question, her mind immediately jumping to the demon army they had been told about.

“Yes, you’re likely right,” Dorian replied.

Varric chuckled, “you two get sucked up by some magical rift—thing—and you come back out reading each other’s minds?” They both shook their heads simultaneously. “Right…”

Eluned touched Cassandra’s arm. “I want to close the Breach as soon as possible. Quickly. Can we negotiate with the King to have any unsuitable to assist to remain here under supervision?”

“Unsuitable?”

“Ah, I think the Herald,” Solas started with a look to Eluned for her permission, “wants to have just those mages that are capable of assisting come to Haven now with those that are inexperienced, elderly, or ill to follow later. It is a wise suggestion on several fronts; a smaller contingent of mages will travel more quickly and excluding inexperienced or weak mages also removes them from the proximity of the Breach minimizing the potential for possession or other accidents.”

Eluned nodded. “Healers come as well.”

Cassandra pursed her lips, considering. “Very well. Your Majesty?”

Alistair crossed his arms and studied Eluned. “How long before you are able to close the Breach?”

Eluned held up one finger and scraped her fist across her other hand, “one week.”

“Herald, it will take the mages nearly that long to arrive in Haven,” Cassandra argued.

“Yes. And I’ll close the Breach the next day.”

“And once that’s done, you’ll come for the rest of the mages?”

“Yes,” Eluned nodded. What did she care? she thought. Once the Breach was sealed, her part was done. The Inquisition could look after the mages and she could leave. If they wanted her help closing the remaining rifts, they could hire the Valo-Kas and they could travel around to close them. She had every intention of taking up Shokraker’s offer at least until she could find the way home, and the Valo-Kas were due back within the fortnight, at latest.

“Those terms are acceptable,” Alistair replied after giving the request some thought. “I expect the Inquisition will keep the remaining mages under guard and escort them from the village in one week’s time.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Fiona replied with a relieved sigh. She turned to Eluned, “we will not fail you, Your Worship. I will begin gathering the mages to travel to Haven immediately. Lady Cassandra.” She bowed to the king, Eluned, and Cassandra once more and hurried off.
Alistair turned back to Eluned with a quizzical look on his face. “Have we met before? You seem—”

Eluned shook her head sharply, then much to his and Cassandra’s surprise, strode off quickly to the door, making a wide detour around the Iron Bull as she left.

“I will see to the Herald’s injuries,” Solas murmured and he too left the hall.

“What is going on?” Cassandra asked no one in particular, exasperated.

“Ah, she’s had a difficult experience,” Dorian offered. “I would recommend that you give her a bit of space then there will be much to discuss.” He bowed his head to the king and followed after Eluned and Solas.

“She certainly seems to have an aversion to the Qunari—” Alistair whipped his head around in shock and stared at Varric. “Wait! Is she—? Vata-something?”

Varric sighed, “I was hoping you didn’t put that together. Alistair, you can not say a thing to the Arishok, or anyone else for that matter. The Qun is hunting her. If they get a hold of her, the world is going to go nug-shit in a hand-basket.”

“Ugh, very colourful, Varric. But he is correct, Your Majesty. The Qun must not find her.”

Eluned trotted briskly down the stairs from the main keep heading to the castle gates. She needed to put some distance between herself and the castle. It still felt like the red lyrium hummed in the back of her mind and the scent of that place lingered in her nose. She sucked in deep breathes of fresh air and tried to calm herself down, ignoring the concerned glances cast her way.

“Is it true, milady?” a tentative, high-pitched voice halted her in her tracks. “Is it true what they’re sayin’? The magister is leaving and the Arl returning?”

Eluned turned to find the young stableboy staring at her with wide eyes. She nodded to him.

With a sob, the boy threw himself at her, wrapping his arms around her waist. “Thank you, milady, thank you.”

She stiffened in surprise, then wrapped her own arms around his narrow shoulders and made soothing sounds until he had calmed down.

“How. Didn’t think you had that in you,” Iron Bull said watching her comfort the boy. “Perhaps I should try that?”

She rolled her eyes before giving him a disgusted look and a rude gesture behind the boy’s back.

“Or not,” Blackwall commented, dryly. “The others are ready to leave, my lady.” He held the reins of her horse for her.

Eluned nodded to him then gently extricated herself from the stableboy. She looked at the boy and raised her brow in question.

The boy sniffled and dragged his sleeve across his face, before drawing himself up. “Thank you, milady.” He spun and ran back to the stables.

She swung up into the saddle and fell in with the rest of the group as they rode out under the portcullis of the castle, breathing a sigh of relief to put Redcliffe behind them.
After a few miles, Solas drew up beside her. “That was very kind of you. Back there with the stableboy.”

Eluned glanced at him, unsure of what point he was trying to make.

“Most people would have ignored him.”

She grimaced.

His brow twitched in curiosity. “Forgive me, Herald. I was simply surprised at your reaction, you do not usually react well to being touched by strangers.” They rode silently for a few minutes before Solas addressed her again, “now that you have the mages, you will need to draw on their power to supplement your own to power the mark and close the Breach. Are you familiar with drawing upon another mage?”

Eluned gave him a worried look and shook her head.

“I see. I would be willing to practice this with you if you wish.” She gave him an eager nod. “It would be inadvisable to draw on mana without having somewhere for it to go. I suggest we practice your barrier casting.”

It wasn’t long into Eluned’s casting before both Dorian and Vivienne drew their horses along with them. “What are you two doing?” Dorian asked as he studied Eluned’s barrier.

“The Herald has not experienced active mana transfer before. We are using an innocuous barrier spell as an outlet for the additional mana.”

“Hmm, a wise choice. The Herald’s barriers could use some practice,” Vivienne commented.

Eluned wrinkled her nose at the comment and looked to Solas, “you mentioned active transfer. I assume that there is a passive transfer?”

(Of course, darling,) Vivienne jumped in. “A passive mana transfer is done for restorative purposes. For example, if a mage is careless and has foolishly over-exerted themselves. Usually, the mage in question will be unconscious and unable to take lyrium to restore their mana balance so another mage will expend some of their own mana to bolster the other to stabilize them.”

“Perhaps you and Dorian would be willing to assist the Herald with practicing the transfer? She will need to draw upon a great many mages, it would be beneficial to practice with more than myself,” Solas prodded Vivienne.

(Of course.)

“Now, the three of us will open ourselves and extend a thread of mana to you, it’s not unlike extending a thread of mana into a staff. You will cast the barrier, concentrate and pick up the threads which you will then weave into the barrier to sustain it.”

Eluned nodded and started casting her barrier. Carefully, she picked up Solas’ thread that she was already familiar with. She felt the other two threads pushing at her; one that felt warm and silky, and the other sharper with greater heat. The barrier wobbled, flaring out then collapsing in as she struggled with the balance.

“Come now, dear, a little more finesse.”

Frustrated, she gave a hard tug on the sharper thread.
“Oooo, gently!” Dorian gasped. “I bruise easily.”

Startled that she read the owner of that particular thread incorrectly, she dropped the threads sending the barrier flying outward to collapse.

“Hey, what are you mages up to? You’re making my horns itch.”

“A little practice with barriers, Iron Bull.” Solas glanced at Eluned as she flinched. “Perhaps we should take a break and we can resume when we make camp this evening.”

Eluned nodded.

“As you demonstrated, it is possible to pull on one stream of mana more so than another. That won’t be possible when you go to close the Breach. You will have too many threads to draw on to be able to modulate them.”

“Could I hurt any of the mages doing this?”

“It is possible, yes. If a mage does not have a deep well of mana, you could end up drawing more than they are capable of providing putting them into mana imbalance.”

“Or killing them outright.”

Solas shot Vivienne a dark look. He turned back to Eluned to reassure her, “you did well to separate out those mages that would be vulnerable. The mages know the risk they take.”

The advisors weren’t present at the gates on their arrival back in Haven as they normally did. Instead, one of Leliana’s agents stood with the Dennet’s stablehands. “Herald, Lady Seeker,” she saluted them both, “Sister Nightingale and the others await you in the Chantry.”

“Thank you—Charter, is it?” Cassandra asked

“Yes, my lady.” She saluted again and turned on her heel.

Cassandra turned to Eluned, “I know you want to rest but there is much to discuss. Please join us in the Chantry after you drop off your packs. You too, Dorian. I’m sure your perspective of the events you and the Herald witnessed at the behest of your countryman will be—helpful.”

Dorian gave her a mocking bow, “since you asked so nicely, Seeker, I’d be delighted.”

Eluned rubbed her knuckles over her lips to stop the laugh that threatened to break free. She cleared her throat, her lips twitching with the suppressed smirk, when Cassandra shot a look at her.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she leaned back against the door of her cabin, relishing the moment of silence. Pushing herself off the door, she dropped the packs at the end of the bed and glanced at the hiding place behind the fireplace chimney. Her hidden bundle was still there. Eluned chewed on her lip, considering; it was probably a terrible idea, but it might make the point she knew she’d have to make with the others. With a quick look to the door, she yanked the bundle from its hiding place and tucked it under her arm, then headed to the Chantry.

Upon entering the Chantry, she could already hear the argument from behind the doors at the other end. She rolled her eyes and wondered if the others even considered what effect the obvious conflict between them had on the others that overheard the raised voices, even if they couldn’t hear the specific words. She sighed and shoved open the door.
“While I do not necessarily agree with the Herald’s decision, I support it,” Cassandra stated. “The sole point of the Herald’s mission was to gain the mages’ aid and that was accomplished.”

“The voice of pragmatism speaks! And here I was just starting to enjoy the circular arguments,” Dorian chimed in helpfully.

“It is not a matter for debate. There will be abominations among the mages, and we must be prepared!”

“If we rescind the offer of an alliance, Commander, it makes the Inquisition appear incompetent at best, tyrannical at worst,” Josephine argued. “With the threat of a demon army and the assassination of the Empress—”

“One battle at a time, Ambassador!” Cullen turned on Eluned. “What were you thinking turning the mages loose with no over-sight? The Veil is torn open!” he demanded.

She recoiled from his anger. “I would never conscript the mages. Enslaving them into being a weapon we call on at our convenience. I’d be no better than you, the Chantry, or the Qun.”

“And how many lives will be lost if they fail? With the veil broken, the threat of possession…”

“The Herald has taken precautions—” Cassandra tried to argue but was ignored.

“You want control of the mages?” Eluned snarled at him and marched around the table to stand before him. She threw the cloth back on the bundle she held and shoved the control rod into his hands. “Then start with me! Be Basvaarad!”

With one smooth motion, she closed the collar around her own neck. She gasped and choked as her body reacted, dropping to her knees before him and folded her hands behind her back. It had only been a few months since she wore the collar, but it felt like a lifetime as her body reacted to the sensation of her magic being ripped from her reach.

“What? N…no,” Cullen stuttered, the colour draining from his face in shock as he adjusted his grip on the control rod frantically. A guilty flush shot up his neck turning his cheeks and ears red as his eyes darted around to the other advisors in the room who gave him various looks of disapproval. “This isn’t what I meant!”

“It amounts to the same thing, Commander. Whether the mages are collared or under guard by templars, none of them are free,” Leliana replied.

Eluned glanced at Leliana in surprise, the spymistress to come to the defense of the mages was unexpected.

“That’s not what I want,” he argued. He held the control rod out to Eluned. “Take it. I don’t want it.”

She looked up at him and gritted her teeth before holding her hands out to accept the control rod. As soon as it touched her hands, the fail-safe activated in the collar sending a searing wave of pain through her. Her eyes rolled back in her head as she convulsed, tipping back onto the floor, her hands locked in a reflexive grip around the control rod. She was vaguely aware of alarmed shouts as she blacked out.

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Eluned winced at the residual pain in her head, all too familiar with the sensation of hitting the ground when the collar had been activated in the past. She was exhausted. She kept her eyes closed and raised her hand to her head, sliding her fingers between it and the pillow she lay on, searching
for signs of injury, finding nothing obvious. She gently stretched her sore muscles and could feel her magic was with her again. The collar was gone as well. With that magic, she could detect the coldness of a templar nearby.

“Solas came and tended to your injuries.”

She blinked slowly at the light and caught the amber gaze that stared back at her.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

She raised a brow in question.

“You knew I would hand the control rod back, and you took it even knowing it was going to cause you pain.”

She sat up and nodded. She closed her eyes immediately and swallowed hard as the wave of nausea washed over her. Once calmed again, she reopened her eyes.

He sighed. “Why?”

“You told me to.”

“I didn’t want that!” he said running his fingers through his hair making it stand up in unruly curls.

She shrugged. “You were Basvaarad, you were in the position of power. If I disobeyed, I risked further punishment which could be worse.”

“Worse?” he exclaimed.

“Yes, you could have inflicted a permanent injury to my body or my mind. I couldn’t stop you.”

“The Templar Order, the Chantry, isn’t like that!”

“Isn’t it? You’ve had me under constant Templar guard since the beginning even after proving myself. Tightening your grip on the mages doesn’t make them or others safer. The tighter the grip, the more desperate people become and the more likely they are to snap.” She shifted in discomfort as she recalled some of her experiences in Kont-aar. “Every few weeks the priests would come and preach to us about accepting our purpose to the Qun. That the Qun honored us for our sacrifice and struggle. It’s supposed to make us find peace. To accept the abuse, the confinement. I saw my first demon not long after being bound.” She shifted onto her left hip and pulled up her tunic to bare the claw marks that ran across her right hip, Cullen’s eyes fell on her exposed flesh and darted away immediately. “The saarebas beside me snapped and gave himself over to the demon. Anything to be free. It happened quite frequently. Despair was common, as was rage and desire.”

Cullen paced and rubbed his neck, at a loss for what to say.

“Someone very wise once said ‘be the change you want to see’,” Eluned said. “The Chantry’s rhetoric on mages is what has brought this situation to a head, and there are two options going forward.” Cullen stopped and looked at her. “You tighten your grip further like the Qun and perpetuate the violence,” she nodded to the collar and control rod that sat on the table nearby, “or you open your eyes and see mages as people and help them.”

After Cullen left and Eluned returned to her own cabin, she hid away her collar in its hiding place once more. She fervently hoped that Cullen, and the others, truth be told, had finally seen the reality
of where the Chantry was leading them. They would be the ones to influence how their world moved forward once the Breach was sealed. She hoped her actions, her sacrifices, were enough.

Carefully, she rebraided her hair and headed to Solas’ cabin. She needed to thank him for looking after her yet again. She rapped her knuckles on the door twice.

“Herald. Come in, take a seat.”

She sat at her usual spot and a cup of steeped herbs was immediately set before her, the sweet-spicy scent of ginger lingered in the air. She looked at him quizzically.

“Having one’s mana ripped away, regardless of the means, is usually unsettling on the stomach.”

Eluned nodded and winced at the still present headache.

“You’re squinting, may I?” he asked coming to her side.

She gave him the faintest of nods. She closed her eyes in pleasure, Solas’ cool palm pressed gently across her brow as his magic soothed and dissipated the tension lingering in her neck and skull.

“Can I ask you why you did it? It was a rash action and you could have been seriously injured.”

She shrugged. “I needed to shame them, perhaps shock them, to see the dangerous path they are on. It’s easy to dismiss actions when it doesn’t happen in front of you. Or if you don’t consider the victim as being a real person.”

Solas’ magic faltered for a moment then resumed. “You placed the control rod into the Commander’s hands knowing he’d hand it back,” he stated, beginning to understand her motive.

“Yes. I had heard some things from Varric about Cullen’s time in Kirkwall; he kept his hands clean while turning a blind eye. This way he was directly responsible for torturing me. Hopefully it opened his, and the others’, eyes.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was fun to write—so many digs at the status quo and people’s beliefs.

If any of you follow me on Tumblr, I’m going to start doing a “Sneak a Peek Mondays” which will be chunk (a few lines or a couple of paragraphs) of future chapters. It may not be from the next chapter but maybe from several chapters into the future. "Ya never know what you're gonna get.”
Eluned stood on the steps of the village to welcome the mages’ arrival. Nearly a hundred mages representing the southern Circles were present. The sun sparkled on the snow along the edge of the lake the mages marched around, it was a pretty picture if not for the gravity of the event before them.

“The mages arrive,” Solas commented as he stepped to her side, folding his hands behind him. “Are you prepared for the assault on the Breach tomorrow?”

“As I’ll ever be. I just hope that I’ll be enough.”

“What you have accomplished already is remarkable; close the Breach tomorrow and your name will be spoken throughout history.”

She wrinkled her nose at the thought, but joked, “are you saying we should hold a parade to celebrate with myself at the head on some gleaming charger?”

“I was going to suggest a griffon, but sadly they are extinct.” He gave her a smile then looked over the arriving group again with a critical eye. “Just remember, an enemy can attack, but only an ally can betray you. Betrayal is always worse.”

Eluned looked at him, startled, “you think the mages, or at the very least one of them, will betray me?”

“I have no particular suspicions of them. If a betrayal was to occur, I would look at someone closer to you than them.” He glanced away from her and looked towards the Breach. “Speaking of which, you should prepare yourself.”

“For?”

“The Elder One that you and Master Pavus encountered in that bleak future.”

“The Breach was never closed in that future. Do you think this person, whomever it is, will still rise if I close the Breach?”

“You would be wise to prepare in any case.”

Eluned woke early. The sun had barely started to lighten the horizon, but she was wide awake. She lay in bed staring at the ceiling, frost sparkled along the cracked edges of the wood, sparkling in the low light. She thought about the mages laying in their own bedrolls, she wondered if they lay awake
with apprehension of the day to come under the yawning Breach over the temple. Unlike her, most of them had never been up close to the Breach, she could imagine their terror.

She rolled over and pulled her blanket up over her head so only her face peaked out. She closed her eyes and took slow, measured breathes to relax.

\[ \text{In—} \]
\[ \text{Out—} \]
\[ \text{In—} \]
\[ \text{Out—} \]

Her bangs shifted. Some stray hairs tickled her nose. Perhaps she should find someone who could give her a proper haircut. Sera—no, bad choice if she didn’t want to look like she lost a battle with a weedwacker. She wiggled her hand free from the blankets and tucked the hair behind her ear, scraping the chilled ring of her fetter across her chin as she did so.

\[ \text{In—} \]
\[ \text{Out—} \]

\[ \text{Close your eyes—} \]
\[ \text{In—} \]
\[ \text{Out—} \]

Her eyes popped open again and she rolled onto her back with a huff. She wasn’t going to be able to go back to sleep and staring at the ceiling wasn’t helping. She sat up, swinging her feet out of the bed covers. She pulled the blanket from the bed and wrapped around her shoulders as she padded quickly across the chilled wooden floor of her cabin. Kneeling before the fireplace, she threw on a couple of logs and stirred the embers. She pushed a bit of her own magic in to help the fire burst to life.

Still kneeling, she settled into the old familiar meditative position she had spent the better part of five years in. It didn’t take long before her knees and ankles started to ache being out of practice as it were; she ignored it and focused on her breathing, steady breaths in and out for the same length until her mind emptied and she was no long aware of her surroundings.

“My lady?”

A thin hand tentatively grasped her shoulder giving it a light shake. Eluned opened her eyes and turned her head toward the person standing next to her.

Dehari squeaked in surprise and jumped back. “I beg your pardon, my lady. I’ve brought you breakfast.” Her eyes darted to the table behind Eluned. “Lady Cassandra told me to inform you that the mages and soldiers have already left for the temple on foot. Your horse will be waiting for you as soon as you’re ready. Good luck, my lady. May Andraste guide you and the Maker protect you.” She curtsied and left the cabin.

She wandered over to the table, the blanket she had wrapped around her slipped off a shoulder and she shivered despite the warmth of the fire. She picked up her teacup with trembling fingers. Over-tired. She scoffed at herself, who am I kidding. I’m scared shitless. So much was dependent on her,
so much could go wrong. Mages could die—she—could kill the mages.

She noticed that Josephine likely had a hand in her breakfast; fruit preserves with the porridge which was already laced with a dollop of cream. It was a shame to waste it when many of the mages probably had less than that this morning. Even though it tasted like ashes in her mouth, Eluned choked it down. A bit of chocolate before I face my doom would have been nice.

She got herself dressed carefully tucking everything in. It was going to be a cold ride up to the mountain and she didn’t want to have to fumble with clothing while everyone else waited on her. Lastly, she pulled on her jacket drawing the collar up high to cover her ears and pulled on her gloves. She stepped out of the door and startled Cassandra who had her fist raised to knock on the door.

“Oh good, are you prepared? The others are waiting for us outside the gates.”

Eluned blew out a breath and nodded. “Let’s see this through.”

The ride to the temple had almost a party quality to it, everyone was in high spirits and Eluned suspected that it was intentional to prevent her from succumbing to worry and self-doubt. The horses were held outside of the temple grounds by a handful of scouts. Whispered words of “Andraste guide you” and “Maker protect you” were offered to Eluned as she passed them on her way into the temple grounds where the mages were waiting.

The mages were arranged in a large circle at the center of the temple directly underneath the Breach. Outside of them, Cullen had the few templars available in Haven as well as a hand-picked, veteran warriors distributed. Eluned clenched her jaw; she didn’t like the presence of the templars but under the circumstances she understood. There was only one previous attempt with this amount of magic and it caused a catastrophic explosion, she could only hope to repeat history. She took a deep breath, shook out her arms, and started to walk toward the center of the temple.

“Mages!” Cassandra called out.

Solas raised his staff, “focus past the Herald! Let her will draw from you!”

As Eluned got closer to the epicenter of the temple, the mark on her hand started to flare and crackle in response to the Breach far above her. Tendrils of magic streaked down from the Breach forming a brilliant green weave of ribbons around her. She could feel the threads of power being extended to her by the mages. She reached out with her own magic, grasping the threads of mana, the feeling of being filled with that much power was euphoric. Before she could lose herself in the sensation, she extended her left hand toward the Breach.

Every fibre of her being ignited as the anchor connected with the Breach, it tugged on her connection to the mages, yanking power through her like a conduit, unchecked. She gritted her teeth through the pain and focused to stop the chaotic draw of mana, pulling the edges of the Breach together. Slowly, slowly the Breach started to collapse until with a soundless scream, she gave one final pull.

The Breach closed with a boom.

A pressure wave knocked everyone off their feet.

For a few moments, the world was entirely still and quiet, then everyone started to cheer.

Eluned pressed her palms against the cold stones and blinked several times, the negative afterimage of the Breach flashed before her eyes, as she tried to clear the buzzing from her head and ears. She gasped for breath and felt like she ought to be sizzling, smoking, or something after channeling that much power through herself.
“You did it!” Cassandra exclaimed, hurrying over to her.

Eluned gave her a head a hard shake and let herself be pushed upright.

A gauntleted hand tipped her head up until the was looking direct at Cassandra whose own eyes darted over her face. “Are you all right?”

Eluned blinked again and bobbed her head against the Seeker’s hand. Cassandra hooked her hand under her elbow and helped her to her feet. She looked up to the clear sky where a ribbon of green rippled across instead of the gaping hole that had been there for months. She gave a shaky laugh.

Cassandra gave her a skeptical look. “Are you sure you are all right, Herald?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I just—I expected to die today.” She turned from Cassandra’s shocked look when she felt a light touch to her other elbow.

“Are you well, Herald?”

“I am, thank you Solas.” She glanced around the temple at the mages that gathered in noisy groups, congratulating or assisting their friends. “How many did we lose?”

“Three; two to mana depletion, and the other—”

“Abomination. One of the templars cut him down the moment he started to change,” Cullen replied. “The body will be disposed of and the other two prepared for funeral rites.”

Eluned pressed her lips together and shook her head. “Funeral rites for all three. I will not have the mage disrespected for their sacrifice simply because they faltered at the end.”

She turned from him and scanned the temple for the three dead mages. The two had had died from her drawing too heavily on their mana lay together, the third was set aside. She went to the third immediately and knelt next to the body. A hush fell over the temple as every mage, templar, and soldier watched her. She bowed her head and circled her fist against her chest. “I’m sorry.” There was a collective gasp as she leaned forward to place a kiss on the ruined flesh of the man’s forehead. She got up and did the same for the other two mages before walking past everyone out of the ruined remains of the temple.

“You sure know how to create a scene, Songbird,” Varric commented quietly as they mounted their horses to ride back to Haven.

Eluned shrugged. “I just paid my respects.” She didn’t care what anyone else read into her actions; they died in helping her close the Breach. Paying them the respect they deserved as people was the least she could do.

When they arrived at Haven, a messenger hurried forward and handed Eluned a piece of parchment. She smiled when she read it.

Delayed by winter storm. Landed in Jader this morning. Will be in Haven in 4 days.
~ Kaaras

“Good news?” Cassandra asked curiously. Eluned handed her the message. “The Valo-Kas will be here soon. I’m sure you’ll be happy for their return.”

Eluned nodded.
Cassandra looked back in the direction of the temple. “The mages will be a few hours yet before they return. Why don’t you get some rest? There will be celebrations later.”

She was exhausted now that the tension and excitement was over. Eluned shot Cassandra a smile and made her way to her cabin, pausing long enough to drop her outerwear before collapsing onto her cot. She was asleep in moments.

The celebration was already underway when Eluned woke. She could hear the music and laughter filtering through her cabin. She didn’t have any party clothes, not that she thought anyone had that luxury, but she put on the pendant Solas had found when they cleared out the wolves in the Hinterlands and wrapped her favourite scarf that Master Gradenigo gave to her just those few months ago, around her neck. It felt like it had been years since then. She grabbed her heavy leather coat; she had spent enough time at winter ice skating parties on the river to know that while alcohol might make you feel warmer, a warm jacket was still a necessity for winter partying.

Leaving her cabin, it wasn’t long before someone pressed a mug of some unidentified alcohol into her hands before darting off elsewhere. She gave it a cautious sniff and was pleasantly surprised to find that it was mead. She made her way over to Varric’s fire where she found the many of her companions already drinking. Sera jumped up and hooked her arm through Eluned’s. Eluned hastily handed her mug off to someone as Sera swung her around in a big circle, cackling madly before releasing her and dashing off elsewhere.

“How much has she had?” Eluned asked, a little awed, taking back her own mug.

“Buttercup? No one really knows,” Varric replied. “You did good today and not just closing the Breach. The mages won’t forget what you’ve done for them.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I killed three of them.”

“You didn’t do that, but what you did do afterward is what counts. They’ll remember that. Now go, mingle,” he ordered giving her a gentle shove from the fire. “Celebrate. You’ve earned it.”

She fondly rolled her eyes at him but let herself be propelled into the crowds. Every time someone realised who she was despite her mark being hidden in a glove, she was thanked, she was blessed, and her mug refilled. At another fire, several people played simple musical instruments to a cheerful tune. Minaeve had her elbow hooked through the bent elbow of a man, Eluned recognized as one of the merchants, they spun each other around in a wild dance. She was startled to see Adan slapping his knee with laughter. He was laughing so hard he nearly tipped himself off the barrel he was seated on; honestly, she didn’t think the grumpy alchemist had it in him.

She continued weaving her way up through the village until she found herself blessedly alone for a moment between Leliana’s and the requisition officer’s tents. She sat down, kicking her feet out over the wall and leaned against one of the supply crates. She tipped her head back and looked at the sky. The sun hadn’t yet set; the sky was lit with a blaze of red and gold through the trees and mountains, while above, stars that hadn’t been seen in months peeked through the darkening velvet sky. The sky was clear and crisp of clouds and a pale ribbon of green like an aurora borealis from home rippled across the creeping dark. She lifted her mug to her lips and took a deep swallow of the little bit of remaining mead; all in all, it had been a good day.

“There you are. I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Eluned rolled her head back against the crate until she could see Cassandra and spread her hands out. “Here I am.”
Cassandra waiting then gave a huff and sat down on the wall when she realized that Eluned wasn’t going to get up. “Solas confirmed that the heavens are scarred but calm. The Breach is sealed. We have reports of lingering rifts and many questions remain, but this was a victory. Word of your heroism has spread.”

Eluned shook her head and waved her hand over Haven. “This is not all me. Luck, good or bad, put me here,” she gestured.

“You are right, it was a strange form of luck but it was a victory of alliance. One of the few in recent memory. With the breach closed, that alliance will need new focus.”

Eluned shook her head again, “my part is done.”

Cassandra frowned, “what do you mean your part is done? The demon army, the Elder One—”

Bells began to ring. For a moment Eluned sat there listening and wondering if they rang bells to celebrate all holidays like the churches did back at home when she realized that the bell on the Chantry behind her wasn’t the one ringing and Cassandra had gone rigid beside her, grasping the hilt of her sword.

“Get up,” Cassandra hissed. “We need to get to the gate.”

They hurried through the village. Partiers gathered in quiet, anxious clumps and quickly stepped out the way to let Eluned and Cassandra through without so much as a question. They found Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine already at the gate.

“Cullen?” Cassandra asked.

“One watch guard reporting. It’s a massive force coming over the mountain.”


“None.”

“None?!?”

They stood staring at each other, stunned by the revelation. There was a crash at the gate making it rock inward before it settled back to its resting place.

“I can’t come in unless you open.”

Everyone stared at the gate, frozen. Eluned shoved between Cassandra and Cullen, pulling open the gate before anyone could protest. She jumped back as a huge armoured soldier fell at her feet revealing a slight figure hidden beneath a voluminous hat. He pulled bloody daggers from the soldier’s back and a trail of dead lay behind him.

“I’m Cole. I came to warn you. To help.” He stepped forward suddenly towards Eluned, making her flinch. “People are coming to hurt you. You probably already know…”

Eluned stared at him. What is going on? she thought.

Cole tipped his head revealing icy blue eyes obscured by pale blonde hair. He stared back at her.

“The Templars come to kill you,” he replied to her unasked question.

Eluned blinked and jerked back in surprise.
“Templars! Is this the Order’s response to our talks with the mages? Attacking blindly,” Cullen asked.

“The Red Templars went to the Elder One. You know him, he knows you. You took his mages… There,” Cole said pointing to a distant rocky peak. “He’s very angry you took his mages.”

They all followed Cole’s arm and watched in horror as the light of hundreds of torches appear over the mountain peak like a tsunami wave barreling down upon them. A freakishly tall figure stood next to another in templar plate armour.

Cullen sucked in a sharp breath when he spotted the templar, “that is Samson, he will not make it easy.”

“I guess we can assume that Darrow was unsuccessful.” Cullen shot Leliana a frustrated look.

Eluned turned her back on the approaching army. The mages, soldiers, villagers, and pilgrims had started to gather behind them. She looked at Cullen and raised a brow. She beckoned to him, “give us a plan.”

“Haven is no fortress. If we are to withstand this force, we must control the battle. Get out there and hit that force with everything we’ve got.” He spun around to the gathered group behind them and bellowed, “all the non-combatants into the Chantry. Soldiers form up! Mages! You have sanction to engage them. Inquisition, with the Herald. For your lives, for all of us!”

It was like being in Seheron all over again; snow instead of fog but the whistle of arrows, the clashing of metal, the crunch of bones, and the screams and smells of the dying were old and familiar companions. She even had a Qunari at her back. She sent out gouts of fire into the Venatori and Red Templars that came over the mountains, fire to kill and ice to make the slopes slick under their feet hindering their progress.

“Boss, to your right!”

Eluned pivoted and cast firemines before some Red Templars cutting them off from flanking soldiers adjusting a trebuchet. They fired it sending snow and rock exploding into the enemy ranks.

“Why are you holding back?” Iron Bull asked her.

She shot him an annoyed look and continued sending fire through the clashing armies. Their forces were terribly outmatched; raw recruits, mages terrified of their own power, and mere handfuls of veteran warriors against a force of seasoned warriors, rogues, and mages.

“Where is that scary-as-fuck Vatasala?” Iron Bull demanded slamming his great axe into a Red Templar with a grunt.

Eluned scowled at him and started to cast once more.

There was a tremendous rumbling sound that rolled across the frozen lake. Huge cracks skated across the surface under the Venatori and templars crossing the ice, sending jagged shards of ice and vents of steam into the air. Suddenly there was a loud snapping noise as the ice released and started flipping as it broke apart dumping all the people on the ice into the now boiling water below.

A cheer rose up from those in Haven as another trebuchet released with a thud sending its missile into the mountain side triggering an avalanche. Snow roared down the mountainside snapping trees like matchsticks, sweeping through the enemy combatants like sweeping away the pieces on a chessboard.
The dragon was unexpected.

All the confidence and high morale was obliterated with one black winged shadow that roared across the sky scattering everyone in a panic to seek shelter from the red lightning it spewed. Eluned could feel the sickly hum of corruption as it destroyed trebuchets with its breath. They quickly herded people from the smithy, the tavern, shops, and tents ahead of them and into the safety of the Chantry.

Eluned, exhausted, leaned against a pillar close to the door as soldiers barred it behind them. She wiped at her face, her hand coming away with a smear of blood from her nose. Boiling the water under the Venatori took a lot out of her. She glanced across the other side of the Chantry and spotted the strange boy in the oversized hat help Chancellor Roderick sit. Blood seeped through the cleric’s robes staining the red tabard with an even darker hue.

“Herald, our position is not good,” Cullen told jogging up to her as the bar dropped with a thump. “That dragon stole back any time you might have earned us. It’s cutting a path for the army, it will kill everyone in Haven.”

“The Elder One doesn’t care about the village, he just wants the Herald,” Cole said as he helped the wounded Chantry cleric, Roderick, sit down.

“If it will save these people, then he can have me,” Eluned thought.

Cole looked at her and replied, startling her again by responding to her thoughts, “it won’t. Nothing else matters but he’ll kill them anyway.” He shifted his gaze to stare at the door as if he could see beyond it. “I don’t like him.”

“You don’t…?” Cullen repeated in frustration. “The only thing that slowed them was the avalanche. We can turn the remaining trebuchet and create one last slide.”

Iron Bull stood with his arms crossed and studied the Commander thoughtfully. “We’re overrun. To hit the enemy, we’d bury Haven and ourselves.”

Cullen nodded. “We’re dying, but we can decide how. The only choice we have is how spitefully we end this.”

Dorian strode over, “that’s not acceptable. I didn’t join the Inquisition just to have you drop rocks on my head.”

“Should we submit? Let him kill us and take the Herald?” Cullen argued.

“Dying is the last resort, not the first. For a Templar, you think like a blood mage.”

"Former Templar," Cullen muttered under his breath.

“Chancellor Roderick remembers a path,” Cole said quietly, cocking his head sideways to listen to the cleric’s fading words. “It’s a secret path that can lead the people to safety above the tree line. We can get the people out.”

Eluned trembled, she didn’t want to step out those doors and face that dragon and whatever it, the Elder One, was that commanded it. She didn’t want all these people to be buried alive or crushed under the stone when the Chantry finally collapsed either. The Chantry shuddered as the dragon flew over once more, the masonry groaned, dust and small pieces of stone fell across the carpet that lined the hall. Voices of men, women, and children cried out in terror as they huddled against the walls, their eyes fixed on the stones above them. She steeled herself, if she didn’t draw the attention of this Elder One, they would never make their escape.
She remembered the pain and grief from when Crooked Horns fell in Seheron and the numbness that followed. She didn’t fear death then, in truth, she sought it; to be free of the pain and suffering of her life, free of the agonizing loneliness she felt without his presence. She let that numbness embrace her now, she was ready to walk onto that battlefield again into the waiting arms of death.

She gave a sharp nod to Cullen.

“But what of your escape?” Eluned looked at him for a moment, whatever he read in her face made him blanch before she looked away. “Perhaps you will surprise it—find a way? The soldiers will load the trebuchet. Keep the Elder One’s attention until we are above the treeline. If we are to have a chance—if you are to have a chance—let that thing…see you.”

Solas hurried to her side as she tightened the laces on her boots before heading out again. She wobbled as she stood up. He grasped her elbow to steady her. “Here,” he handed her a half-full potion vial that glowed blue in the dim light of the Chantry. “Lyrium to bolster your mana. You are dangerously close to putting yourself in mana imbalance.”

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head, “never used Lyrium before. I don’t know what it’ll do to me.”

“I understand your reluctance but if you do not, you will certainly fall when you go back out there,” Solas argued. He grasped her right hand and placed the vial in it, closing her fingers with his own. “I know that there is nothing that can be said to stop you from this course of action,” he said quietly, “so please. Take it. We’ll deal with the consequences after.”

She grimaced as she shot the vial back but then gasped at the euphoric feeling of the mana surging back into her. Solas had the tiniest of smug looks on his face as she handed the vial back to him.

In the end, the dragon was the one that separated her from the others.

When she and her handful of chosen companions accompanied the soldiers to ready the trebuchet, Red Templars and Venatori broke off their attacks on the Chantry and focused on them. Yet none of the attacks that hit her personally were anywhere near being particularly damaging. Eluned wasn’t certain if that was due to the defenses the others put up around her or the enemy were pulling their own attacks. It certainly hadn’t helped the two soldiers that were smashed into a red smear under the monstrous red lyrium club wielded by one of the templars.

Eluned gave the trebuchet wheel one more crank to move it into position. A dragon screamed, giving them little warning as the huge corrupted creature appeared over a mountain peak again. She gave a sharp high whistle and waved to the others to run. An ear-splitting roar made everyone want to drop everything and clap their hands over their ears. They took off running for cover when the dragon came up over the southern ridge, flying quickly at their location. A blast of red lightning ripped open the ground beneath her feet tossing her into the air to slam into the ground.

Eluned hit the ground hard enough to drive the air out of her lungs, a pop and a sharp pain raced across the front of her right shoulder. She cried out soundlessly as she tried instinctively to push herself upright with her right hand; she could feel her collarbone shift and dig into the inside of her coat. She cradled her right arm with her left hand as she struggled to her knees. The ground shook as the dragon loped through the shattered palisades cutting off her escape path back to the Chantry. She got to her feet and backed away carefully toward the trebuchet but not so close that the dragon’s attention would be called to it.

Instead the dragon cocked its head toward the path to the west. Eluned was reluctant to take her eyes
of the predator before her but if something had the attention of the dragon, she needed to know if it was a distraction that could permit her escape, or something worse that she needed to worry about.

The tall, misshapen creature she had seen earlier in the battle, standing on the ridge with the templar, strode forward out of the fire. A grotesque mockery of a man; his body was a twisted, stretched corpse distorted with chunks of red lyrium growing out of him. “Enough,” he commanded the dragon.

He gestured with his hands and a blast of magic swept across the area between him and Eluned extinguishing the fires. “Pretender,” he addressed her with a surprisingly cultured voice, “you toy with forces beyond your ken. No more.”

Eluned took a small step back as he stalked toward her.

“Know me. Know what you have pretended to be. Exalt the Elder One, the will that is Corypheus.” He pointed a skeletal hand at her, “you will kneel.”

Eluned bared her teeth at him in a snarl and shook her head. She would not submit to him.

“You will resist. You will always resist but it matters not. I am here for the Anchor.” He raised his left hand; a metallic orb illuminated from within with green light crackled and glowed with a malevolent red lightning like that which the dragon had spat. It floated and spun over his hand.

The orb seemed familiar, like Eluned had seen it before. A sharp pain pierced her temple as she tried to recall where she had seen the orb.

Corypheus reached out with his free hand, “the process of removing it begins now.” He threw an arc of energy toward Eluned linking himself to her. The mark in her left hand sparked to life, tugging with greater resistance that it did when she was closing the Breach, driving her back to her knees with the pain.

He growled in frustration as the connection between the two of them snapped back. “It is your fault, Herald. You interrupted a ritual years in the making, and instead of dying, you stole its purpose.” The dragon stalked around behind her, snarling at her, in response to its master’s anger. Eluned folded herself over her pained hand, oblivious to both. “I don’t know how you survived, but what you fling at rifts I crafted to assault the very heavens. And you use the Anchor to undo my work. The very gall.”

He stomped over to her and grasped her arm, closing his hand around the fetter and yanking her from the ground. Eluned squealed as her weight tugged her arm through the cuff slightly, tearing the flesh until her hand and wristbones caught on the edge of the cuff. She groaned as her shoulder strained as she swung in his grip as he drew his arm back to throw her. Pain exploded in her head, elbow, and back as she slammed into the trebuchet.

“I am not a slave. I bow to no one,” she snarled at him.

He snorted with disdain, “it matters not.”

Eluned groaned, the bones in her arm beginning to twist as she swung in his grip as he drew his arm back to throw her. Pain exploded in her head, elbow, and back as she slammed into the trebuchet.

“The Anchor is permanent. So be it. I will begin again and give this world the nation—and God—it
requires. You will die.”

Eluned rapidly blinked her eyes as three Corypheuses swum into view before finally returning to one. Gasping rapid, shallow breaths, she struggled to her feet glancing desperately for a weapon. Spotting an abandoned sword, she tried to pick it up only to have it slip from her shaking, nerveless fingers and clatter to the wooden trebuchet platform with a loud metallic ring. She pressed herself against the trebuchet to remain on her feet as the world shifted and wavered before her eyes.

Oblivious to Corypheus’ droning monologue she raised her eyes to the mountain behind the Chantry. *Had the others managed to escape? Did they get high enough up the mountain to be safe?*

Unbidden, lines from one of her favourite poems sprung to mind as she watched desperately for the flare:

> And you, my father, there on the sad height,
> Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
> *Do not go gentle into that good night.*
> *Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

She blinked rapidly at the creeping black that was closing in on her sight; *she could not pass out, she would not fail.*

A pale streak, like a tiny comet, rose above the treeline then faded out as it dropped toward the earth.

Grasping the sleeves of the opposite arm in each hand, she turned and kicked the lever of the trebuchet releasing it. She hobbled as quickly as she could off the platform and away from Corypheus and his dragon. Terror raced up her back as she heard the roar of the snow rushing up behind her.

Leliana lowered her bow as the lit arrow flew into the dark sky. They waited. And waited.

“What?”

The arm of the trebuchet swung and moment later the mountain erupted as snow, rock, and trees cascaded down to bury the village. The dragon escaped, flying away to the west.

The avalanche continued to rumble down the valley obscuring their view below.


Eluned’s companions and advisors turned to Cole in shock.

“What?”

“Is she—?” Several people asked at once.


Josephine sobbed and turned into Blackwall who wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Sera was wrapped in his other arm.
Dorian raised his hand to his mouth in horror as they watched the snow finally settle silently in the valley below them.

“I’m scared…”

Chapter End Notes

In case the font messed up, the message Eluned received after closing the Breach was as follows: "Delayed by winter storm. Landed in Jader this morning. Will be in Haven in 4 days.— Kaaras"

Thank you all for your continued enthusiasm for my story. If you are on Tumblr, I'm now doing a Sneak a Peek Mondays where I'm posting a bit—a few lines, some dialogue, or even multiple paragraphs—from upcoming chapters of EYP.

Oh I can't forget to show you all—I won an art giveaway by the lovely drellvhen on Tumblr. She drew Eluned for me:
Chapter Summary

**Limbo**

*Noun: an uncertain period of awaiting a decision or resolution; an intermediate state or condition.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Eluned rolled over pulling the blankets up around her nose and ignored the flickering light on her eyelids. She could hear the muted sound of ravens calling to each other and people moving around quietly. She was blissfully warm for a change and she could smell—coffee…?

She cracked her eye open and stared at the wooden door of the bedroom, perplexed. The walls were painted in the soft grey-lavender that her mum loved. Her mother’s childhood bear sat on the table beside the bed. The window was cracked open slightly and she could hear the pine trees swaying, their branches moving together in the breeze coming off the ocean below her parents’ house. She sat up and looked around, confused.

On the bedside table, next to the bear, her tablet sat from where she left it the previous night after reading before she slept. She picked it up and flipped open the cover: 7:18 AM May 15 2018. She opened the weather app: current weather 15˚C, expected high 32˚C. Placing the tablet back on the bedside table, Eluned glanced at her arms and froze. She sat upright and jerked the sleeves of her favourite nightshirt back on her arms, twisting and turning her hands. No metal cuffs, no weird green slash across her palm. She reached up with a shaky hand and touched her mouth; no scars. She yanked the nightshirt up and ran her palms across her back and around over her hips; no whip scars, no claw marks.

Eluned clapped her hands over her mouth to smother the loud sob that threatened to break free.

“It was just a horrible, horrible dream,” she muttered. She jumped at the sound of her own voice startling her. Tears streaked down her cheeks as she started to laugh.

She slid out of the bed and padded across the plush carpet to the bathroom. Her reflection; green eyes, caramel brown hair that was currently escaping the unraveling braid, full cheeks studded with freckles and a rosy bloom that she often covered with foundation so not to look flushed all the time, stared back at her. There were no scars, no wasted muscles hollowing her cheeks, or gold in her eyes to mark her as Fade-touched. It was all in her mind.

She shook her head and laughed again as she left the bathroom dressing herself in the comfy clothing she had laid out for the day. The first day of her holiday. Once dressed, Eluned left the bedroom and continued down stairs to where she could hear her parents speaking quietly and the heavenly smell of coffee came from.

“Oh Ellie! I hope we didn’t wake you,” her mother said, looking back over the sofa at where Eluned stood at the bottom of the stairs.
“Nope, you didn’t,” Eluned answered in a cheery voice. She walked over to the sofa and kissed her mother on the cheek.

“I was hoping you would have slept in.”

“Well technically I did, Mum. My body thinks I should have been up hours ago with the difference in the time zones,” she replied picking up the coffee mug beside her mother for a sip. Her mother swatted her with her folded-up crossword puzzle.

“There’s coffee still in the kitchen,” her father replied with a fond smile from his wing chair opposite her mother.

Eluned walked over and gave him a kiss on the cheek as well. “Thanks Dad.” She turned away and headed towards the kitchen.

He looked over her clothes, and said, “are you going to the cave this morning?”

“Oh, I wish you wouldn’t go there by yourself,” her mother added, lowering her crossword puzzle to her lap.

“I’ll be fine, Mum. It’s supposed to be overcast for the next few days, so I want to go now and get some pictures of the cave.”

“I know, but alone?”

“She’ll be fine, hon.”

Eluned flashed her father a smile. “Mum, the cave is wheelchair accessible. It’s perfectly safe; it’s not like I’m going spelunking in some unexplored cave. It has handrails, lights, and everything. Besides, the guided tours start at 9 so I’ll have less than an hour by myself.” She started heading to the kitchen to grab a granola bar and water bottle to take with her.

“I just worry. You’re always alone.”

Eluned turned back from the kitchen door and gave her mother a soft look. “Mum. I’m not always alone. I have a great bunch of friends that I see regularly. I’m good friends with a few people from work and we go out for dinner and drinks after work several times a week.”

“But what about Scott? I thought you two were so happy together?”

“Gwyn, we agreed we weren’t going to say anything,” her father chided her mother.

Eluned walked back over the couch and folded her arms along the back of it. “We were but his job kept him out of the country for weeks every month. My job has been super busy, and I’ve been working odd hours. We just—didn’t see each other. We drifted apart. We’re still friends and text each other regularly, but we decided to go our separate ways.” She gave her mother’s shoulder a light squeeze as she got back up to head to the kitchen. “I’m fine, I promise.”

“You’ll be home for supper? I told Sam that you would be in town and made reservations at the restaurant. He said he was going to bring in something special for you.”

“Yum, sushi. I’ll be home. I’m going to spend an hour, two, tops at the cave. Then I thought I’d stop off at my favourite coffee shot for a nanaimo bar and caramel coffee before coming back.”

“You’re not going to have a nanaimo bar for breakfast!” her mother called to her.
Eluned laughed as she walked into the kitchen and called back, “you bet I am. I’m on holidays. Dessert for breakfast!”

She filled her water bottle from the container in the fridge. “Hey Mum, do you want to go to that little shopping mall you like tomorrow? I know you said you were looking for a new top to go with your skirt.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful! You always have the best luck in finding things.”

She walked back into the living room, “it’s not luck. You just have to have the patience to sort through all the racks.”

Her mother shot her an amused look. “I don’t know where you found that patience; you were terrible to take school shopping.”

Eluned snorted a soft laugh, “lucky for you, I grew up.”

Her dad looked over his shoulder, “you can take my car. The keys are just inside the closet on the hook.”

“Thanks Dad. I’ll see you both later.”

Eluned drove down the coast highway and turned off onto the back road that took her away from the beach and inland towards the caves. It had rained the previous night and the moisture still glittered on the leaves of the trees. Hanging moss filtered the morning sun into hazy ribbons of light that splashed across the road as she drove into the parking lot. She absolutely adored the West Coast rainforest; maybe she’d have to see if she could turn her job into a remote one, she could move west and take advantage of the more outdoor-friendly lifestyle.

She gathered her long sleeve shirt and stuffed it in her light backpack, along with her camera, water bottle, and granola bar. With the car locked, she stuffed the keys in the zipped pocket for safe-keeping and walked across the parking lot to the path to the cave. The gravel crunched pleasantly under foot.

The mouth of the cave was open and inviting. The early sun streamed in toward the back of the entrance of the cave reflecting off various stalactites and stalagmites that glittered in morning light. She stopped at the mouth of the cave, lifting the damp hair from the back of her neck. She twisted the long, wavy caramel-brown hair up into a thick ponytail and secured the escaped tendrils back into the hair clip. “Really need to get this cut sometime soon,” she thought.

She froze as a strange sense of dread welled up in the pit of her stomach. She gave herself a shake for being ridiculous, dropped her hands to her sides and took a step forward. Her heart pounded at the shot of adrenaline raced through her veins made her take two hasty steps back from the cave entrance. She crashed into something.

Eluned spun around and found her self face to face with a painfully thin young man. He reminded her of one of her cousins who was all arms, legs, and sharp angles. The man’s blond hair was ragged and fell into his eyes.

“Oh, I am sorry!” she said backing away from him. The hair on the back of her neck stood up when she considered how he got as close as he had without her noticing; she hadn’t heard him take any steps on the gravel.

He canted his head slightly, “you’re not supposed to be here.”
“I know the park doesn’t open for another hour, but I was going to take a few pictures before all the tourists show up.”

“No,” he shook his head, “you’re not supposed to be here.”

She stepped around him, feeling inexplicably nervous. “You know what? I’ll come back on another day.” She hurried away toward the parking lot; she glanced back over her shoulder, but she couldn’t see where he was. She shivered, she no longer felt like going to the cave, maybe the beach instead.

Eluned wandered for hours on the beach. She carried her shoes and dug her toes into the sand, watched the tide turn revealing gleaming sand that teemed with life. Gulls screamed overhead, diving to scoop up tiny crabs and fish that became trapped in the tide pools. She sat upon one of the exposed rocks with her arms wrapped around her legs and tried to piece together why the cave and the blonde man had freaked her out as much as they had. Finally, she headed back to her parents’ house, still lost in thought.

“There you are, Ellie! I thought you were going to be home hours ago,” her mother exclaimed when she walked in the door.

“Sorry Mum. I went to the beach and lost track of time.” She winced and rubbed her fingers across the base of her skull.

“Are you all right?”

“Uh, just a headache. Mum, could we postpone Sam’s until tomorrow. I’m going to go to bed early; I think the jet lag is getting to me.”

“Of course, hon. Go get some sleep and we’ll see you in the morning.”

Eluned gave her mother a drawn smile and headed up to the bedroom. She pulled off her clothes, dropping them on the bathroom floor, then threw herself into bed. She was asleep in moments.

Eluned rolled over pulling the blankets up around her nose and ignored the flickering light on her eyelids. She could hear the muted sound of ravens calling to each other and people moving around quietly. She was blissfully warm for a change and she could smell—coffee…?

She cracked her eye open and stared at the wooden door of the bedroom, perplexed. The walls were painted in the soft grey-lavender that her mum loved. Her mother’s childhood bear sat on the table beside the bed. The window was cracked open slightly and she could hear the pine trees swaying, their branches moving together in the breeze coming off the ocean below her parents’ house. She sat up and looked around, confused.

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She slid out of the bed and padded across the plush carpet to the bathroom. Her reflection: green eyes, caramel brown hair that was currently escaping the unraveling braid, full cheeks studded with freckles and a rosy bloom that she often covered with foundation so not to look flushed all the time, stared back at her. She gave her head a shake and splashed some cold water on her face to try to help
shake off the lingering sleep.

Once dressed, Eluned left the bedroom. She hesitated just past the door and turned back to the room. She frowned slightly; she was forgetting something. After a moment, she shrugged and continued down stairs to where she could hear her parents speaking quietly and the heavenly smell of coffee came from.

“Oh Ellie! I hope we didn’t wake you,” her mother said, looking back over the sofa at where Eluned stood at the bottom of the stairs.

“Nope, you didn’t,” Eluned answered in a cheery voice. She walked over to the sofa and kissed her mother on the cheek.

“I was hoping you would have slept in.”

“Well technically I did, Mum. My body thinks I should have been up hours ago with the difference in the time zones,” she replied picking up the coffee mug beside her mother for a sip. Her mother swatted her with her folded-up crossword puzzle.

“There’s coffee still in the kitchen,” her father replied with a fond smile from his wing chair opposite her mother.

Eluned walked over and gave him a kiss on the cheek as well. “Thanks Dad.” She turned away and headed towards the kitchen.

“You need to wake up, Songbird. We need you.”

She froze at the sound of the voice that was very much unlike her father’s, goosebumps raced over her skin, and she whipped around to look at him. “What did you say?”

He looked up from his paper, “I asked if you heard the songbirds. Did they wake you?” He glanced her clothes, and said, “are you going to the cave this morning?”

“Oh, I wish you wouldn’t go there by yourself,” her mother added, lowering her crossword puzzle to her lap.

“I’ll be fine, Mum. It’s supposed to be overcast for the next few days, so I want to go now and get some pictures of the cave. I’ve been dying to go there for ages.”

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“You’re not going to have a nanaimo bar for breakfast!” her mother called to her.

Eluned laughed as she walked into the kitchen and called back, “you bet I am. I’m on holidays. Dessert for breakfast!”

She filled her water bottle from the container in the fridge. “Hey Mum, do you want to go to that little shopping mall you like tomorrow? I know you said you were looking for a new top to go with your skirt.”

She stood still in the kitchen, waiting for her mother’s reply.

“Mum?”

There was no answer.

Eluned frowned and walked out of the kitchen and back into the living room. “Mum?” The room was empty. “Dad?”

She stumbled at the sudden pain in her feet. She looked down at her bare feet and watched in horror as some of the toes on each foot turned various shades of red, purple, and black.

“Oh dear. It looks like they might have had to cut off your toes after all.”

Eluned’s head snapped up and looked around the empty room. “Wha—?”

She gasped at a sharp pain in her left hand. She looked down and green light crackled and sparked from it. “No, no, no,” she pleaded. “It was a dream.”

“The anchor is behaving oddly isn’t it? Perhaps they should just cut off the arm too. Tear it off before it does something really strange,” the voice said.

A tall man appeared before her wearing strange knee-length robes held shut with straps and metal rings, a fluffy short cape or jacket lay over his shoulders. His lanky brown hair fell over his face, his eyes looked bruised as if he hadn’t slept in ages.

He stepped closer to her and looked at her feet. “Hmm, that doesn’t look good at all,” he said as blood slowly starts to spread under her feet on the light carpet. “Do you think they cleaned off the blood from the last person before they used the blade on you?”

Eluned stumbled back, her wrists banged into the door frame with a metallic thunk. Pain shot through her arms and shoulders. She whipped her gaze from her feet to the cuffs around her wrists and back down at her bloodied feet. “This isn’t real. None of this is real,” she whispered.

“Which part, dear? You’ll need to be more specific,” the man said stepping closer to her.

She hobbled from the doorway and skirted around him leaving footprints on the carpet. He’s got to be a demon, she thought. “I’m not dead,” she said.

The demon pursed his lips and bobbed his head side to side, considering. “Are you asking or telling? Both are technically correct. But then, if you wanted to die you shouldn’t have run from the avalanche like a coward, should you? If you hadn’t run, the tree that covered the hole you fell in
would have struck you instead, killing you instantly.”

“It’s not cowardly to want to live.”

“Is it not? Then why are you hiding here? Wake up and face the pain and misery that you ran so valiantly toward… Or you could stay here—I can make it worth your while.”

Eluned looked away from the demon, hesitant.

“Here, let me show you what you have to look forward to.” He snapped his fingers and pain overwhelmed her nearly staggering her to her knees. The demon stalked around her.

She drew a breath to argue with him, her breath caught and sent her into a painful fit of coughing. There was blood in her hand when she stopped.

“Oh, the demon said poking her in the back making her gasp in agony and arch away from him, “those ribs are broken. Of course, the blood might just be the teeth you loosened when you broke your face.”

“You’re a fucking asshole,” she growled at him.

“Really—” he drawled, “’cus I could be so much worse.” The demon shimmered until it was Tal’atkata that stood before her. He swept his hand from his head toward his feet. “Is this better? Do you like this form more?”

She went to retort and found she couldn’t open her mouth. Frantically, her hands reached for her face and found thick threads lacing her lips.

No, no, no, she thought as she clawed at the threads. She got away from him. He couldn’t be here.

The demon whipped out his hand closing it around her throat. He shoved her back hard against the wall, her head bounced off the drywall hard enough to leave a dent in it. Her eyes watered as she tried to focus on him. He lifted her until her toes left the ground, scrambling for purchase below. He growled at her. “Stop resisting and make a choice—” the demon shifted form again until the silvery eyes of Crooked Horns stared back at her, “and then you can have what you want.”

Her feet lowered to the floor, the hand around her throat shifted to gently cradle her jaw. All the pain she felt before was gone. Crooked Horns tipped his head slightly and ran his thumb across her bare lips. He gave her a slow sweet smile and lowered his head until his lips were a hair’s breadth away from her own, “stay here with me.” He pulled her from the wall, wrapping an arm around and pulling her flush against him, his lips brushed across her own. He cradled her neck, slanting his lips over her own, teasing and coaxing her with the gentle slide of his tongue until she submitted to him.

She clutched at him, desperately wanting it to be real.

“It’s not real,” a new but familiar voice said. “It’s a lie.”

Crooked Horns’ expression changed to one of anguish as she stepped back from him. “Ignore it, kadan. It’s trying to confuse you.”

Tears streamed down her face as she looked at him, saw her own pain reflected in his gaze as she stepped out of his grasp. She wrapped her arms around her waist to prevent herself from reaching out to him. She wanted so badly to believe him.

Eluned glanced at the pale young man hidden under the over-sized hat. “I know you. Why do I
know you?"

“I'm Cole. You've seen me before, but you forgot.”

The demon that had worn Crooked Horns’ face shifted in appearance and flickered between forms, growling and snapping at her.

Eluned cried out as she fell to her knees, pain bloomed over her body; arms, back, head, and feet.

“It can’t hurt you if you don’t let it.”

Eluned shivered and her breath hung in the air before her as the temperature in the room plummeted.

“This isn’t real, and it never will be. Your body will die if you stay here.”

“I want to—” her voice vanished.

“There are people that care for you, that are waiting for you. This—” Cole turned slowly around in a circle, “isn’t the way back.”

“How?”

He leaned toward her resting his head on her shoulder, his breath warm on her ear. She watched his hand hover before her face, middle finger held down by his thumb with tension until it released with a smack against her forehead. “Get out.”

Chapter End Notes

Maker, this chapter drove me nuts which is amusing considering the theme—hopefully it doesn’t cause you, my lovely readers, too much confusion!

Next time on "Embrace Your Purpose", the author regains her sanity to sit in a cart with her OC for a month long trek through the Frostbacks and learns how to play cards!
The flare of light, visible even considering the distance, drew all eyes toward the south as it lit up the early morning sky. With a clap like a storm’s distant thunder, the Breach was gone except for a ribbon of green across the blue as a reminder that it had been there.

Kaaras grinned, she did it. He laughed out loud and smiled at some of the others that had grins of their own, “she did it!”

“Come on, the sooner we get moving, the sooner we can all celebrate with Ellie,” Shokraker said packing her bedroll onto the horse. They had been pleasantly surprised to see that in the time they had been away in Nevarra and the Free Marches, the Inquisition had grown enough to have horse relays available for them to use on their return.

They fell into a loose grouping as they headed along the Imperial Highway as it started the climb through Gherlen’s Pass. As the day grew later, Kaaras drew his horse in beside Shokraker. “Have you changed your mind about asking Ellie to join us?”

Shokraker lips thinned as she pressed them together. “I would still have her join us but the situation with Ashaad Two is worrisome.” She glanced at him. “You know he wasn’t happy about Ellie’s presence and after the explosion that killed three of our own, he was relieved that we left to honour our annual contract. He was adamant that the Valo-Kas should keep its distance from the Inquisition.”

“Do you really think he’d risk going back to the Qun? They’re just as likely to kill him as let him return.”

“He has information that he could use as leverage on his return.”

“He wouldn’t betray her to the Qun?”

“Yeah, he would,” Sata-Kas growled, coming up on Kaaras’ other side. “We should expect it. We
could protect her from an outright attack, but if they send their Ben-Hassrath agents, we might not see them coming. I suggest if the Inquisition still has work, we should take them up on it. They have their own spies and network that could keep watch for us.”

“That is my thought also,” Shokraker nodded. “Taarlok and I have been discussing terms of a contract to broach with the Inquisition when we return.” She looked up into the sky and squinted. “It’s getting late. Let’s set up camp just over the ridge.”

Everyone fell into their routine rolls setting up camp for the night. The horses became restless at dusk and they heard a low rumbling echo through the mountains.

“What is that?” Katoh asked.

“A storm,” someone replied.

Another rumble echoed off the mountains. “I’ve never heard thunder in a winter storm in the mountains,” she shot back.

“It’s probably an avalanche somewhere,” Sata-Kas replied. “Nothing to worry about.”

Late the following day, they turned west away from Lake Calenhad toward Haven only to run into a small group of Inquisition soldiers and refugees that looked like they had seen better days. Kaaras quickly dismounted and went to help a soldier that was being held up by two of the civilians.

“What happened?” he asked the soldiers as he started peeling off a bandage, dark from dried blood.

“Haven was attacked,” the soldier gasped.

Kaaras froze and looked up at the soldier, “what do you mean?”

“The Herald. She closed the Breach, a day, or was it two—Maker, I don’t even know any more. She closed the Breach but that night when everybody’s celebrating and half in their cups an army of monsters attacked us.”

“There was a dragon and everything,” one of the refugees.

“Where is everyone else?” Sata-Kas asked.

Another soldier joined them. “Buried. Me and my mates were rounding up this lot to get them to the Chantry, but we got cut off—so we decided to hide up in the trees away from the village until it was safe. Saw the whole thing.”

“You saw what?” Kaaras asked rigid with tension, his hands clenched into tight fists at his side.

“Saw the Herald face the dragon and its master. Set off a trebuchet and buried the whole lot of them under the mountain.”

“That dragon flew away.” The wounded soldier shook his head, “all dead for nothing. What a waste.”

The wind that seeped into the tent made the candle flame flicker, making the lines on the map appear to waver in the light. The canvas snapped against the tent poles drowning out all other sounds of the camp around them and sometimes their own words even though they stood closely together as they studied the map.
“So where do you suggest we go, Commander?”

Cullen pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to will the forming headache away. He could already feel the creeping flush of heat that signaled the onset of another feverish night of withdrawal pains. “I don’t know, Leliana, but I do know that we can not stay here. We’ve been here for two days and we’ve scared away any game in the area. People will begin to starve if we do not successfully manage to hunt soon.”

“If we turn back—” Cassandra said.

“Too risky. The enemy’s forces could be waiting for us. The avalanche will make navigating and hunting in the area hazardous and we’re too far from Redcliffe to obtain help from there before people start dropping.” He studied the map before him and sighed with frustration. “We don’t know where we are, but our best option is to proceed forward. If we continue north, we may eventually run into Gherlen’s Pass or even Orzammar.”

“Orzammar? But that’s…” Josephine blanched. It was nearly a hundred miles as the raven flew never mind through the meandering path of uncharted mountains. “What about the Herald?” she asked softly.

“If the Herald… If she survived, she knew we were headed north from Haven. We can only hope that if—she’ll make her way to us…”

“I can send my scouts—”

He shook his head, “in the morning, Leliana. They’ll not find anything in the dark and in this storm, even if our tracks back aren’t already obscured, they’ll be hard pressed. We should all get some rest.”

The others nodded forlornly. Leliana hooked her arm through Josephine’s and the two of them left the tent. Cassandra lingered for a moment over the map and looked at Cullen. “Do you think there’s a chance that she survived?” she asked quietly.

He raised his eyes to her, “she’d need a miracle.”

Cassandra pressed her lips together, not pleased with the answer, but not having a differing one herself.

Suddenly the air distorted in the tent revealing the whip-thin figure hidden under an over-sized hat. “To the south, hurry. She doesn’t have much time.” He vanished in a cloud of magic.

Cullen and Cassandra looked at each other and blinked in confusion. As one, they suddenly hurried from the tent and walked swiftly through the camp not wanting to alarm anyone by moving more quickly.

Varric looked up from his place at the fire he shared with several other of Eluned’s companions to see the two warriors heading out of the camp briskly. “Hey Seeker! What’s going on?”

She waved a hand at him. “Not now, Varrie.”

“What’s got a bee in their knickers?” Blackwall wondered.

Sera immediately protested, “don’ look at me—I didn’t do it!”

Dorian slowly started to rise, “the Herald—”
Iron Bull wrapped his hand around Dorian’s forearm and pulled him back down, all the while carefully watching the retreating backs of the Inquisition leaders. “Sit down ‘Vint. There’s no need to get the whole camp in an uproar,” he said softly. “We’ll know soon enough.”

As Cullen and Cassandra approached the edge of the camp, the sentries there snapped to attention. “Seen any activity, soldier?” Cullen asked.

“No ser,” one soldier replied, saluting with his fist over his breastplate.

“We’ve heard some wolves but haven’t seen any movement,” the other replied, also saluting.

Cullen continued down the trampled snow that was starting to become obscured by the blowing snow. Cassandra followed just behind him, “do you think she made it?”

He ignored the question and pushed through the snow. He crested a ridge, ahead of him was a dark object partially covered with blowing snow. He didn’t remember there being a large stone or fallen tree when they passed that way earlier in the day. It had to be… “There! It’s her,” Cullen exclaimed running over to the body that lay face-down in the snow, long strands of caramel-brown hair fluttered in the wind.

“Thank the Maker!”

Cullen crouched down and gingerly rolled her over. “Maker’s breath,” Cullen’s own breath exploded from his body in shock. Frost caked her eyelashes shut and the left side of her face was a livid bruise of blue, purple, and black. A long cut skated down her brow and extended to her cheek but due to the swelling around her left eye, he couldn’t tell if the damage extended to it as well. Eluned’s skin was so pale as to look waxy, her lips blue, and the dried blood from her nose, the corner of her mouth, and the cut on her face stood out starkly against her skin.

“Get the healers. All of them, now!” he yelled to Cassandra as he carefully cradled Eluned’s unconscious body in his arms as he ran back to the camp. A buzz had started to rise in the camp as healers rushed to the call, but he paid it no mind, pushing his way through the loose flap of the tent set aside for the injured.

One healer directed him to an open bed and announced to the others, “we need to warm her up immediately. Mages.” He pulled out a dagger and slipped it under the scarf wrapped around Eluned’s hands.

“No! Wait, wait, wait!” a female voice called out as she shoved through the throng surrounding the tent. “The cold has likely saved her and will help us now. Before you do anything—”

“Just who do you think you are, knife-ear?” the healer spat.

“She is the former Grand Enchanter of the College of Magi. A skilled healer and experienced battle mage,” Cassandra interjected. “You will heed her.” She stepped back and gave a nod, “please Fiona.”

“As I was saying, the cold will help us for a few minutes while we make sure that she is not bleeding out. Take your time and check her over thoroughly.”

The healer with the dagger bent over Eluned and slipped the blade under the scarf again.

“Wait!” Fiona told him again. “Look she’s made herself a sling and has both arms in it.”

“So she was just keeping her hands warm,” he argued.
“No, that isn’t the most efficient way and would have made her trek needlessly difficult. She couldn’t
defend or balance herself. There must be a reason for it.” Fiona waved one of the other mages over,
“check her over from finger tip to shoulders on both arms.” She turned away and started issuing
order to anyone in earshot. “I want every mage that is a competent healer in here now that has mana
to spare and isn’t needed elsewhere.”

“Grand Enchanter—”

“Just Fiona. We don’t have time for formalities.”

“En… Fiona,” the mage said, “the Herald has a broken collarbone and wrist on the right side. Her
elbow is broken on the left and there appears to be damage to that wrist also but the bracers she is
wearing is interfering with my attempt to assess the damage. If I apply magic to the cuff—”

“Do not apply magic on the cuffs or you will damage the Herald further,” Solas replied as he ducked
through the tent entrance and made his way to the cot.

“Ser Solas, you are familiar with the magic?” Fiona asked.

“Not specifically, no. I do know; however, that the cuffs are warded against any magical interference
and the Herald will suffer as the result.”

“I see. What do you suggest?”

“Have your people attend to her other injuries. I will look after the injuries to her wrists and hands.”

“All right. I need a pair of shears or a blade,” Fiona requested. “There is blood on her lips—there is
injury to her face but check the rest of her body for other internal injuries.”

The mages worked quickly under Fiona’s and another mage’s direction. Eluned’s heavy leather coat
was split down the back seam and carefully worked free of her arms, as was her frozen, soaked
tunic. Shocked gasps drew the attention of her companions that waited impatiently to find out how
she was. Cullen ducked his head into the tent, quickly averting his eyes but not before seeing the
black and red whip scars that laced her back in a pattern that crudely resembled the Qun’s own
heraldry; that which wasn’t obscured by the massive and livid bruise running down the entire right
side of her back.

“We need to warm her up now,” Fiona said once the injuries had been addressed, her voice hoarse
from use and overall exhaustion. “The mages are exhausted, what little magic they can provide for
healing. Somebody needs to share their body heat.”

“I… I can help with that,” Cullen said, stepping forward.

Fiona nodded to her colleague.

The mage stepped up to Cullen, giving him a critical look. She raised her hand toward him and
paused, “Commander, if you don’t mind?”

He looked at her hand, confused. “What? Er, uh… no.”

She stuck her hand in past his mantle and pressed her palm against the side of his neck, then to his
brow. She pursed her lips, then pulled her hand away. “No, you’re feverish. You’re at risk of taking
a chill.”

Iron Bull pushed his way into the tent, and shot Cullen a smug look, “give her to me. I’ve got heat to
She turned to him and checked him the same way as she had Cullen before giving a nod. “Armour off then get onto that cot… if you won’t break it.”

“No, ma’am,” he replied dropping his shoulder harness quickly to the floor with a thud. The cot creaked and groaned but didn’t shift beneath him. They carefully rolled Eluned against him, both arms wrapped in bandages and slings, bandages wrapped tightly around her ribs, and more bandages still around her feet. They tucked warm blankets and furs around them, while the others retreated to the command tent to wait for the healers’ report.

“Keep her warm but don’t let her sweat. If you need to get up, get the attention of one of the healers to assist you. If there are any changes to her condition, for good or ill—”

Iron Bull nodded, “I’ll let one of you know.”

Exhausted, Fiona and other senior mage healer headed over to the tent where the Herald’s advisor were waiting for news. Fiona rapped on the tent pole and they both entered. The tent was crowded but still as Eluned’s companions stood quietly to hear what the healers had to say.

Everyone was silent for a few moments before Cassandra impatiently asked, “well, what news? Will she live?”

“Yes, Seeker Cassandra, if she wakes,” Fiona sighed. “But she has been gravely injured and will need time to rest. We have pushed as much magical healing as we can until the mages are nearly exhausted and the Herald’s own body rejects any further healing. The Iron Bull is currently providing heat to warm her as no one retains enough mana to do so with magic.”

“And what of her injuries? Will she make a full recovery?” Cullen asked.

“She has three broken ribs on the right side as well as several others severely bruised. A broken collarbone and wrist on the right side, broken elbow and damage to the wrist on the left. She has a fractured cheekbone on the left side as well as a superficial cut, it doesn’t appear that either of these will affect her eyesight.” Fiona paused. Everyone started to relax and breathe sighs of relief until Fiona continued, “there is a cut and swelling on the back of her head, but the skull is intact, we won’t know if she’ll have vision or headache problems until she wakes. Her feet were badly frostbitten, she may lose a few toes as the flesh was already showing signs of dying.”

Fiona fell silent.

“Is there anything else?” Cassandra asked.

When Fiona didn’t reply, the other mage spoke up, “no, Seeker. We’ve set up a rotation of mages and mundane healers to monitor the Herald’s condition.”

“Ellendra, isn’t it?” Cassandra asked. “The Herald recruited you from the Hinterlands?”

Ellendra bowed her head in acknowledgement, “yes, Seeker Pentaghast.”

“Very well, you may go. Please keep us apprised of the Herald’s condition.”

Both mages bowed and retreated from the tent. The other companions quietly left the command tent for their own bedrolls or campfire. Varric, the last to leave, paused at the tent flap and gazed across the camp to the healer tent where Eluned lay, “it’s a shame that Blondie wasn’t around. A spirit healer of his caliber could probably help her regain her voice and repair most of the damage that was
“You would have that abomination in contact with the Herald?” Cullen snapped. “Didn’t he cause enough damage?”

Varric sighed and gave a shrug, “regardless of what he did, Curly, you have to admit that he was one of the best damned healers around. For what the Herald did for us—she deserves nothing but the best.”

Eluned tried to ignore the flickering light on her eyelids. She was blissfully warm, but she could feel the cold nip of the air beyond the heavy weight of blankets and furs piled on top of her. She could hear the muted sound of ravens calling to each other, people speaking quietly, and the steady crunching of snow beneath many feet.

She cracked her eye open and stared at the stained, bleached canvas that swayed rhythmically back and forth above her. The edge of a fur tickled at her nose and she tried to lift her hand to brush it away and found that she couldn’t move. She made a small sound of distress as she started to struggle, lean brown fingers carefully pulled away the blankets from around her face.

“Well, look who has decided to return to the land of the living?”

Eluned blinked at the face that swum into view, “a joke, necromancer?”

He sobered instantly, “I wish it was. You very nearly didn’t make it.”

She tried to sit up and struggled a bit under the blankets when she couldn’t pull her arms out. A look of panic flashed across her face.

“Wait, let me help you up.” Dorian leaned forward and helped her sit up, tucking blankets around behind her to prop her up and keep her warm. “You have injuries to both your arms. The mages have been pushing as much healing into you as they can and now that you’re awake you can take some healing potions. It’s still going to take you some time to recover.”

She closed her eyes and breathed hard through her nose as her head spun with vertigo from laying down for so long.

“Are you in pain?”

She shook her head and groaned. She opened her eyes and found a very sceptical pair of grey eyes studying her. “Head. Feel sick.”

“Ah. I have something here to help with that.” Dorian held a small vial to her lips, she recognized the distinctive tartness of rashvine in the restorative. “Do you think you could manage to eat something? I’ll get you some ginger tea and then you can try some food.”

When she gave him an affirmative answer, Dorian slipped out of the covered cart leaving her alone. She stared at the canvas and let her eyes drift as she listened to the sounds of movement around her outside of the cart. From somewhere ahead of the cart, she heard a woman’s voice start to sing. A small sound that quickly gained strength as more and more voices joined her own. The flap on the cart flipped open with Dorian’s return. He settled down beside her and held a mug of warm tea for her to drink.

“How often do they do that?”
“This is a first.”

“Why?”

“Well I would imagine its due to the news that their Herald has finally awakened.”

Eluned started to raise her arm to cover her eyes but stopped with a hiss of pain. “Oh for fuck’s sake…”

He barked out an inelegant laugh, “you really aren’t of the faithful variety, are you, oh ‘Chosen of Andraste’?”

“I didn’t even know who Andraste was until I looked it up in one of Josephine’s books.” She sighed. “Where are we now?”

“Wandering in the wilderness. We don’t really know where we are. Or where we are headed, for that matter.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t take us forty days and forty nights.”

“Kaffas! Why would you even joke about that?”

She ignored his question to ask one of her own. “Do we know where Corypheus is?”

“No and there has been no sign of him, his dragon, or any of those red monstrousities. We are very much alone out here.”

The canvas switched open to reveal Solas. “I’ve brought broth for the Herald. I would like to inspect her injuries.”

Dorian glanced at her and she answered with a nod. “Well then, I will leave you in the tender care of our wandering hobo.” He maneuvered his way out of the cart again then handed up the covered bowl of broth once Solas had climbed in.

Solas settled down beside her, “eat first, then I can check how you are healing. If you give me a moment, I can free your right arm and you can feed yourself.”

Eluned nodded. With a glow of magic in his palm, he pushed aside the collar of her tunic and ran his fingers across her right collarbone. Satisfied, he grasped her forearm giving it support and undid the sling that held that arm against her body. A quick magical scan over her wrist then he placed the mug of broth in her hand. She sipped at the hot broth until her arm started to shake with fatigue and Solas took over until she indicated she had enough.

“I did also want to talk to you about another matter.”

Eluned nodded for him to proceed. He paused and muttered something under his breath, Eluned could feel a shimmer of magic fall over them.

“A silencing spell; no one else will over-hear our conversation,” he replied to her curious look. He set about examining her injuries as he spoke. “The orb Corypheus was using; it’s Elvhen. I do not know how Corypheus survived nor do I know how people will react when they learn of its origin.”

“Elves would be an easy target. We should keep this to ourselves.”

“History would agree with you. I… thank you for your discretion.”
“Of course, Solas. You can trust me.”

He paused thoughtfully glancing at her eyes, then gave a slight tip of his head in acknowledgement. Satisfied with the healing to her upper body, he moved to the end of the cart, flipped back the blankets at the end of the bedroll and started to remove the bandages on her feet.

Eluned stared at her feet. The skin was still discoloured but worse yet, her feet were misshapen from missing toes. The demon or whatever it had been in her head had shown the truth.

Solas’ head snapped up at her sound of distress. Whatever look crossed her face had him grabbing a pail and hurrying to the head of the cart to support her when she leaned sideways and vomited. “Forgive me da’len, I should have warned you.”

She closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the side of the cart with a thunk. She winced as she breathed slowly through her nose, then asked, “walk?”

“Will you walk again? I don’t see any reason you won’t. You will, of course, need to change your gait to compensate, but you will walk again.”

She started slightly as she felt his fingers brush across her face, drying her tears. She opened her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m sure that there are others in worse condition then me and here I am crying over a couple of toes.”

He helped her to some water to clean out her mouth and heated the remaining broth that she had left earlier. “There is no need to apologize. I would be more worried if you had no emotional response at all given what you have been through.” He finished inspecting her feet and began wrapping them again.

“Can I leave the cart? Visit with the others?”

“You will need to stay off your feet for some time to properly allow them to heal, but I see no reason why you can not join the rest of us when we stop for the evening. You must promise to wait for someone to help you and keep off your feet as I’ve instructed.”

She nodded eagerly. She had only been awake for a short amount of time but already she had memorized the stain patterns in the canvas over her head in her boredom.

Solas paused before continuing, “I found some other information in the Fade that would be of use to you. The Inquisition needs a new home to rebuild and grow. To the North, there is a place that waits for a force to hold it. Lead them there.”

“What difference does it make? I told Cassandra after I sealed the Breach that I was done.”

“The situation is not as it was before. By attacking the Inquisition, Corypheus has changed it; he’s changed you. Would you truly walk away now?”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. She gave her head a tiny shake.

“You have more enemies now than you did; however, you have a greater number of allies as well. Use them.”
She made a face of distaste.

“You still wish to go home,” he stated, changing tact.

She nodded.

“We have spoken before about using your leverage to direct the Inquisition where you wished. For your selfless action at Haven and subsequent miraculous return, you will have even greater influence than you had before. Used wisely, we could expand our search for a means to returning you to your home.”

She sighed and nodded again. He was correct. She had the Qun looking for her and now the forces of Corypheus, they would be sure to kill her or hand her over to the ancient magister. The Avvar augur, Amund, said that there was another path, but she still had no resources of her own to search for it. As much as she might not like being in the limelight, as it were, she needed the Inquisition as much as they needed her.

She yawned, belatedly covering her mouth with her free right hand.

Solas chuckled and tucked the blankets and furs back around her. “Rest now. When we stop for the evening, someone will come and help you.”

“Thank you,” she gestured as she wiggled under the blankets to get comfortable. Her eyelids growing heavy before Solas had even left the cart.

The stillness of the cart woke Eluned, the first thing she became aware of were the voices raised in disagreement. She frowned to herself, she could hear Cullen and Leliana arguing. She wasn’t sure how far away they were from her location but if she could hear them, then it was certain that others could as well.

A tap on the side of the cart startled her out of her thoughts.

“Hey Boss?”

*Of course, it would be Iron Bull.* Eluned gave a low whistle to let him know she was awake.

The flaps at the end of the cart flipped open, Iron Bull ducked his head to peer inside. “Solas said you were joining us this evening?” She nodded. “Good. I’m here to give you a ride,” he said with a grin.

She glared at him. “*Blackwall?*”

“He’s chopping wood, so you’re stuck with me.”

She huffed in resignation, untangled herself from the blankets, and slid across the bedroll closer to the edge of the cart.

“Just wait a sec—got an extra warm pair of socks here for your feet since you can’t wear your boots yet.”

Eluned grabbed the socks out of his hands and started the awkward process of pulling them on with one hand; her left arm still immobilized by the sling.

He snatched them back and grasped one ankle in his hand, trapping her foot against him while he carefully rolled the sock over her foot and up her calf. “Good to see that Corypheus didn’t knock the
stubborn attitude out of you.” He ignored her glare while rolling the next sock over her other foot. She flinched slightly as he leaned past her and grabbed one of the furs from her bedroll. He wrapped it around her and used it to tug her off the cart and into his arms.

A short distance away, a fire had already been started with a pot hung over it and her companions were gathering around it. In the opposite direction, the argument continued growing louder in volume, Eluned could see the uneasy glances from the survivors toward that tent. Iron Bull headed for the fire. She gave a low whistle and pointed at the command tent.

“Yeah, they’ve been arguing and are going to keep arguing,” he said, still walking towards the fire. “No point in us starving while we wait for them to come to some decision.”

She started struggling in his arms when he didn’t change directions immediately. He simply tightened his grip on her. Eluned jabbed him as hard as she could in the solar plexus with her elbow and pointed back at the command tent.


“We can not simply ignore this! We must find a way,” responded Cassandra.

Cullen scowled at the map before them. “And who put you in charge? We must have a consensus, or we have nothing!”

“Please, we must use reason! Without the infrastructure of the Inquisition, we’re hobbled!” Josephine interrupted.

“I can’t come from no where!”

“She didn’t say it could,” Leliana stated, “but we need to choose a direction.”

Eluned whistled; four sets of eyes turned as one to where Iron Bull stood with her in his arms.

“Oh my lady, you’re out of bed!” Josephine exclaimed, hurrying around the table. “Is there anything we can get for you, anything we can do?”

“Yes. Stop arguing! The entire camp can hear you.”

“If we could just come to a decision—”

“We need to go north—”

“We can’t wander in the mountains—”

“If we turned back—”

Eluned rolled her eyes as they all started arguing again. Iron Bull twisted his head away and grimaced as she whistled again loudly. “Enough!” She tapped her fingers on Iron Bull’s chest and pointed to the map. He carried her closer. “Send scouts to the north-east. There is an abandoned fortress we can use.”

“Herald—” Cullen started to argue.

Eluned pressed her lips firmly together as she stared at him and jabbed her finger at the map again. Cullen sighed. She gestured for Iron Bull to carry her out of the tent.

“How do you know about the fortress?” he asked her quietly as he carried her to the fire.
“Solas saw it in the Fade.”

“Wonder how long he’s been sitting on that bit of information,” he mused.

Eluned shrugged. “Said it was better coming from me,” she replied.

He hummed but didn’t comment further as they had arrived at the campfire where most of her usual companions gathered. A few blankets were hastily gathered to give a soft place to sit and Dorian traced a warming glyph before she was set down on top of them. Iron Bull set her down then strode over to the Charger’s campfire.

“It’s good to see you up and about, Songbird. You scared the shit out of us when you showed up.” Varric placed a mug of stew into her hand.

She gave a little shake of her head, “don’t remember getting here.”

“Huh. Well, you just about got the whole way to camp before collapsing just outside. For whatever reason, the Seeker and Curly went racing out of camp at the right time and found you in the snow; carried you to the healers. We couldn’t tell were the ice and snow stopped and you started.”

Dorian snickered, “I’m not sure what had the Commander blushing harder; when the healers started peeling off your frozen clothes or when he volunteered when they asked for someone to share body heat.”

“Nah, he definitely blushed harder when that mage, Ellendra, shoved her hand under that mangy collar of his,” Iron Bull replied as he returned, he settled down on a log across the fire from Eluned with his own bowl of food.

Eluned could feel her own blush creep up her neck. “I guess I’ll have to thank him.”

“Oh, you’ll need to thank someone else for that,” Dorian commented with a sly smile. “Ellendra rejected the commander.”

She gave him a puzzled look in question. She followed his look and caught the eye of Iron Bull who tipped his horns the tiniest amount. She immediately dropped her gaze into her lap and tried to ignore the blush that roared into full blaze.

“So,” started Varric trying to break the awkward silence that descended upon the group, “do you remember anything about what happened after Haven?”

“It’s confusing. Jumbled,” Eluned replied. She set her bowl in her lap and rubbed her thumb in her left palm thoughtfully.

“That’s to be expected considering the head injury,” Solas remarked.

She frowned and continued to rub her palm. “Corypheus said that his ritual was meant to tear open the Veil, so he could enter the Fade.”

“Maker,” Dorian gasped, “if he had succeeded, he could have destroyed the world!”

“I think that was the point—so he could remake it.”

“How does your mark figure into all this?” Blackwall asked.

“I—I don’t really know. He said I stole it and he tried to take it back.” She studied her palm again. “It’s different now.”
Solas’ attention sharpened on her, “how so?”

“I don’t know. There were demons and the Anchor—pulled them back into the Fade, I think.”

“There were demons when you woke up?”

“Yes? I mean, I’m not sure.” She rubbed her fingertips between her brows. “I’m tired. I’d like to go lie down again.”

Iron Bull stood up, “I’ll take you.”

Eluned placed her empty bowl on the log beside her and looked up, “Blackwall?”

Blackwall shot an uneasy glance between her and Iron Bull, and cleared his throat, “yes, my lady.” He gathered her up gently and took her to the cart where her bedding remained. After carefully depositing her on the bedroll, he shifted awkwardly while she pulled off the extra socks. “Is there anything else I can do for you, my lady?”

“No, thank you Blackwall,” she said with a smile as she settled herself under the blankets. “Good night.”

“Right.” Blackwall gathered himself and stepped away. He stopped and turned back. “Good night, my lady,” he said as he closed the flaps on the cart.

Eluned lay in the dark and stared at the canvas overhead. Sleep eluded her. She rolled onto her side and hissed as her left elbow banged into the padded, but still firm, cart floor. She rolled back onto her back with a huff. She didn’t understand what she could and couldn’t remember from the events of Haven and it frustrated her.

“Your hurts are so loud.”

Eluned squeaked in surprise. She could make out the shadowy shape of thin young man with an over-large hat in the dim light. “Cole?”

“You don’t belong here.”

She frowned in confusion. “I thought you said I needed to come back here.”

“Yes, but this isn’t where you belong either. The door is lost.” He tipped his head as if listening to her or to something else. “Oh, I made it worse, but I can’t make you forget. Someone already has.”

She studied him silently as he aimlessly fiddled with a wicked dagger, a sense of disquiet crept over her. Would the others behave differently if they knew she didn’t belong? Would she end up in chains again, only trotted out to seal rifts as they came across them? Would he be the one to betray her?

Cole gasped. “I won’t tell anyone about you, although he already knows.”

“You mean Solas?”

“Yes. He won’t tell either.”

She nodded.

After a few moments, Cole spoke again, “he thought you were sent by the Maker to help after all. He wanted you to know.”
“Who?” she asked, puzzled by his change of subject. “Solas doesn’t believe—"

“No, Chancellor Roderick. He felt better that he didn’t succeed with getting you executed. Said it was his test of faith.” Cole flipped the dagger between his hands. “He was happy at the end. I helped him.”

Eluned drew in a sharp breath—and Cole vanished.

Chapter End Notes

So... do you all think it's time I tag the relationship? 😊 Have you guessed who it is yet?
Evacuation

Chapter Summary

Evacuation

*Noun: the action of removing from a place of danger to one of safety*

Eluned rubbed her nose, trying to get the acrid smell of scorched wool out of her nose, and gave Dorian a pained look as he laughed.

“Come on, try again,” he said, barely holding back the smug grin. “The rune looks like this,” he briskly traced a symbol that Eluned tried desperately to memorize, “and channel your mana thusly,” he finished off with a stylish flick of his wrist. A soft glow pulsed on the fabric then settled into a subtle shimmer she could only detect if she looked for the magic. He whisked his hand across the fabric and the rune vanished along with its radiant heat. “Now you,” he prompted her.

Her brow pinched as she concentrated, chewing on her lip, as she carefully tried to emulate the pattern that Dorian had drawn.

“Yes,” he said quietly prompting her.

She slowly began to channel some mana into the rune she created. It shimmered then started to glow; the rune flashed, and the fabric burst into flames. She slapped her hand down onto the burning fabric shoving it into the snow to extinguish the fire. Wool was usually quite resistant to fire, but she was making a determined effort at overcoming that particular attribute.

“You should not be encouraging the Herald to practice such magics without proper supervision.” Vivienne pulled her cloak around herself and sat down on one of the logs after whisking the snow away with a slight look of disgust.

Dorian stopped his last bout of laughter to address the enchanter, “I’ll have you know that I was at the top of all my classes at the Minrathous Circle and am a fully ranked Enchanter myself. I’m more than capable of supervising—”

“I meant a templar, darling.”

Dorian gave a snort of derision, “they’re only good for looking pretty—” he shot a look across the camp towards a blonde example which made Eluned giggle, ”and occasionally feeding you peeled grapes.”

“Perhaps in Tevinter…”

Solas sat down beside Eluned while the other two bickered. “Try again,” he prompted her. She started to trace the rune again. “Ah,” he halted her hand with his own. “Try this instead,” he demonstrated.

She copied Solas and the rune under her hand pulsed with a different glow than Dorian’s had before settling and giving off warmth without the unnecessary flames. She smiled in pleasure at having succeeded.
“Well done, lethallan.”

“That’s not the proper technique for that application.”

“It is a perfectly acceptable technique that accomplished the task while requiring the minimum input of mana from a mage,” Solas retorted. “Just because it does not adhere to the narrow-minded constructs of your Circle education does not make it wrong.”

“I will forgive you for that, darling,” Vivienne drawled. “One can not hope for enlightenment from a hedge mage.”

“I suppose Enchanter, you would recommend that the Herald be harrowed as well?” Solas queried.

“Of course. There is no better way to ensure that she capable to controlling her abilities and resisting demons,” Vivienne replied.

“Then you are foolish and reckless yourself. The Herald has learned to use her magic and protect herself from possession under the harshest conditions a mage can possibly face, and yet, you doubt her skill? To make matters worse you would force her into the Fade with a source of unknown magic branded into her flesh for a barbaric ritual all to give you peace of mind under false pretenses.”

“An uneducated apostate like yourself—"

Eluned stood up only to be immediately swept off her feet.

“What are you doing?” Solas chided her. “You are not to be on your feet.”

“I will not sit here and be talked over like I am some mindless thing. I had enough of that when I was in the Qun.”

“Ir abelas. That was thoughtlessly rude of us.”

“Yes. Do forgive us, my dear. We only want what is best for you.” Vivienne stood up and turned away, her cloak swirling with a dramatic flourish behind her.

Eluned pulled her cloak up around her ears and basked in the warmth the heat rune she had enscribed gave off as she leaned over the makeshift table sent up in the tent and studied the map before her. The scouts had been updating the map with trails, caves, valleys, and other topographical information that they had no previous knowledge of. It would be helpful in the future if they didn’t have to go back around the long way to get back to Haven; they would at some time need to see if they could salvage anything from the village, but it would have to wait until they had established themselves in their new home, and had the help of the spring thaw.

Leliana paused at the entrance of the tent, then entered to take her place on the other side of the table while they waited for the others to arrive. She studied the silent woman for a few moments. “I suppose you blame me for our predicament…” she trailed off.

She raised her eyes from the map and looked at Leliana before give a short, sharp nod.

The spymistress was, for once, caught off-guard and recoiled in surprise, as if she had been slapped. She quickly recovered. “If I had not recalled them after the first lookouts were reported as missing, if I had kept them out there longer, but I was afraid to lose my men—”

“No, not that. Our people are not expendable.”
“Then?”

“Butler.”

“He betrayed us!”

“Yes, and he could have told us who he betrayed us for. We could have been warned about Corypheus.”

Leliana pressed her lips together in irritation.

She shrugged and dropped her gaze to the map again. If Leliana couldn’t accept that she made a tactical error, then there was nothing she could say to change her mind.

The jingle and creak of armour announced the arrival of Cullen and Cassandra, and the soft swish of fabric announced Josephine. “You wished to speak to us, Herald?” Cullen asked.

She sat up straight on her stool and nodded. “How long for ravens to get to the Crossroads or Redcliffe from here?”

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck as he studied the map, “well… we’re still not entirely certain as to where we are but I would hazard a guess at two days, three at most if the wind is against them.” Leliana nodded in agreement. “Why do you ask?”

“We have seen no signs of Corypheus or his forces. We are not actively being hunted. The risk of discovery is no longer a danger. We should let our remaining forces know that we’re alive before they up and disband for themselves.”

Heads slowly started to nod in agreement.

“We should also put together a list of essential items we will need to have readied once we arrive and can send someone out to lead back to us. We can eliminate some of the delay if preparation is done ahead of time.”

Four pairs of eyes widened in surprise.

“That is a very—strategically—sensible suggestion, Herald.”

“I will commence writing up a list immediately,” Josephine added.

“I will begin writing instructions for my agents.”

She blinked in surprise; after the little altercation with Leliana, she thought the woman would have been more resistant. She swiveled on the stool and glanced at the door.

Cullen glanced at the door and back to Eluned, “Herald, can I take you back to the rest of your companions?”

“Blackwall…”

“Ah. I’ll go fetch him.”

She heard some discussion outside and rolled her eyes as Cullen returned with Iron Bull.

“Blackwall’s chopping wood so I’ll take you.”
Iron Bull’s muscles flexed and shifted against her as he shrugged as he crunched through the snow. “Dunno. You know you can put your arm around my neck if you’d be more comfortable. I don’t mind.”

She pulled the edges of her cloak closer together, tucking her hands inside, and looked away. She felt him stumble and she started to fall. She yanked her hands out of her cloak and threw them around his neck, pressing her forehead against the side of his jaw, the coarse hairs of two weeks of growth scraped across her cold skin. His arms under her knees never shifted and the arm around her back returned.

“Sorry. Ankle brace is a bit frozen.”

She pulled back from him and studied his face. His expression was completely neutral except for the tiniest crinkle of flesh around his eye that gave away his amusement. She flicked him hard on the tip of his ear. “Ass.”

“You see too much,” he replied with a laugh.

She stiffened. “Reading qunari was a matter of survival.”

He had no chance to reply as they reached the fire with the rest of the group and she was making her best effort to get out of his arms and onto her seat by the fire. He tightened his grip slightly to prevent her from flinging herself to the ground and gently set her down. He turned but immediately stopped for Varric who was standing in the way.

“What was that about?” Varric asked with a thrust of his chin towards Eluned.

“Nothing.”

“Didn’t look like nothing, Tiny.”

“I slipped. She’s fine; just made her nervous, that’s all.”

The Crossroads were in better shape than they had been when the Herald first arrived. Rebuilding of homes, shops, and farms, and clearing the general area of signs of battle had been going on for weeks, normality had started to return to the village and the surrounding country-side. News of the fall of Haven; however, rattled it anew and people fled to Redcliffe, back in the hands of Arl Teagan, not bothering to wait and see what new horror advanced upon them this time.

The Inquisition forces that had been stationed there to assist with the locals held their position and increased their patrols to watch for whomever or whatever was responsible for Haven’s destruction. With the closure of the Breach, existing rifts remained stable and no new ones had been reported, but that did little to ease the tension as each day slipped by with no word from the Inquisition’s leaders. The Valo-Kas sat with an Inquisition camp on the eastern edge of the Crossroads where the most trouble with bandits came from and a few active rifts remained.

Kaaras sat at the fire, staring into the flames as he absently scooped his breakfast from his bowl to his mouth, not noticing that the bowl had been empty for some time.

“No one is going to take pity on you feeding yourself air; if you want more breakfast, get off your ass and get it.”
“What—” Kaaras startled. He turned and looked at Sata-Kas in surprise and then at his empty bowl.
“Oh, I didn’t realize…”

“We could see that,” Sata-Kas replied with a gruff snort. “You’ve been trying to eat from an empty bowl for the last ten minutes. Where is your head at?”

Kaaras turned back to the fire without a word.

“Oh.”

“It’s been nearly six days since the last survivor stumbled into the Crossroads and everyone has told the same story. Ellie sacrificed herself and for what?” he asked bitterly. “We’ve had no news from anyone else; no ravens, no scouts, no sign of survivors.”

“You know that under all the pain and fear, she had a big heart and a lot of courage,” Sata-Kas said quietly to the healer. “She would have thought the cost worth it if it gave the others the slightest chance.”

“But we’ve heard nothing!”

Sata-Kas shook his head, “doesn’t matter. Even if they all died, it doesn’t diminish what she did for them. For all of us.”

“She was a fierce little thing at times,” Katoh said. A fond, lopsided smile slid into her face as she reminisced. “I will never forget how she defended her cake from Meraad when we were in Val Royeaux.”

Sata-Kas chuckled, “Ellie, the Fierce. Defender of Cakes, Wielder of Forks.”

Kaaras nodded his head and gave a wobbly smile in remembrance. His grief was sharp, but it was better to remember and hang onto those moments.

They fell silent, settling back into their own thoughts as they sat finishing their breakfast. It was early yet before they needed to head out to do their patrol; there was a report of some bandits moving in again to the east of the Crossroads and the supply of meat was falling again. The sun peeked through the trees, setting veins of metal in the surrounding rock glittering in the shifting light.

A young messenger with Inquisition colours ran into the camp. He paused at their fire. “Looking for Scout Harding—” he gasped trying to catch his breath, sweat rolled down his temple, steaming slightly in the cool morning air, as he glanced around from tent to tent, fire to fire. “Corporal Vale—” He broke off as he spotted the dwarven woman and hurried over to her, handing her a piece of parchment after saluting her.

“What do you suppose that is about?” Katoh pondered as they watched the messenger speak with Harding.

“What’s going on?” Shokraker asked, arriving at the fire.

“A messenger just came in like his ass was on fire. Looking for—”

“Yes!” Lace Harding shouted as she pumped her fist in the air. She scribbled something down on a piece of parchment and the messenger ran out of the camp again. She walked over to their fire with a big grin on her face. “Corporal Vale had a raven show up at his camp during the night. Said the bird looked thin and a bit worse for wear but had a message still attached to its leg… From Sister Leliana.”
“What!” multiple people exclaimed.

Harding grinned, “the Inquisition made it out of Haven. They’re in the Frostbacks and heading to some ancient fortress.” She gave a shrug. “We’ve been requested to start gathering supplies; food, clothing, weapons, and the like. They’ll be sending scouts out to us once they figure out where they are.”

Everyone started to ask questions but Kaaras interrupted, “what about Ellie? What about the Herald?”

Harding turned to him, her eyes sparkled with glee, “she’s alive. The Herald survived.”

Kaaras sat down heavily on a log and dropped his head into his hands, his shoulders shook as he cried in relief. His dear friend was alive. Sata-Kas’ large hand came down on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze; he nodded slightly in acknowledgement of the warrior’s silent support.

Eluned spent several more days travelling in the cart until the healers had determined that she was sufficiently healed—ribs, head, arms, and wrists— to handle riding a quiet pony during the day as she was still not permitted to spend time on her feet. Despite being in the mountains for over two weeks and the hardships they experienced; cold, exhaustion, meager rations, and deaths of those that were injured, ill, or weak to begin with, the morale began to rise as she spent more and more time on the pony visible to the survivors as she traversed back and forth through the caravan checking on people as she went along.

Fortunately, there were no more instances of people breaking out in song, although Mother Giselle did her best to try to convince Eluned that she was some risen saviour. Eluned squashed that as quickly as she could.

Near the middle of the third week when Cullen called a halt for the evening, Solas stood to the side of Eluned. “Come, I wish to show you something.” One of the scouts hurried over and held onto the bridle while Solas lifted her off the pony and set her carefully on her feet for the first time, holding onto her hips while she found her balance. “Is there any pain at all?”

With one hand still on the pony’s saddle and her other hand on Solas’ arm, Eluned took stock of the feeling in her feet. She shook her head.

He watched her intently, “numbness or tingling?”

She smiled at him, “no Solas.”

“You will tell me immediately if you feel the slightest change,” he demanded.

“Yes, I will tell you. I promise.”

“Very well.” He reached past her and grabbed the walking stick from the scout. “It’s just a short walk to the ridge. Take this,” he handed her the stick, “and lean on me.” Solas’ arm wrapped around her waist like a band of iron startling Eluned at the strength he hid with his unassuming appearance. He braced her left arm with his own and slowly led her to the ridge.

Clouds hung low and heavy over the adjacent mountain peak and valley. The valley sat in grey shadow; then as if by magic, the evening sun broke through the clouds revealing the ancient fortress. The tall walls were awash by the sunlight, pale gray that blended in with the snow and stone lit with a rosy glow of the setting sun. Ragged, aged banners flew from the towers fluttering in the wind.
“Tarasyl'an Te'las.”

Eluned turned to him with a look of awe. “You saw this in the Fade?”

“Indeed,” he flashed her a smug smile. “Tarasyl'an Te'las, the place where the sky is held back.” Eluned’s brows rose. “Skyhold.”

She spun in Solas’ grasp and threw her arms around his neck pulling him in for a hug. After a startled moment, he hugged her back briefly before she stepped back. “Thank you,” she gestured. She gestured covering her ears and took a deep breath. Solas whipped his hands up and covered his ears as she let out a piercing whistle that all of her companions were familiar with as a signal to come to her location.

The warriors of her group, including Cullen, arrived first, hands on sword hilts ready for battle. “What is it, Herald?” Cassandra demanded hurrying to her.

She closed her fist and dragged her thumb under her chin, then circled her hand in front of her chest with her thumb pointed back at her, “no danger.”

Cassandra relaxed and released her grip on her sword.

She waved her hand and directed the others to the fortress on the other side of the valley.

“Maker’s breath! How does something like that disappear from history?”

Eluned gave Cullen a little shrug and stepped back as more and more people crowded to the ridge to see their destination. With a point at her feet, Solas scooped her up and left the excited crowd to their view.
The final leg of the journey turned out to be just as fraught with peril as their initial flight from Haven; they were on the wrong side of the valley. The ancient fortress appeared to have grown out of the mountain side except for the gatehouse at the end of the causeway that stuck out of nowhere and had no visible approach from their vantage point. In the morning, they began their slow descent into the valley, weaving back and forth along trails that in some places were hardly wide enough for the few carts they had with them. As a precaution, the draft animals were unhitched and led on foot, and the carts were carefully maneuvered by hand. They had learned the hard way precisely how precarious the path was when one horse spooked at a small slide of rocks. Eluned shuddered; she could still hear the scream of the horse and its handler as they fell from the narrow path.

It was one more name to add to the list of casualties.

As the sun rose and they descended, an ancient village or outpost of some kind became visible jutting out of the snow on the floor of the valley. Stone walls and rotted timbers outlined the shapes of a moderately sized village built to serve the fortress and house addition forces in the long, low buildings that looked like the barracks Eluned had seen and lived in during her initial time in Kontaar.

“A good first line of defense,” Blackwall commented, studying the village as he walked along beside her on her pony. He positioned himself between the pony and the edge, his hand providing steady assurance to the pony where it rested on the animal’s shoulder in front of Eluned’s knee. “You see there, at the head of the valley,” he pointed with his free hand, “there are barracks there to house forces to defend the village and control access to the fortress. There’s open land in front, good for training purposes but it will also mean that any hostile forces approaching won’t have any cover.”

He squinted up at the sky and then back down into the valley, “hard to say yet what’s all in that valley, but it might lend the village and the fortress to being self-sufficient if there’s farm and grazing land enough.” He glanced up and caught her eye. “Sorry, my lady, I’m probably boring you.”

“No,” Eluned gestured. “I've never learned anything about the strategic defenses of a fortress. Please continue.”

He continued pointing out structures and the layout of the village that they could determine from their location before falling silent for some time.

Nearing the bottom of the mountain, the trail again switched back so they approached the village from the open area Blackwall had pointed out before. The road to Skyhold was also finally visible, pressed between two walls of rock, it emerged from behind a tall gatehouse that stood three storeys tall and climbed up to the gatehouse and causeway they saw from the mountain top that morning. He
excused himself when everyone halted on the field.

Cullen moved between the soldiers barking out orders; they shrugged off the travel kits and pulled out swords, shields, and armour.

“The nugs are happy.”

Eluned glanced down from the pony’s back to find Cole standing at her side where Blackwall had been. She tipped her head in question.

“They haven’t had company for a very long time.”

“Is there something special about the nugs?”

He looked up at her, suddenly wringing his hands in an anxious fashion. “They guard it.”

She drew a soft breath when she realized what he was telling her and gave the pony a gentle kick sending it forward.

“Herald,” Cullen called to her as she approached, “hold here while the soldiers make sure the village is as abandoned as it appears.”

She nodded and whistled to him as he turned away.

“I must insist—”

She gave her head a sharp shake.

“Is there something—”

“Nugs.”

He frowned slightly, “nugs?”

“Yes. There are nugs in the village. They are not to be hunted.”

“You don’t want—nugs—harmed?” he asked slowly. “You know the people are hungry?”

“I know. We’ll find something else. It’s important.”

He opened his mouth to argue and closed it again with a shake of his head as he strode away to give additional orders to the soldiers, scouts, and mages that were conducting the initial approach.

The soldiers moved out, carefully approaching the village, watchful for signs of occupation, hostile or otherwise. Eluned sat on her pony, surrounded by her companions, and watched from the distance as the other pilgrims and refugees milled around and waited also. Whispers and speculations floated around her; everyone was eager and hopeful that they had finally found a place to rest and rebuild.

She shifted in the saddle, placing her right leg across the pommel; it was a bit of a precarious position as the saddle wasn’t meant to be ridden aside but it gave her legs a little respite after being astride for so many hours and so many days. From her vantage, she could see the Inquisition soldiers fan out through the village, going from building to building, door to door.

After fifteen, twenty minutes of silence, Cullen calmly re-emerged from the village and returned to the waiting group.
“It’s all clear. There are no signs that the village has been inhabited by anything, other than nugs,” Cullen glanced at Eluned, “for years, if not decades. We’ll move the civilians into the village and take a team up to the fortress.”

“The Chargers can take point,” Iron Bull volunteered, hefting his battleaxe over his shoulder.

“Come, you should be one of the first to enter Skyhold,” Solas said, quietly stepping up beside Eluned. She walked her pony forward at his urging.

“Herald, it would be safer—” Eluned gave him a withering look. “Nevermind,” Cullen concluded.

Eluned couldn’t believe that she was going to be living in a genuine castle, or fortress, or whatever Skyhold technically was. After everything she had seen and experienced in the years she had been in Thedas, it was amusing to think that living in a castle would be so surreal. She had lived in communal barracks, a saarebas’ cell, and as of late, a tent or some sort of crude outdoor shelter; she wasn’t likely to have more than a bed in a small room now, but it would be in a castle behind thick walls and high towers.

She craned her head back as she rode under the heavy iron portcullis hung above their heads as the passed through the first gatehouse, the bottom end jagged like teeth providing a silent threat to those that entered. Another portcullis hung above them at the other end of the gatehouse. The archway through the gateway soared above their heads providing plenty of height to allow loaded caravans, equipment, and supplies through, and was wide enough for two wagons to pass each other. She could see, in the floor above them, holes and slots in the stones which she realised were murder holes, holes for pouring boiling water, dropping rocks, or sending magic down on any enemies caught between lowered portcullis gates.

The road up to the upper gatetower was in remarkably good condition. Gravel crunched under foot providing good traction as they walked up the long slope. The upper gatehouse was much the same as the lower one. Beyond it, the arched causeway spanned the gap between the gatehouse that they saw from the other side of the valley and the walls of Skyhold itself. A wooden drawbridge was lowered and nestled between two short towers that were littered with arrow loops to defend the gate. Beyond those, two square towers flanked the entrance itself, barracks for troops on sentry duty and likely more murder holes above the recessed gate. Eluned could see some sort of shimmer wavering in the light where the gates themselves should stand.

Iron Bull and one of his people, an elven woman with blond hair and green vallaslin, met them just outside of the final entrance to the fortress. “There’s some sort of magical barrier over the entrance. Dalish here, used her—”

The elf tutted at him.

“Used her bow to take a poke at it.”

“It’s all right, darlings. I’ll get this,” Vivienne said, confidently striding passed them, staff in hand.

Solas came around to the pony’s side and helped Eluned down, giving her his arm to lean on once more, and led her slowly toward the gate.

“Perhaps dispelling the magic—”

“Yes, Dorian, I tried that.” Vivienne’s voice was level but there was a definite thread of annoyance present.

“Allow me,” Cassandra stepped up. The mages hustled back out of her range as she muttered
something under her breath and planted her sword against the stones. The barrier rippled and shuddered, then sprung back with a blast knocking the Seeker from her feet. Cullen swiftly arrived at her side to give her a hand up which she accepted with a scowl directed at the barrier.

“Perhaps the Herald should have a try,” Solas suggested.

Eluned quickly turned her head toward him with a hiss to get his attention alone, “I can’t do this. I don’t know how to break barriers.”

“I think you can,” he said in a low voice, leading her forward. “Just feel.” They stopped before the barrier, he let go of her arm and stepped back, leaving her there by herself.

She stood before the barrier, hyper-aware of the weight of all the eyes upon her back. She could kick Solas for leaving her hanging while everyone watched her every move. She didn’t know what she was supposed to do. She gazed at the shimmering surface of the barrier and along the edges, looking for signs of runes, or some indication as to what delineated where the barrier started and ended; she could see nothing. She chewed on the inside of her lip in frustration; Vivienne cast elemental magic against it and tried to dispel it without success, Cassandra tried to negate the magic with whatever non-magic magic she had again without success. Attacking the barrier didn’t work.

She didn’t know how long she stood there, but people were starting to mutter behind her. “—bitter disappointment if we travelled all this way and can’t get in the open door.”

She shifted her weight to turn around to ask a question and stopped; Solas said to feel. She moved her walking stick to her left hand and raised her right to the barrier. Her fingers glided across the surface like brushing her fingers over wet ice. The barrier rippled under her touch. She extended her aura carefully; the barrier felt—familiar. The mark on her left hand, which had been quiet since Haven, thrummed. She gasped in surprise.

“Are you all right, Herald?” Cassandra asked.

She nodded. She transferred the walking stick to her right hand and raised her left to the barrier.

“Uh, you sure that’s such a good idea, Songbird?”

She glanced at Varric and shrugged, then placed her palm against the barrier. The barrier shuddered under her hand, but then she felt it; a familiar vibration, a familiar tug on the magic in the palm of her hand like she felt when she closed a rift. The frisson of excitement or fear—she wasn’t sure which—skated up her spine; the magic of the orb, the mark on her hand, the barrier and most likely Skyhold, itself, were all related somehow. She extended her aura with the mark and pushed on the barrier. It shuddered again then like dripping hot water on ice, the barrier melted away from her hand until some critical limit was met and the barrier shattered, disappearing entirely.

A cheer rose behind her. Solas stepped up beside her again and took her elbow, slowly walking her forward ahead of the others, “welcome to Skyhold, Herald.”

Kaaras’ horse tossed its head up and down in protest and danced sideways under its tense rider. He consciously blew out the breath he had been holding and relaxed his body, the horse responded by dropping its head, its ears flopping to the side in relief. The past few days since receiving word that the Inquisition survived, that Ellie survived, were so busy that he had barely a chance to think. He knew she survived but no one could tell him how she was.

They had quickly scraped together what supplies they could from the area, taking hunting trips into the woods surrounding the Crossroads, and retrieving small stockpiles the mages had in Redcliffe as
well as those still hidden in the hills by the rogue templar and apostates that had been previously dealt with. Stockpiles had to be divided up so the people remaining in the Crossroads would remain supplied as well.

The arrival of nearly twenty templars had both helped and hindered those efforts. The clanging and jingle of metal armour had sent refugees and those mages remaining at the Crossroads into a panic. It was good fortune that both Lace Harding and Kaaras had been at the camp when the templars arrived and they had both recognized Belinda Darrow. Most of the templars had battle injuries of varying severity, they were all dehydrated and malnourished. Kaaras had spent much of the following days helping the healers tend to their injuries. Those with minor injuries were quickly treated and put their hands to helping prepare supplies and accompanied the caravans.

His horse humped its back a bit snapping him out of his thoughts.

“If you don’t relax, your horse is going to throw you over the side of the cliff and say good riddance.” Shokraker stood in her stirrups a looked over the side of the road, “it’s a long way down, Kaaras.”

They rode through the second gatehouse and turned onto the causeway to the fortress proper. Kaaras drew in a breath of awe as he looked at the walls and gates before him. How did no one know about this place?

They rode through the gate and several of Dennet’s stable hands rushed over to take the horses. To the right of the gates was a large space that had been partially cleared to act as a makeshift stables but beyond the collapsed ruin of a walkway, there appeared to be an old rotten barn and gates to more livestock areas beyond.

Kaaras looked around the huge bailey that was teeming with activity. Stone, broken and rotted timbers lay in piles. Tents sat in orderly rows to the left of the gate. His eyes followed the walls around until they came to the great hall that stood before them soaring overhead with huge double doors at the top of staircase that descended and switched back to the courtyard where scouts and soldiers were hurriedly rushing orders back and forth from…

Kaaras’ eyes landed on the tall blonde in platemail with a ridiculous furred collar. He balled his hands in a fist and scowled. “Commander!” he bellowed at the top of his lungs.

Cullen’s head snapped up at the challenge, his hand automatically drifting to his sword.

“Kaaras…” Shokraker warned placing a hand on his arm.

He shrugged her off and stomped across the bailey. “I asked you for one thing—” he yelled, “one thing only—that you protect her! And instead you dropped a mountain on her after trying to feed her to a dragon.”

Cullen took his hand off his sword and put his hands out to try to placate the obviously, very pissed off Tal-Vashoth healer. “Now just a minute—”

Kaaras stopped in Cullen’s personal space and looked down at the shorter human. “Where is she?” he growled.

“I don’t—”

Kaaras raised his head and let out a piercing whistle. After a moment, another high-pitched whistle replied. He turned his back on Cullen and walked briskly into the open space of the bailey and glanced around. He drew in a sharp breath when he spotted someone hobbling as quickly as they
could, leaning on a walking stick, toward him. He started to walk slowly toward only to dart forward when they stumbled.

Eluned fell into Kaaras’ arms. She dropped her walking stick and wrapped her arms around his neck as he stood back up lifting her from her feet. She half giggled, half cried at seeing him again. When her shoulders started to ache, she tapped him on the back of his neck to get him to put her down. She gave him a watery smile and wiped the tears from his face; her smile turning to a laugh when he did the same to her.

Kaaras laughed, “I’m happy to see you, too, Ellie.” He pulled back a bit, hands still on her shoulders, and looked her over critically, “how are you still injured? Have they not looked after you? Are you eating alright? Sleeping?”

She scowled at him and rolled her eyes. “I’ll tell you everything, mother.”

“Attitude. That’s what I like to see.”

“Ellie,” Sata-Kas called, walking up with his arms held wide.

Kaaras let her go and looked around the bailey while she greeted the rest of the Valo-Kas.

On the other side of the lower courtyard, Iron Bull stopped to watch the arrival. He had heard that the Valo-Kas were on their way back and were arriving with the first shipment of supplies from the Crossroads. He scratched at the stubble on his chin, thoughtfully; with the Inquisition’s losses, the Chargers weren’t likely to be dismissed but the Herald might push to have one of the Valo-Kas accompany her instead of himself.

“Huh.”

Iron Bull looked down at his second in command. “What?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“Spit it out, Krem,” he growled.

“It’s just… I thought the Herald had a problem with qunari but it appears that the issue is just with you. What did you do, Chief?”

“She knows what I am, who I report to.”

“Yeah, so do the others but they don’t—”

“Work it out. You’ve seen the scars, right?”

Krem’s brows drew together sharply as he recollected previous, fleeting interactions he had with the Herald as he watched her with the Valo-Kas. He drew in a sharp breath, “she was sarrebas under the Qun? How is that possible? I thought the Qun didn’t keep non-qunari mages?”

“They don’t, or they didn’t, at least not until her. She was famous in Seheron and the Qun want her back.”

“She knows you’re Ben-Hassreth, so she thinks—”

“Yeah. She has a lot of anger towards the Qun for what they did to her.”
“And you are a constant reminder.” Krem finally turned and looked at Iron Bull. “No offense Chief, but I kinda don’t blame her.”

“Yeah,” Iron Bull drawled. He caught the eye of one of the Valo-Kas on him and nodded in acknowledgement. “Neither do I.”

Chapter End Notes

So I totally headcanon that Skyhold is bigger and has way more defenses than we ever see in game so I'm fleshing it out as I see fit 😊
The garden was fully walled which kept out the cool breezes that still made their way through the bailey. White stone gleamed and reflected the weak winter sunlight warming the soil that Eluned sat pulling weeds and dead grasses from. The garden was a pleasant and surprising find. Kaaras had shoved his shoulder into the stuck door while they had explored together and practically fell through when it finally gave. They had sat in the garden and told each other what had happened in the other’s absence. He gave her a scarf that the alchemist, Master Donis Gradenigo, had sent with his compliments when the Valo-Kas had stopped by Cumberland on their way back from their last contract. Kaaras had insisted that he look over her injuries and held her when she cried over her mangled feet and the horror of the attack on Haven.

Eluned sat in the garden, alone, studying the space as she gave her hands a rest from pulling weeds from a small section of soil that surrounded what had been a gazebo of some kind. Several rooms lay on each side of the garden with a staircase in two opposite corners to more rooms above and a rampart along the outer wall which was now occasionally patrolled by Cullen’s soldiers. The garden became a sanctuary that she retreated to escape the noise and attention of everyone around her. She knew that all too soon, the rooms would be occupied, and her quiet sanctuary would disappear. Like now.

“There you are,” Cassandra huffed in annoyance. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Eluned glanced up at the other woman from where she sat in the dead grass. “I haven’t been hiding.”

“Yes, but what are you doing in here?” She looked around at the ragged, over-grown garden.

“Yes, but what are you doing in here?” She looked around at the ragged, over-grown garden.

“Weeding.”

Cassandra gave her a withering look.

“I try to help with repairs, cleaning, or even with the healers; someone always recognizes me and shoos me away. Like I’m too fragile, or too precious, to do anything. So I decided to weed the garden to do something more useful than sitting on my ass.” She looked down at herself, “well, sitting on my ass doing nothing. So far, no one has taken this away from me.”

“I see.”

“Was there something you wanted, Cassandra?”

“Yes. There are matters that need to be discussed regarding the Inquisition’s next steps and we’d like you to join us.”
“I don’t know what more I can offer.” Eluned twisted her left hand over to bare the Anchor and flexed her finger. “Send me where there are rifts to be sealed and I’ll close them.”

“Please, some of these matters concern you directly.” She reached her hand down and helped Eluned to her feet, letting go once she nodded that she was stable. She turned and walked briskly away, halting a few steps away and checked her stride to keep pace as Eluned hobbled, leaning on her stick toward the staircase leading up to the great hall.

With the arrival of the first shipment of supplies, repairs and renovations quickly began and the Inquisition’s council removed themselves from the tents in the bailey to newly cleared rooms within the great hall. Scaffolding had been erected along both sides of the hall, masons and carpenters chattered back and forth as materials were hauled up to fix the crumbling mortar and rotted beams. At the end of the hall, more scaffolding sat before the windows as glaziers cleared out the shattered stained glass that remained within corroded leading.

Cassandra lead her through a doorway into a room that Eluned could see was already taking on Josephine’s personality. “This way,” she said, leading her through another door.

Rubble laid stacked against the outside wall underneath a great hole that awaited the attention of the stonemasons. Shokraker sat on a bench and Sata-Kas stood beside her, leaning against the interior wall. Beyond them, Eluned recognized Belinda Darrow, her arm in a sling, but didn’t recognize the other templar that stood with her. Cassandra swept past them all and ushered Eluned through the final door.

“Ah, good of you to join us, Herald,” Josephine welcomed her, ushering her to a stool at the end of the table and waited for her to get settled. “It’s a bit cold in here, don't you think?”

“We are in the mountains,” Leliana responded drily.

“I'm more concerned about everything scattering when there's a draft,” Cullen frowned looking at the massive table with a huge map of Orlais and Ferelden. Bits of parchment fluttered and crackled where they were held down by various markers and other random weights.

“Repairs are underway in all areas of Skyhold, but I will speak with mason Gatsi to have him prioritize repairs here,” Josephine replied, scratching notes on her tablet. “We should have the Valo-Kas join us first, the report from the templars is going to take more time to discuss.”

Shokraker and Sata-Kas entered the room. Sata-Kas came and stood just behind Eluned’s shoulder.

“We have some disturbing news to report,” Shokraker started. “Upon successfully completing our contract in Nevarra, Ashaad Two protested our return to the Inquisition.”

Eluned pointed to herself in question.

“Yes, because of you Ellie,” she shot her an apologetic look, “his opinion of saarebas was stronger than we had thought. He left the Valo-Kas.”

“Does he pose a threat to the Herald?” Cullen asked.

Shokraker nodded, “not directly but we strongly suspect, in retrospect, that he’ll have returned to the Qun.”

“Surely, returning to the Qun would be too dangerous for him to contemplate? They are not known to be lenient on those that declare themselves Tal-Vashoth,” Josephine asked.
“No, they aren’t; however, if a Tal-Vashoth returned with something of value to the Qun…” Sata-Kas replied.

“He will inform them of the Herald’s—Vatasala’s—survival in exchange for his own,” Leliana concluded.

“We believe so, yes.” Shokraker put her hand on Ellie’s shoulder. “I’m sorry Ellie. If we had realised sooner, we would have eliminated him.”

Eluned’s heart leapt into her throat and the hair on the back of her neck stood up. They knew. The Qun knew she was alive, or they would soon. Black spots danced before her eyes and she sucked in ragged gasps of air; she couldn’t succumb to her fear. She wouldn’t let them control her. Sata-Kas placed his hand on her other shoulder and gave it a light squeeze in support. She reached up and grasped both of their hands, giving them a squeeze of her own.

“Thank you for this information, Shokraker. We’ll put it to good use,” Leliana said.

“There is one more thing we wish to discuss. The Valo-Kas wishes to continue working with the Inquisition, if you’ll have us.”

Josephine nodded her head, “of course. Why don’t you and Taarlok meet with me later today and we can discuss terms.”

“I thank you.” Shokraker nodded to Ellie, then she and Sata-Kas left the room.

“I will speak with Iron Bull after and apprise him of the situation. His presence at your side will be essential now to ensure we see any threats from the Qun,” Leliana told her.

Eluned grimaced; he hovered enough as it was, now he had even greater reason to, but she nodded. Now wasn’t the time to make a big deal of it.

Cassandra went to the door and waved the two templars into the room. Eluned recoiled slightly from the overwhelming feel of cold she got from them. It suddenly struck her as curious that she didn’t feel the same intense cold from Cullen; perhaps she was just getting used to him, nonetheless, she shifted in discomfort on her stool wishing it wouldn’t be so obvious to get up and move away from them. She nodded in greeting to Belinda Darrow.

“It is good to see you were successful in your mission, Darrow.”

“I wish it had been more successful, Commander.”

Cullen nodded and prompted her, “your report.”

“First, I would like to introduce you to Ser Delrin Barris. He was instrumental in saving as many templars as we could. Without his assistance—” she paused and looked down for a moment to gather herself, “without his assistance, I don’t think any one of us would have made it out of Therinfal. When I arrived there, I proceeded with our plan expressing my frustration with the Inquisition. Knight-Captain Fletcher sought me out when word reached him that I had arrived. As I had mentioned, I served with him in Starkhaven. We met several times over the following days until Fletcher expressed his concerns over the Lord Seeker’s actions. It was a very risky thing he did as there were strange undercurrents running through the templars. Anyone that voiced dissent vanished for a few days before returning with dramatically different opinions than previous—if they returned at all. I confessed to him then my true intent for being at Therinfal. I didn’t know if I had just signed my own death warrant. The next day, Fletcher introduced me to Ser Barris…I think it best if he took
Delrin Barris stepped toward the table and focused on Cullen and Cassandra. “After the Order abandoned Val Royeaux, the Lord Seeker marched us all to Therinfal. At first, we didn’t question that anything was not as it should be. I mean, obviously the sky was torn open, the Divine was dead, the Circles had fallen, so everything was unusual, but we all thought that the Lord Seeker had the Order retreat away from the distractions to consolidate our forces and then we would return.

But weeks passed, then months, and yet, we did nothing. The Knight-Captains started talking to us about a new kind of lyrium, a better kind than the Chantry gave us. The Knight-Captains took it first to prove it was safe and tell us how powerful it made them.

The Lord Seeker’s behaviour became more outlandish, his ambition was disturbing and completely contrary to the Order’s precepts. The officers, too, were behaving strangely. The knights started questioning and the more vocal ones disappeared; no one knew if they alive, dead, or had been assigned duties elsewhere. We knew that something was terribly wrong.

We began to organize quietly amongst ourselves at Darrow’s urging; myself, Knight-Captain Fletcher, and Knight-Lieutenants Abrahas, duBois, and Primmer. In the end, finding the Lord Seeker’s body which had been dead for months confirmed to us that the Order had been corrupted from within.”

“You found the Lord Seeker’s body?” Cassandra asked with a frown.

“Yes, Seeker Pentaghast. We found the body of Lord Seeker Lucius Corin stuffed into a chest, and yet the Lord Seeker walked among us and had since our departure from Val Royeaux.”

Cassandra looked deeply troubled by the news.

“There were about forty of us ready to leave but someone, or something, must have tipped our hand. We were descended upon by these—monstrosities—” Barris’ voice broke, he paused struggling to gather himself to continue. “Our brothers and sisters-in-arms had been twisted, corrupted with this red lyrium. We lost several fleeing Therinfal, we lost a few more to injuries and illness in our flight. Of the forty that fled, there are twenty-nine of us left, a few more may yet succumb to their injuries; although, your healers are valiantly trying to prevent that.”

The room fell to silence.

“What is to become of us now, Knight-Commander?”

“That is no longer my title, I have left the Order,” Cullen replied. “The future of the Order will have to be decided by the new Divine—one is elected. In the mean time, the Inquisition could use your help, but there will be time to discuss the terms of that help once you have recuperated.”

“Yes ser,” Barris saluted.

“Thank you both for your report. You are dismissed.”

The two templars saluted and started to retreat from the room, Darrow turned at the door and shot a glance at Eluned, “um, Commander—am I to resume my previous duties?”

Cullen blinked and flicked his eyes toward Eluned before straightening his stance, “no, Darrow, that won’t be necessary. Report to Knight-Captain Rynen and he will assign your new duties.”

“As you say. One more thing, do you know where I might find Ser Trevelyan? I was hoping to catch
up with him, one Free Marcher to another.”

Cullen’s hand clenched over the pommel of his sword, “I’m sorry to inform you that Liam Trevelyan did not survive Haven. It is my understanding that he fell defending civilians retreating from the red templars.”

Eluned started at the news and felt a pang of guilt; she had never given any thought as to the whereabouts of her watchers. True, she had resented their presence and had no compunction at making things difficult for them as a sign of protest, but she would never have wished them death at the hands of the red templars.

“I see, ser.” Darrow saluted and left the room, pulling the door shut behind her.

Leliana stepped toward the table and pulled a parchment from wherever she had it hidden within her sleeves. “Prior to our flight from Haven, I sent word through my contacts to locate an Arcanist that could join us and assist with our mages and smiths. She will be arriving within the week. Once she arrives, Herald, you should speak to her regarding your shackles.”

Eluned looked at her in surprise and nodded her head.

The others glanced at each other in silence and then at Eluned. Cullen rubbed the back of his neck as he shifted his weight. Their behaviour was highly suspicious.

“What is it?”

“There is one final piece of business that we need to discuss with you. We need to elevate a leader to take the Inquisition forward. We want you to be our Inquisitor.”

Eluned looked at Cassandra with surprise. “Corypheus came for the power of the mark,” she replied looking at her hand. “He said it’s now useless to him. He wants me dead so I can not interfere. It would be better for the Inquisition if I remained hidden.”

Cassandra shook her head, “the Anchor has power, but it is not why you are still here. Your decisions let us heal the sky. Your determination brought us out of Haven. You are the creature’s rival because of what you did. And we know it. All of us.”

“All of you?” She looked at each of them and they held her gaze. She pressed her lips together then asked, “do I have a choice? You could have just declared it and been done.”

“The others did want to surprise you with a ceremony in front of everyone.” The corner of Cassandra’s mouth twitched, so slightly that had Eluned not spent as much time with her as she had, she might have missed it. “I told them that you would create a scene that they would never hope to recover from; no doubt the sound of a sword being thrown to the stones would have created a memorable ring in everyone’s ears that they would not soon forget.”

Eluned’s own lips twitched, yeah, that would be something she would do.

“Choice matters to you. You should be given the option to decide for yourself if this is something you want.”

Eluned slid off the stool and grabbed the edge of the table as she found her balance. “I can not walk properly, I can not speak. I’m not a leader. I told you in Haven that I was done. I do not want this.” She turned and hobbled out of the room as quickly as she could.

“Herald.”
Rapid footsteps followed her across the chamber, but she didn’t stop.

“Ellie, please!”

She stopped and turned in surprise at Cassandra’s use of her name, raising her brow in question.

“Please give our request serious consideration. We do truly want you to be our Inquisitor.”

“Why not you? You are a Seeker, the Right Hand of the Divine. Without you, none of this would have even started.”

“I… I was considered.” A faint blush started to colour her cheeks. “But I refused.”

“So you wish to dump the responsibility on my own lap. Thanks for that.” She turned and put her hand out to open the door.

“No, it wasn’t to shirk the responsibility.” Cassandra clasped Eluned’s arm in her hand to stop and turn her back. “I am not suitable for the position. The events of late have made it clear that my judgement is too clouded by the bias instilled in me by the Chantry. The Chantry has proven itself to be corrupt—the Templar Order, the Seekers—all corrupt, and you understand that this is difficult for me to admit—” the blush started to get darker on her cheeks, “but I do not trust my own judgement as a result. I do not see the world like you do.

If we are to have any hope in making things better, then we need you. I will follow you. That’s all I wished to say.” She dropped her hand from Eluned’s arm, saluted, and turned back to the council chamber.

Eluned stared at the Seeker’s retreating back, dumbfounded. Cassandra had always treated her like a dangerous thing, or a careless child at best; for her to declare that she would follow—that she thought that Eluned was their best hope—was stunning, to put it mildly.

She wasn’t sure how long she stood in the great hall contemplating what Cassandra and the rest had told her. She spotted the silhouette of Iron Bull approaching the main doors, she hurried forward the best she could and ducked through a doorway to the right. She was pleasantly surprised to find herself back in the garden. With a shrug, she returned to the spot she was weeding and sat down again.

It didn’t make sense to her that they would want her to be their leader. They didn’t like the decisions she made in the past; the templars were all but wiped out because she didn’t go looking for them, the mages had unprecedented freedom. She was a mage; worse still, she wasn’t an acceptable, Circle-trained mage but saarebas, one that was even rumoured to be possessed. She couldn’t speak so she was useless to negotiate with others, and now she was injured and had difficulties moving. She was a liability in every sense of the word.

She shook her head and focused on weeding to try to distract herself, but she soon got lost in her thoughts again. She was a target that brought the wrath of Corypheus down upon the innocent civilians of Haven. It was only a matter of time before the Qun found out of her survival and she was a target for them. She wasn’t sure which one terrified her the most, but she knew that people would die in either case. How many people would die defending her? Death trailed her at every step.

“Herald?”

Eluned looked up and squinted into the sunlight. Solas stepped to the side and blocked it so she could see him.
“May I join you?”

She nodded and started to get up, but he sat down on the grass across from her before she could.

“What can I do for you, Solas?” she gestured.

“Cole told me that you were distressed. Has something happened?”

“The Qun knows about me, or well, they will. One of the Valo-Kas has gone back.”

“What did the Seeker and the others have to say about it?” he asked sharply.

“They will speak with Iron Bull to watch for agents but—”

“Do you not trust the Iron Bull?”

“I—I don’t know.”

Solas scrutinized her as she studiously evaded his gaze and plucked at dead bits of grass. “There is something else.”

“They didn’t blame you for what happened. They got caught on their own.”

Eluned’s head jerked up to look at Cole who materialized before them.

“What do you mean, Cole?”

“She believes that people will always die because of her.” He turned from Solas to Eluned, and said softly, petting her shoulder, “they’re sorry that you sacrificed yourself for them. They were going to die no matter what you did. The aarvarad was never going to give you a choice.”

She sucked in a harsh breath in surprise. He couldn’t know about—

“Gelasan hoped that you would find your way to be free. They all did.”

Eluned wrapped her arm around her waist and covered her eyes with her free hand.

“Oh, I made it worse,” Cole fretted, plucking at a loose thread on the cuff of his ragged shirt sleeve. “I can make you forget…”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to forget them.”

“But…”

“It’s all right Cole. I will talk with the Herald,” Solas interrupted.

“Cole. He…” she looked around at the empty garden. “What is he, Solas?”

“Cole is a spirit of Compassion.”
Compassion. Compassion that killed. She understood that all too well. “He’s a spirit that left the Fade? Could he be corrupted?”

“There is no reason to fear him,” Solas said with a sigh.

She shook her head, “you misunderstand my concern. I thought spirits became twisted when they cross the Veil?”

“Oh. When they are pulled across against their will, yes, but Cole has chosen to do so willingly and retains his nature.”

She nodded.

“The Qun isn’t the only source of your distress.”

She looked down at her hands, digging her right thumb into the palm of her left hand. Her brows drew together as she considered Cassandra’s words. Solas said that she’d eventually be able to walk, and she could but her movement was severely hampered to the point that she’d be a liability in the field. She couldn’t talk so would be of little use to direct their forces in the field or even negotiate with potential allies. She didn’t know how she could lead the Inquisition in any shape or form.

“They wish you to become their Inquisitor,” Solas said startling her out of her thoughts. “Cassandra is not subtle in her questions.”

She gave an inelegant snort. “Varric would agree with you.”

He smiled slightly, “indeed.” He sat silently for a few more moments. “Refusing would be a mistake—you know this. Becoming Inquisitor can only help you; it would protect you from the Qun, and further our research into your way home. The shards you have found, I suspect, are Elven in nature and had been hidden until the Breach tore the Veil. You can direct resources into finding these and other artifacts; something maybe found to help you with your goal.”

She nodded slightly. A way home was still something she considered; how she would explain her disappearance and her physical condition wasn’t something she had figured out yet but it was something she could address later.

He changed tact, “you have already effected change for the betterment of the mages, you could do so for others. You have a unique perspective that the others do not.”

She grimaced, “Cassandra said the same; not so much about the mages, but my way of seeing the world.”

“Well, there you have it.”

Eluned groaned, “I feel like a pawn on a chess board.”

“Then do not be that pawn. Embrace the power they offer you and become the queen. You have already accomplished much; there are few regrets sharper than watching fools squander what you sacrificed to achieve.”

She studied him and nodded. Glancing at her feet, “I’m still a liability in the field.”

Solas stood up and extended his hand to her, “come. Let me teach you how to step through the Fade.”
Happy holidays of whatever domination you may celebrate at this time of year. May 2019 be happy, healthy, and prosperous for you all.
“Ah Inquisitor. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit to my humble little corner of the rotunda? A little social call, or perhaps a lively discussion of magical theory?”

Eluned shook her head as she arround at the humble corner, noting the finely upholstered chair and footstool, as well as the ornate goblet that had been sitting on the gleaming wood cabinet that she’d bet sovereigns, royals, or whatever they had in Tevinter for currency, that it was stocked with some quality wine. How he’d managed to gather the items in such a short time, she’d never know, although she had noticed a series of deliveries making their way up to the balcony that Vivienne had claimed for herself as well. Apparently, some people knew exactly how to get things so they didn’t have to go without.

He picked up his glass and placed it to his lips. “Ah. Something serious, then? Is Cassandra having second thoughts about your appointment? I must say, the look on her face when she read your speech was quite amusing; of course, she covered it up well, but those of us that know her could tell she wasn’t completely at ease with your statements.”

“Dorian!” she gestured sharply.

“Sorry, getting carried away, I see. Please continue.”

“I have been made aware that as Inquisitor, one of my duties will be to judge and sentence prisoners of the Inquisition. I was informed that there was one presently waiting sentencing.”

He lowered the goblet. “Alexius.”

“Yes. I am told that I have the option to execute, or as he is a mage, sentence him to Tranquility.”

He blanched and sat down hard in his plush chair. “And you are telling me this so I have the opportunity to say good-bye to my mentor?”

“I’m telling you because I need your help. I want to find another option.”

“I don’t know what help I can give you.”

“Have you seen Alexius since Haven?”

“I have not been permitted past the door to the prisons.” He waved his hand around with a casual flare that belied his distress. “Can’t have the evil Tevinters colluding with each other, you know.”

Eluned pressed her lips together. “Then come with me. They will not prohibit the Inquisitor.”
“Throwing your weight around already. I like it.” He tossed back the rest of the wine in his goblet and thumped it down onto the wood table beside his chair. They both winced as the metal edge created a divot in the polished surface. “Let’s go!”

The door in the bailey that led to the prison wasn’t guarded but a pair of guardsmen sitting at a table in a small room chatting over dice jumped to their feet when Eluned and Dorian entered. “Your Worship?”

She drew herself up to her full five-foot-six-inch height, which to her chagrin, still meant that she was at least a good six to eight inches shorter than everyone else in the room, and walked—limped, although she didn’t need to rely on the cane any longer—through the room to the door leading further to the prison cells before any of the others had a single thought that they could actually stop her. It partially worked.

“Your Worship,” one of the guardsman protested, moving to block her passage by placing his hand on the door. “The Commander said that no one, but himself or Sister Leliana, or the regular scheduled watch was to venture down to the prison cells.”

“Who does the Commander report to?” she asked with an arched brow.

The guardsmen looked at each other, shifting uncomfortably in their armour, uncertain what to do. “Uh, you… Inquisitor,” the first replied.

The other guardsman, not to be outdone by his colleague, piped up. “But the prisoner is a dangerous m-m…” he stuttered to a stop as he glanced between her and Dorian. “I mean, uh…”

She rolled her eyes and pulled the door open, not waiting any further for the guardsmen to decide whether they were going to permit her to go to the prison or not. The stairwell descended into the gloomy darkness, the light of the torches set at intervals down the stairs flickered and reflect off the wet stones. The damp air made the torches sputter, oily smoke rolled toward the ceiling creating a hazy, glow around each.

“Here, take my arm,” Dorian murmured beside her. “It wouldn’t do to have you take a tumble down the stairs to the prison.” He looked over his shoulder briefly, “I think one of them has gone to get the Commander.”

She nodded, it was expected. It would still give her about twenty minutes before they got across the bailey to Cullen’s office in his tower and back with him, if he did decide he needed to intervene. She chuckled to herself, of course he would come.

As they went further down, the temperature dropped, the humidity rose, and a roaring noise grew louder and louder. They pushed open the bottom door and emerged into large room, half of which appeared to disappear into a waterfall that tumbled over the side of the mountain.

A templar snapped to attention beside one of the cell doors. “Inquisitor?”

“Gereon Alexius?” she gestured at the door beside him and mimed unlocking it.

A confused look crossed the templar’s face. “Inquisitor?”

“I wish to speak with the prisoner. Please open the door.”

The templar hesitated for a moment then started to undo the locks on the door, “you’ll need to take the lamp from the table with you. Magic isn’t permitted in the cell.” He pulled open the heavy iron door revealing a small cell as Dorian lifted the lamp before them.
Dorian stepped through the door ahead of Eluned and gasped as he raised the lamp. She stepped around him to see what had alarmed him. Alexius sat on a thin pallet and leaned against the wall with a thin blanket wrapped around his shoulders, he held a hand over his face to shield his eyes from the lamp. “I’d offer you a seat, but well, you can see my accommodations aren’t so congenial for visitors. I wouldn’t recommend the water either, it’s laced with magebane.”

“Maker, what have they done to you Gereon?” Dorian absently pressed the heel of his palm against his sternum as if he was having difficulty breathing.

“Nothing that I haven’t deserved, Dorian.” His eyes fell on Eluned, “I’ve been told that I am to face my judgement soon. I assume this will come at your hand—Inquisitor?”

Eluned gave her head a slow nod. She was having a hard time concentrating on the conversation going on before her; the walls of the cell seemed to pull the heat from her very marrow, she flinched at the sound of the chain on Alexius’ shackles. She instinctively reached for her magic but found it out blocked from responding to her call.

“Gereon,” Dorian warned.

“I couldn’t save my son. I betrayed the Southern mages. I passed along harmful information. Do you think my fate matters to me? You’ve won nothing. The people you’ve save, the acclaim you have earned. You’ll lose it all in the storm to come.”

“Gereon! They are going to execute you or make you tranquil!” Dorian admonished his one-time mentor with a quick look in Eluned’s direction to try to gauge her response. He drew his brows together in concern at how pale she had become since walking into the cell. “Will you offer nothing in your defence? Tevinter has disowned you and stripped you of your rank. There is no reprieve coming for you beyond what the Inquisitor may offer.”

He sighed leaning his head back against the grimy stone wall, already having accepted whatever fate awaited him, “if those are my choices, death would be preferable.”

Eluned roused herself with a mental shake—she could give into her panic attack later—and asked him, “you want to die again by my hand?”

He opened his mouth slowly to respond, then his head snapped up and his eyes locked onto her. “Again? The spell worked?”

Dorian shook his head. “Not as you intended. You told us that the spell was meant to go back in time to undo the Inquisitor’s presence at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, but your spell sent us forward. We saw the destruction of Thedas. The Breach consumed the sky, red lyrium infected everything, and Felix… Corypheus didn’t save him.”

“I just wanted…” Gereon’s head fell forward onto his chest, “my son. I just wanted to save my son.”

A door crashed open beyond the cell and Eluned could hear the clank of plate mail and raised voices. She took a couple wobbly steps across the cell and crouched before Alexius. When he didn’t look up at her, she reached forward and lifted his head by his chin. His eyes were glassy with unshed tears. “Are you loyal to Corypheus?” He stared into her eyes, she gave his head a gentle shake and asked him again as the door to the cell crashed open.

“What is the meaning of this?” a distinctly Fereldan voice barked.

“Ah, Commander,” Dorian said, smoothly stepping around to place himself between the Commander and Eluned.
Eluned kept her eyes on Alexius’ face until finally with a slight shake of his head, he sighed, “no, I’m not.” He squeezed his eyes shut as the tears finally slipped free. “For what it is worth, I am sorry for all the damage my actions have caused and will likely to continue to cause; the Venatori know who you are, what you were before all of this.” Eluned drew in a sharp breath. “Whatever you decide to do with me, I will face the consequences without protest.”

“Inquisitor, I must insist.” The hand that appeared to help her to her feet, was painfully tight on her arm above the elbow; it propelled her out of the cell door and let her go. “What is the meaning of this?”

Eluned turned away from Cullen and pressed the back of her hand against her mouth as she closed her eyes and concentrated on slowing down her breath. Now outside of the cell, she became aware of her magic prickling under her skin and she suddenly understood what the templar had meant, that the cell itself had been warded against magic. Her magic was there but she had been disconnected from it just as it she had the collar around her neck. All too readily, painful memories of being chained to the floor in a cell not that dissimilar to the one she just exited pushed to the forefront of her mind; saliva flooded her mouth which she reflexively swallowed to try to push back the rising nausea.

“Inquisitor? Ellie?” Dorian gently prompted her, his hand careful on her arm but she winced anyway at the tenderness that she didn’t doubt would be bruises later.

“Sorry. Bad memories. Spent the better part of five years chained in a cell like that one.”

“Maker! I didn’t realise,” Cullen said dragging his fingers through his hair. “But what were you doing in there? He’s dangerous…”

“How dangerous is he really? The cell is warded against magic and he’s being poisoned. What could he really do?”

Cullen’s brows shot up in surprise. “How did you know the cell was warded?”

“The templar said. It felt like my collar did.”

“That’s what a saarebas collar feels like?” Dorian shuddered.

“Sort of. The cell wards creep up on you. The collar,” she snapped her fingers, “feels like you’ve had the wind knocked out of you while simultaneously being poleaxed.”

“Well, that would be… unpleasant.”

Eluned gave him a faintly amused look and shook her head. She turned to Cullen, “you asked me to pass sentence on Alexius. I needed to speak with him before then.”

“Why? Would could he possibly have to say?”

“That he regrets what he had done. That he has remorse.”

“I’m sure he regrets his failure to kill you and destroy the world,” Cullen sneered.

“No, that’s isn’t it at all. But I may never have had the chance to find out if I didn’t try.”

Cullen sighed with exasperation and ran his fingers roughly through his hair again. “Are you going to need personal interviews with all the prisoners before you pass judgement on them?”
She shrugged. “I suppose that is up to me, isn’t it?” Cullen looked like he was about to start pulling out his hair. “I’ll tell Josephine that I will sentence Alexius tomorrow. We’ll head back out to Redcliffe and area to deal with a few remaining rifts and collect the remaining mages and Tranquil as promised.” She turned and headed to the stairs, eager to leave the dungeon behind.

“Don’t look at me. You put her in charge.”

She smiled faintly to herself, she could almost hear Dorian’s shrug and Cullen’s resulting hair pulling.

After informing Josephine that she intended on sentencing Gereon Alexius the next day, she was in return informed that the Arcanist, a dwarven woman by the name of Dagna, had arrived and was set up in the Underforge along with Harritt and his assorted smiths and apprentices. The Arcanist was eager to meet her.

Still feeling shaky from her visit to the prison cells, she nonetheless wanted to meet Dagna, herself, to see if there was anything she could do with her tools to remove the shackles from her wrist, but she loathed to go down to the smithy by herself if it was anything like the dungeons. She crossed the great hall to where she knew Solas was often found to be working with the hopes that he would be available. She whistled softly when she entered the room.

“Inquisitor?”

Eluned looked up to find Solas peering down from atop some scaffolding. “Are you busy, Solas?”

“I’m doing some preparation to the walls for future painting but nothing that is time sensitive. Is there something I can assist you with?”

She nodded. “The arcanist has arrived. Will you come and explain what you’ve discovered,” she gestured, tapping one of the cuffs.

Solas made his way down from the scaffolding and cleaned up what he needed, then they walked together to the Underforge. “What do we know about this arcanist?”

“Leliana met her in Orzammar during the Blight. Said that she’s extremely knowledgeable in combining the arcane with weapons and armour. I’ve been told that she is highly sought after, although not always for benevolent reasons.”

Going through the door to the Underforge should have been similar to the prison for all that they were both underground, but they weren’t. The heat from the smelters and forges dried out the air and obliterated any scent of decay that might have lingered in the damp stones before the fires were rekindled. Eluned could hear the dull roar of water again but it was nearly drowned out by the ring of hammers on metal and the rhythmic whoosh of air from the bellows.

There was another difference that she hadn’t expected; the lighting. Instead of torches, highly polished discs of metal hung on the walls bouncing light back and forth across the space above the heads of the smiths.

“Pretty ingenious, isn’t it?” a cheery voice piped up. “Lots of natural light without the added heat or smoke of torches. The elves, or whoever were here before and created these, were very clever. At night, we can just set a veillfire lamp or two out and it does the same job.”

Eluned’s head snapped down from staring at the discs to the person before her.

Eluned blinked, a little taken aback by the chipper dwarf. “Welcome to the Inquisition. We’re happy to have you here.”

“Me, too! I’ve heard some impossible things. I love impossible things. Those are the best to make, well, possible.”

“Leliana said that you might be able to help with something personal.”

Solas started to translate but Dagna interrupted by answering Eluned directly. “Oh yes, she mentioned that you were in a bit of a bind. Can I see?” She glanced between the two, “oh, lip reading. When you work in a noisy forge, you get good at lip reading since you can’t really hear anyone anyway.”

Eluned nodded and started to pull back her left sleeve then switched to her right; Dagna seemed the type to get distracted by the shiny, like one of Leliana’s ravens. She extended her arm, hand up to Dagna. She gently took her hand and ran her fingers over the cuff and the ring on the inside of her arm.

Dagna blinked, startled, as Eluned twisted her whole arm as she attempted to turn over her wrist to see the other side, “it goes right through?”

She nodded.

“That must have hurt something awful. Oh, there is Qunari heraldry on here—the Qun did this to you?”

She nodded again.

Dagna hummed to herself as she turned the arm back over.

“The cuffs are enchanted. The Herald remembers seeing runes but not what type,” Solas spoke up.

“Oh! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ignore you—”

“Solas. The runes prevent magic, from the Herald or another mage, from being used on the cuffs to destroy them. Any attempts we have made, even on an exploratory basis, have resulted in the magic being channeled back into the Herald, painfully.”

“What powers the runes?”

Eluned frowned and shook her head in question, while Solas looked horrified at the question.

“All runes work when mana is applied to them, by charging them. Utility runes can store a finite amount of mana and then they have to be recharged when that mana is depleted. Or you have temporary runes, like a heating rune on clothing, that can be continuously supplied until they are no longer needed and the rune is dispelled. Have the cuffs ever been charged by another mage?”

Eluned shook her head, feeling ill, as she finally started to realize what Dagna was getting at.

“So the runes are powered by your own connection to the Fade? That’s actually—diabolically clever; use your own power against you to ensure your captivity. Uh well,” Dagna glanced at Eluned
and noticed the look of distress on her face, “sorry, Your Worship, obviously not for you.”

“Fenedhis! I did not consider that Inquisitor, I’m sorry.”

She smiled at Solas and gave a little shrug. They had other things more pressing to think about before.

“Have you tried to cut off the cuffs?”

“Harritt was reluctant to try as he didn’t have any tools fine enough to work around my flesh.”

“Hmm, well I have some tools that we can try if you’re up for it?”

Eluned nodded and Dagna directed her to a seat next to an unused anvil while she rummaged through some boxes.

“So you were saarebas, right? What happens to your mana with the collar?”

“The collar just prevents a saarebas from using their magic without being directed by their arvaarad. Doesn’t deplete them or they’d be useless in battle.”

Eluned jumped at the sound of Iron Bull’s voice behind her. She never saw or heard him come into the Underforge. He walked around to the other side of the anvil and stood in front of her with his arms crossed over his chest.

Dagna hurried over with an armful of tools and pulled one of her assistants over to help. “Here,” she told the assistant, “stabilize here and here so it doesn’t twist. We don’t want to hurt the Inquisitor.”

The apprentice took a hold of her wrist and stabilized the cuff as directed while Dagna maneuvered her tools in place over the ring.

Eluned suppressed a shudder and tried to concentrate on keeping her breathing steady. The noises of the forge seemed to get dulled like she was hearing them from under water. The light in the room became hazy and everything seemed to be moving in slow motion.

Somewhere close behind her, a hammer stuck a piece of metal just as Dagna’s tool snapped jolting the pin in the cuff and sending a shock of pain through Eluned’s wrist.

She flinched, the smith reflexively tightened his grip.

She gasped as the sounds, smells of the forge suddenly returned to clarity and overwhelmed her.

“Let go! Now!” someone barked.

“What…?” the smith asked, confused as he looked over his shoulder at Iron Bull. His question cut off as he started to scream. Eluned grabbed the smith’s wrist as he held her own and channelled heat into his flesh, burning him.

The moment her wrist was free from being held, she bolted up the stairs.

“Boss! Hey Boss, wait!”

Fear skittered up Eluned’s spine as she could hear Iron Bull’s hurried steps behind her. Was he really calling her Boss or was it bas? She reached out to open the door to the great hall when he caught up with her.
He reached out and turned her toward him. She hissed, despite his grasp being gentler, as he took a hold of the same elbow that was already tender from the earlier grab by Cullen. His eye flickered with concern to where he held her and back to her own eyes even as he slid his hand down so his fingers encircled her forearm. “Who hurt you?”

“Doesn’t matter.” She tried, unsuccessfully, to jerk her arm from his grasp.

A frown passed his face in a flash at her answer. “How often do those waking nightmares happen?”

“Let go of me!” she warned wrapping her free hand around his wrist and channeling a little bit of heat, just enough to be uncomfortable.

“I’ll let you go when you answer my question.”

“That one has never happened before.” She tugged on her arm again and then poured more heat into her other hand when she still couldn’t get free.

The muscle in Iron Bull’s jaw fluttered as he ignored the growing pain on his arm from her magic. “So there are others. How often?”

“I don’t know! I’m having a bad day, all right? What does it matter?”

“What does it matter? I need to know what to watch out for, so you don’t freeze up in the middle of a battle and get yourself killed.”

“Why should you care?” she sneered at him. “I’m just a dangerous thing, after all.” She pushed more heat into his wrist until finally he jerked his hand off her arm with a hiss of his own. She spun away and shoved through the door, slipping into a fade step the moment she was clear of the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

I hope everyone had a wonderful holiday season if you celebrate at this time of year. May 2019 be fabulous to you all.

Thank you for your continued enthusiasm, kudo, and comments—without your support, this story wouldn’t be where it is today. :)
Eluned raised her face to the sun as they rode down the causeway from Skyhold, it was the first time that she had been out of the fortress since they had claimed it. As much as it was nice to have the safety of the tall stone walls, she was itching to get out and have a change of scenery. Despite the draw of a trip outside the walls, Varric and Vivienne, both begged off joining them; Varric was waiting for news on one of his contacts regarding Corypheus, and Vivienne was lending a hand to Josephine and Leliana with her contacts in the nobility in Orlais to get warning to Empress Celene.

The new horse that Dennet had provided Eluned jigged underneath her with energy at being outside of the walls, she purred at the horse and firmly stroked its withers to calm it. It wasn’t the only one eager to be going. So too, were the Chargers, boisterous and noisy, in stark contrast to the dozen templars that were fit to accompany them to scout Haven for anything that could be salvaged, and any clues left behind by Corypheus’ forces. Some might have considered Eluned’s orders to send the templars as being spiteful, sending them to see the destruction their brethren had wrought on the village, but in truth she wanted the Chargers to have a little more protection. Despite not knowing them well because of her distance with Iron Bull, she liked them and their irreverent attitudes.

As they descended the mountain, she turned her sights on the village below Skyhold, which had been nickname Pied du Ciel. Renovations had been underway just as quickly as they had up in the fortress itself. Barracks, stables, smithies, kitchens, bakeries, and bath houses had been repaired and restored for the main body of the Inquisition army as well as the refugees that survived the flight from Haven.

Word of the Inquisition’s survival had resulted in a continuous influx of merchants and tradesmen that wanted the opportunity to get in with the Inquisition as it rebuilt. Closing the Breach, Eluned’s sacrifice and subsequent return, inspired young people; their families displaced from farms by the fighting between the templars and mages, they now flocked to the Inquisition to take up arms and forge a new life for themselves. Unsurprisingly, at least to Eluned, there were a lot of non-humans coming to the Inquisition as well. Josephine was good as her word and Eluned’s acceptance speech was getting around; the Inquisition would welcome all races and beliefs. If she could lead by example for the betterment of mages, perhaps too, the Inquisition could be an example for the regular people. It was worth a shot, anyway.

The large group proceeding through the village, generated much interest and had people stopping to watch as they passed. Many had never seen Eluned up close and people gathered along the road to watch them ride by. The Chargers and templars were on foot and kept pace until they reached the fork in the mountain pass. Leliana’s scouts had located the road on their initial trip out of Skyhold to the Crossroads, they discovered that it led directly back to Haven. If only they had stumbled across it during their flight, they could have cut off weeks of their time lost in the mountains. As it was, the
Chargers and templars would reach Haven on foot before Eluned’s party reached the Hinterlands on horseback.

Iron Bull swung off his massive horse and hollered at his company, “Chargers! Watch your backs out there. We don’t know if any of those red bastards are still lurking so keep your eyes open.”

He pulled Krem aside and had some words that Eluned couldn’t overhear. Then the Chargers and templars were heading off to the south while they continued to the east. Eluned smiled as the sound to the Chargers started singing, the bawdy lyrics bounced off the mountain pass; Darrow was probably having kittens, and Cassandra simply made her usual disgusted noise as she turned her horse to the direction of Redcliffe.

Tidy rows of tents lined each side of the King’s road, varying shades of tan, cream, and brown dotted the fields like a patchwork quilt. Eluned could see mages and Tranquil wandering in and out of the tents, clustered in groups around fires, or tending to various tasks. They looked less frightened and in better condition than when they were initially freed from Alexius. As they rode closer, an air of tension started to ripple through the camp as she and her group were noticed.

Corporal Vale came forward to meet them. “Inquisitor, it is good to see you again.”

Eluned nodded in greeting and gestured to the surrounding camp.

“We’re in much better circumstances than the last time you saw us. The Valo-Kas left us well supplied before they headed to Skyhold.”

“And how have your charges behaved?” Cassandra asked.

“Ah, there was an adjustment period. Forgive me for saying, but the mages and Tranquil aren’t taught any sort of survival skills so they’ve had some difficulties adjusting to the situation, but they’ve rallied themselves and have adapted. I have no complaints.”

“Good. Have everyone gather their things, just what they can carry and be ready to leave at first light. We have an audience in Redcliffe but will return before the morning to escort them to Skyhold.”

Corporal Vale saluted, his first bumping against the metal breast plate, “Inquisitor, Seeker, on your orders.” He spun away sharply and started barking out orders.

“We should head to Redcliffe right away,” Cassandra said.

They headed up the road to the village; this time there were no time-bending rifts, no demon-crazed wolves, no feuding templars and mages. The scars of the battles were slowly disappearing as new grass sprung up vibrant and green where scorchmarks had been before. Bodies had been removed and given funeral rites, broken carts and debris from people fleeing had been reclaimed or repurposed for the refugees, and farms had started to be put back to right. Without all the chaos that had been there before, Eluned realized that the countryside was quite beautiful.

The village itself was also sliding back into normalcy. It certainly wasn’t as crowded as it had been with the hundreds of mages and Tranquil relocated. There were more merchants and stalls open, a livery stable had taken up residence at a crossroad that diverged leading further into the village or off to the castle that stood above the sun-sparkling lake. People chatted and looked curiously as they passed, turning onto the road to the castle.
Eluned strode into the hall of Redcliffe Castle with Cassandra on one side and Dorian on the other. She dropped her chin toward her shoulder briefly, Iron Bull followed closely behind her to her left just like he had the last time she walked into that hall though there was a decided lack of red lyrium this time around. She shuddered. Solas trailed behind them.

“All right?” Dorian murmured.

She gestured, “memories future past.”

He nodded in turn.

“Inquisition. Welcome back to Redcliffe.” The man that addressed them appeared to be in his late-forties or early-fifties and fit like he still knew how to wield a sword; silver streaked his brown hair. A young man with a marked familial resemblance stood behind him to his right. To his left was was a massive man with a thick head of grey hair, liberally shot through with white, pulled back to fall on his shoulders. A well trimmed mustache and beard that was more white than the grey, and heavy lines graced his face giving the impression that he had seen a fair share of both joy and grief in his life. Despite his apparent age, he carried himself with confidence and strength.

“Arl Teagan,” Cassandra bowed her head to him.

“May I introduce an old friend of mine, Arl Wulff of West Hills,” Teagan indicated the older man, “and my nephew, Connor Guerrin, son of Eamon Guerrin, the former Arl of Redcliffe. I believe the Inquisition promised the king that the mages would be relocated once the Breach was sealed.”

“Sorry. Our picnic in the mountains lasted a little longer than planned but we’re here now.”

Beside her, Cassandra drew a sharp breath in frustration and Dorian fussed with his mustache to cover up his laugh. Teagan’s brows shot up in surprise.

“The Inquisitor said—”

Teagan interrupted Cassandra, “yes, I believe I understood what the Inquisitor said.” He turned and sat down, “I do not wish you to think that Redcliffe is ungrateful. You did restore my rightful seat and castle to me. Redcliffe has had a troubled past and has only recovered from all the chaos of ten years ago; our resources are limited but we would offer what we can.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Uncle?” the young man stepped forward. “I will be going with the others.”

Eluned studied the younger man curiously.

“I know that the King said I might remain here in my home, but I am mage. It’s not right that I be exempt from the order to leave Redcliffe. I would join the other mages with the Inquisition.”

“Connor, you don’t have to go,” Teagan stated, frowning.

“Uncle, I feel I must.”

“Are you certain, my lord?” Cassandra asked.

Connor shook his head. “I am mage, I have no title. And yes, I am certain, lady Seeker. I did some terrible things during the Blight; for all that I was a child, countless people lost their lives, lost friends and loved ones. I’ve been away at the Ferelden Circle until the Circles fell, but the people remember,
and I see the looks of fear in their eyes still. They shouldn’t have to relive that simply because the king gave me dispensation as a favour to my uncle.” He looked to Eluned then nodded decisively, “it’s better that I’m with the other mages.”

“Very well… Connor. The remaining mages and Tranquil will be leaving the Crossroads at first light tomorrow.”

Connor excused himself and Teagan got up to indicate the audience was over.

Eluned stepped forward before Cassandra could halt her. “Do you know how the Venatori came to have the information that the mages were in Redcliffe?”

“I don’t know,” Teagan shrugged and glanced at Arl Wulff who shook his own head as he shifted on his feet. “Doesn’t your prisoner, the Tevinter magister, know?”

“He does not. He was given orders by Corypheus to enslave the mages that were already here. Someone passed information to the Venatori so that could happen.”

“What does it matter now?”

Eluned gave a shrug of her own, “perhaps nothing. The Venatori have likely moved on from here.”

“Just so. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to see to my nephew.” Teagan left the room. With a final glance at Eluned, Wulff left as well.

Eluned breathed a sigh of relief to be outside of the castle walls again as they rode away from the castle. The place still creeped her out; every time she blinked she kept expecting to see red lyrium bursting from the walls and floor.

Iron Bull reined his horse in beside hers. “He’s lying.”


“Wulff.”

“You must be mistaken—”

“No.” Eluned looked at Iron Bull, narrowing her eyes as she considered what to do as they halted at the village’s livery. “Think he’ll follow?”

“I’d give my left—”

She scowled at him.

“He’ll follow. He looked like someone with a guilty conscience.”

She nodded. “Split up. Cassandra, I need you to go to the Chantry and ask the sisters to leave for an hour so I can pray in privacy. Bull, Dorian, you go with Cassandra.”

“No,” Bull growled. “We’ve spotted Venatori around and I can’t watch your back from the Chantry.”

“And you’re a fucking obvious qalaba.” She gestured at his height and horns. “The Arl will never approach with that much guard which is why you’ll lie in wait. I’ll keep Blackwall with me, Cole is
around somewhere.”

“I’m here.” Cole appeared beside her.

She nodded. “Solas and Sera can mingle and watch for any movement.”

“I can stay with you,” Dorian offered.

She shook her head, “no. Depending on the Arl’s intent, he is going to be wary of you as well. He doesn’t know where your true allegiance lies.”

Everyone separated to their posts; Eluned and Blackwall lingered in the marketplace for a few minutes, wandering from stall to stall. She had just finished purchasing some embrium tea from an apothecary and crystallized ginger when there was a light tap on her wrist.

“Large fellow with the Arl’s build, cloaked with a hood up, just arrived at the livery,” Blackwall muttered close to her ear.

She nodded slightly and turned from the apothecary’s stall, they slowly walked toward the Chantry, stopping now and then to look at something or have a brief word with a villager; an elderly elven man lamented his inability to put flowers on his wife’s grave, another young man fretted over his family’s lost ram. Finally, they reached the Chantry door. She turned to Blackwall and looked at him intently, “why don’t you head to the tavern and get a meal.”

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Blackwall’s face before he responded, “right. Er, as you wish Inquisitor.” He raised his voice a bit, “I’ll fetch you from your prayers in an hour.” He left her there and headed in the direction of the Gull and Lantern tavern

Eluned suppressed the urge to smirk. He was a terrible actor.

She pulled on the door of the Chantry and ducked into the dark interior. It was perfectly silent as she walked toward the altar. She really hoped that she hadn’t set herself up for a trap but then spotted the subtle movement of Iron Bull letting her know where he was located. On the other side, Cassandra did the same. She wasn’t sure if Dorian was behind a door or up in the gallery. She knelt in front of the altar and bowed her head, looking for all intents and purposes, like a pious worshipper. The stone floor was cold beneath her knees despite the padding her armour provided; she hoped as she settled into an old familiar position, that the Arl didn’t take too long to arrive.

After a short while, her knees, ankles, and hip joints started to burn; she resisted the urge to shift her position. Funny, she thought, I sat like this for hours at a time for years. How quickly one loses the ability. In the past, she’d lose herself in a trance and ignore the pain until it no longer mattered, but she couldn’t risk the lack of attention now. She minutely shifted her weight from one side to the other, back to the middle, and continued to wait.

The creak and low thud of the door closing behind her snapped her back to attention. She held her position as if she hadn’t heard anything even as she focused all her attention to the footsteps behind her.

“Inquisitor? Forgive my interruption,” the deep voice of Arl Wulff addressed her. “Could I have a moment of your time?”

Eluned stood up smoothly, wiping the grimace of discomfort from her face before she turned to face the man. She beckoned him forward.

He halted at a respectable distance which placed him directly in the light of the windows, making
him squint at the light. “As Arl Teagan mentioned, I am Gallagher Wulff, the Arl of West Hills. I have information on the Venatori.” He raised his hand to block the light and stepped toward her only to hastily step back again at the ring of metal clearing scabbards. His eyes widened in shock. “I beg your pardon! I mean you no harm—” His eyes darted from the Seeker to the great axe hefted by the mountain of a qunari that had emerged from the shadows, and the crackle of magic before and behind him.

“We know the Venatori will strike at the Inquisitor. We have spotted their spies within Redcliffe,” Cassandra warned him without lower her sword where she held it between Eluned and himself. “We can not be too careful.”

“I accompanied his majesty and the Arl with the intent to reclaim the castle from the Tevinter magister—” he spoke quickly. “Well, you were there. I’ve remained to assist my old friend with returning his arling back to order. Redcliffe has had a difficult past with its troubles during the Blight; it did not need or deserve what happened here with the Vints.”

Eluned watched as the giant of a man crumpled before her eyes. She waved off the weapons held on him.

“Maker damn me, it is my fault!”

“Explain,” Cassandra demanded.

“A Tevinter came to me just after the Circles fell with an offer from a Magister to rescue the mages. I thought it was a win-win solution; the mages would be escorted to safety in a country that embraced their kind, and Ferelden would be spared from the damage of yet another conflict being waged through its lands.”

Dorian was horrified. “Fasta vass, man, what were you thinking? Don’t you realise that the elven mages would disappear into the underground slave rings to be sold as little more than enchanted blood sources!”

“They’re mages—I thought they’d be safe in a country of mages.”

“A country that flagrantly keeps slaves, elven or otherwise,” Eluned commented with disgust. She ignored the look that Dorian shot her.

“Did Arl Teagan or the king know about this?”

Wulff avoided the eyes of Cassandra and shook his head, “no, I kept it quiet. We—I thought that if word got out where the mages had gathered, that it would bring those templars down upon us. I didn’t know that the king had already offered the mages safe harbour, that was the reason they had gathered there. I quietly sent information on where the rebel mages were located back to the Tevinter agent. Magister Alexius arrived under cover of dark in West Hills and I accompanied him and the Venatori to Redcliffe.” He paused and shook his head in confusion. “The next thing I know, I’ve been asked to escort Teagan out of Redcliffe under Venatori guard ‘for the safety of everyone’!”

“Alexius’ initial use of the amulet,” Dorian commented.

“Have you spoken of this with the king? What you did was paramount to treason against the Ferelden crown.”

“No. I’ve said nothing. I’m not afraid to die—I know that will be my sentence if I take this to the king. I just wanted to help the mages and restore order.” He looked at Eluned and implored, “if my life can be of use to the Inquisition in payment for my crime, you may have it. I still have contacts
within the Venatori; they are none the wiser that I am aware of their duplicity.”

Eluned looked at Cassandra and raised her brow in question.

“This will need to be discussed further with the others back in Skyhold. My lord, you’ll accompany us.” The last a demand, more than a question.

“Yes. I will be at Crossroads at first light.” He bowed to Eluned and left the chantry.

“We’re just going to let him go and trust that he’ll show up?” Dorian asked.

“He knows he’s a dead man if he doesn’t. Come on,” she waved to the others, “Blackwall is getting us seats in the tavern.”

Cassandra opened her mouth to protest, then shut it and fell into step beside Eluned. The other two trailed behind.

Dorian glanced at Iron Bull, he practically had a bounce in his step. “You seem awfully chipper after all that.”

“Yeah. She insulted me. In Qunlat!”

“And that’s a good thing?” Dorian asked incredulously.

“Yeah,” he drawled. “She’s not afraid of me anymore.”

“You are a strange, strange man.”

Eluned pretended that she hadn’t heard them.

The trip back was slower than the trip out. They didn’t have enough horses for all the mages to ride. They had a few wagons to carry the eldest, those that were ill, and a few of the very young that couldn’t withstand the rigours of walking all day. In the evenings, Eluned circulated among the mages and Tranquil—she didn’t avoid them much to the surprise of the other mages—talking to them about Skyhold and what they should expect. Most of the mages were pleased to hear that they wouldn’t be under guard by templars, that they’d have their own places to study and pursue their studies, but some still expressed concerns. She reassured them that everything would be addressed when they got to Skyhold.

She picked herself up from where she had been sitting at the fire and started to head back to her own. A mage stood up and started to work his way toward her.

“Inquisitor?”

She stopped and started to turn around.

“The Venatori will see you fall for your crimes!”

Eluned whipped around and cast a barrier over herself as she turned to face her accuser.

The dagger in his hand clattered to the dirt as the fury in his eyes faded; a great axe lay buried through his shoulder and half way into his torso.

“Are you all right?” Eluned blinked as a grey hand shook her gently. “I said, are you all right?”
Eluned nodded as she looked up at Iron Bull from the crumpled form of the Venatori in his stolen mage robes. She had forgotten that he had been shadowing her all evening.

The mages stood around in horrified silence, unsure if they would be blamed and punished for the assassin in their midst.

“Go to Cassandra. I’ll deal with this.” He gave her a gentle shove toward their own section of the camp.

As soon as they arrived in Skyhold, the surviving mages from Haven greeted them; so too, did Vivienne and Fiona make their presence known to the new arrivals. Eluned found it interesting to see how each of the enchanters were addressed by the other mages, if they were addressed at all. The volume of excited voices rose as people found each other. There were glances back in her direction as there had been no further discussion on the road regarding the assassin and any repercussions.

She spotted the advisors waiting on the landing to the great hall and knew that she needed to address the issue of Arl Wulff with them before she’d have a chance to slip a way for a moment to herself. She squeezed her way through the crowd and jogged up the stairs to where they waited.

“Inquisitor, welcome back,” Josephine said. “We received your rather cryptic message about a political prisoner?”

“I need a noble detained under guard. Discreetly,” she said pointedly at Cullen. “I don’t want him in the prison cells.”

“Can you tell us what this is about?” he asked

“Yes, but not here. Can we get him settled first and then I’ll tell you all about it.”

With Arl Wulff being taken care of, Eluned headed to the war room. Josephine’s office had a decidedly improved appearance to it with a set of upholstered wingback chairs situated before the fireplace and a colourful rug spread between them. Polished bookshelves were already starting to groan from a collection of books that had appeared during her absence from the fortress. She continued into the corridor to the war room and was pleased to see the pile of rubble was gone and the great hole in the wall had been repaired.

The war room had had its own repairs; the floors had been scrubbed, cobwebs and dust removed from the walls, fresh candles were set in the massive tree-root chandelier and veilfire torches and the same reflective dishes as the forge gleamed from the walls. Eluned shrugged her pack from her shoulder, wincing at the plume of road dust that came off it when it hit the floor. She crossed the room and helped herself to a goblet of water while she waited for the others that soon arrived.

“What is this about a Venatori assassin?” Leliana demanded as soon as the door was shut behind her, the last to arrive. “Cassandra said you were attacked while escorting the mages.”

“Yes. A Venatori agent hiding amongst the mages.”

“We will need to put the mages under guard.”

Eluned shook her head at Cullen. “Not their fault. Watch them discreetly from a distance.”

“The Arl of West Hills. This is highly unusual,” Josephine remarked.

“Before we discuss that,” Leliana interrupted, “Dagna said she has the means to remove your shackles. Whenever you are ready—”
Eluned nodded eagerly, “as soon as possible.”

“I will send word so she can gather what she needs,” Leliana replied and slipped out of the room. Within a few minutes she returned. “Two hours to prepare.”

A rush of nervous anticipation overwhelmed Eluned and she sat down on the ever-present stool.

“Are you all right, Inquisitor?” Josephine asked, concerned, touching her hand.

Eluned rapidly blinked her eyes and waved Josephine off. “Yes. It’s just—I never thought…”

The ambassador smiled, “I am—we all are,” she corrected, “happy for you.”

“The Arl?” Leliana prompted.

Eluned explained everything that the Arl had told them.

“The man should tried and executed,” Cullen snarled. “This is the price of doing business with the Venatori.”

“That would be a waste,” Leliana commented. Eluned stared at the spymistress in shock. Had she not done that exact thing to Butler? Perhaps she was learning. “The arl does not know what we know. He could easily pass along misinformation in good faith.”

“He does seem genuinely sorry for what he did. I believe him that he didn’t intend for what happened.”

“Arl Wulff is a good man. I’m sure he will make amends,” Josephine agreed.

The ideas and arguments started to take on a circuituous path but Eluned was too distracted to really care. She was tired. She was in desperate need of a bath. And below her, Dagna was making her last preparations.

Eluned’s head snapped up as she jerked herself back upright on her stool.

“Perhaps we should continue this later,” Josephine stated sympathetically. “There is still some time for you to get cleaned up before you meet with Dagna. Dehari had requested to resume her duties as your maid. I can have her get a bath ready for you in your new quarters.”

Eluned’s brow rose. “What was wrong with my old quarters?”

“They were not appropriate for your status.”

She opened her mouth to protest. She liked her room off the garden. She could easily come and go without anyone being the wiser.

“They were also indefensible,” Cullen added.

She snapped her mouth shut. After relaying the information on the Venatori assassination attempt, there would be absolutely no way that she’d be able to convince them otherwise. She nodded.

“Good,” Josephine said, pleased. “Now that’s settled, let me show you to your new quarters.”

Chapter End Notes
**Translation** (probably not needed but whatever):
Qalaba: A type of cow that the Qunari breed known for its stupidity.

Thank you all for your continued support; kudo, comments, bookmarks, etc. I love you guys! ❤️
I've moved away from Tumblr a bit with it's stupidity. I will now be posting updates, sneak peeks, and art over on DAME.life. It is a safe, inclusive community started by, and for, fans of Dragon Age and Mass Effect. You can join at https://dame.life/i/f527bdfeb549
Eluned nodded as she passed the guard standing at the door at the far end of the great hall behind her throne, a landing beyond the door split into a hall to her left and a staircase that led up. She took the stairs up as she had been directed by Josephine. The stairs wound their way up the tower, housing a series of offices or quarters midway up that she assumed were for the other advisors although they currently stood empty, and another guard stood at attention at formidable looking wooden door decorated with ornate metal work. “Inquisitor,” the guard saluted and pushed the door open for her.

Another set of stairs—she was going hate all those stairs—opened to a massive space that rose to a vaulted ceiling. The space was surprisingly light with stained glass windows on three sides and a rose window high in the wall opposite the biggest, most luxurious looking bed she had ever seen. A pair of balcony doors flanked a large fireplace which would be the source of heat for the room. She rolled her eyes at the ridiculous sword hung over the fireplace that they had presented to her when they elevated her to Inquisitor in front of all the survivors of Haven.

She dropped her pack on the floor next to the gleaming carved desk set diagonally in a corner opposite the stairs. She flipped open the wooden box on the desk and found a tidy selection of quills, stoppered bottles of ink, a knife for sharpening the quills, sand for blotting, a stick of wax with a stamp with the Inquisition heraldry to seal letters. She picked up the sealing wax and was surprised to find that it was green instead of the usual red she had seen on the others’ letters. She huffed, of course, hers would be green. Green like the fucking glowing mark in her hand. She left the wax in the box.

Several bookshelves stood ready for whatever she wanted to collect. She smiled when she spotted a pair of books already there; Varric’s “Tale of the Champion” and “Hard in Hightown”. There were two other doors that she assumed led to closets or some other storage areas, but the series of pull ropes along side the bookshelf and first closed door drew her attention. There were three pull ropes that disappeared into the wall they were hung upon; she looked along the wall to see where they led but the didn’t appear to come out anywhere after disappearing into the wall. She gave an experimental tug on one; perhaps it would lower the chandelier to light the lamps or close the curtains, but nothing happened that she could tell.

She heard the door at the bottom of the stairs open and shut, and footsteps jog up the stone step. “You called, my lady?” Dehari asked.

Eluned frowned in confusion.

“You rang the bell,” the elf clarified. “Ah,” she commented when the look of confusion didn’t clear. She crossed the room to the three pull ropes. “This one,” she pointed at the rope Eluned had pulled
on earlier, “rings a bell in my quarters. Ring it whenever you have need of me.” She pointed to the second rope, “this bell goes to the quarters of your personal secretary, once you choose one.”

Eluned’s brows rose, incredulously. She didn’t need personal staff. Having a lady’s maid was bad enough.

“This pull,” she indicated the third rope, “rings in the guard room. You would use this in case of emergency.”

She stared at Dehari and looked around the room. It was overwhelming. It was too much. She had gone from being a slave, an accused mass murderer, a holy icon, and now she had the quarters and accoutrements of a pampered noble. It was beyond absurd.

“The lady Josephine said that you would be wanting to bathe,” Dehari said putting her hand on the closest door next to the pulls, “I can have that prepared right away.”

She shook her head, “bucket and cloth will be fine.” They might give her all the luxuries of a noble, but she wasn’t going to keep people waiting for her like she was one.

“My lady, that won’t do,” Dehari protested, scandalized. The Inquistitor couldn’t bathe in a bucket.

“Please. I need to meet the Arcanist in a short time and just wish to wash off the road dust and change into some clean clothes.”

The elf pressed her lips together and nodded. She hurried from the room.

Eluned sighed and started to undo all the closures on her armour. She hesitated and looked around the room, she didn’t want to put the mud and blood splattered armour on the upholstered furniture.

“I’ll take those for you,” Dehari offered, as she reappeared with two buckets of water and disappeared through the doorway.

She followed the elf into the room and found that it was her own private bathing room. There was what appeared to be a carved stone bath that was as smoothly finished as any modern bathtub. Heat runes were laid into the bottom to heat and keep the water warm. A small brazier sat in one corner to keep the room warm, and shelves and racks held an assortment of bathing products, scrapers, cloths, and towels.

“I’ll just set these to warm…”

She shook her head and dipped her hand into the first bucket and then the second, channeling magic into heat until both buckets were steaming slightly.

“Oh. Well that’s useful.” Dehari set the buckets down in the tub and took Eluned’s armour from her.

Eluned smiled and continued to undress.

A gasp had Eluned glancing over her shoulder and saw that the other woman had turned white and was staring intently at the floor. She whistled to get her to look up, “I’m sorry, I should have warned you. It’s a bit shocking at first.”

“Does it—does it still hurt, my lady?” she asked as she stared at the red and black marks that criss-crossed Eluned’s back.

“No,” Eluned lied.
Her quick wash and change of clothing done, she headed down to the Underforge to meet with Dagna. Heading down the stairs, she noticed that the forge was much quieter than it had been the last time she was down there. A couple of smiths and apprentices passed her as she entered, including the one she had burned. She touched him to get his attention and pointed at his arm, “I’m sorry.”

“S’alright, Inquisitor. I’dve burnt myself worse when I was learning the trade. The elf mage fixed me up right good. Dinna even miss a day.” He bobbed his head to her and left with the others.

The Underforge fell relatively silent then, there was still the hiss and roar of the dampened fires and the waterfall, but no hammers fell on anvils, no blades whirred on sharpening wheels. Eluned went down the final set of steps and stopped; Dagna, Harritt, Kaaras, Solas, and… a templar, judging from the great cold void in the room, were waiting for her. Kaaras spotted her and strode across the Underforge to her and gathered her hands in his own.

“You all right, Ellie?”

She gulped, not taking her eyes off the templar, “I’m suddenly feeling very nervous.”

“I won’t lie to you, it’s not going to be pleasant, but I’m going to be here with you the whole time.”

She nodded, “can’t be any worse than when they were put on.” She let him lead her forward to where the others were waiting.

As she got closer, she recognized Knight-Captain Rylen from Haven.

He gave her a casual salute while he remained leaning against one of the heavy benches. “Welcome back, Inquisitor.” He rolled the “r” with his Starkhaven accent, making her smile.

“Inquisitor! We’ve figured out how to get you out of your shackles. You remember that I told you the runes to prevent tampering were powered by your own mana?” Eluned barely had a chance to nod before Dagna carried on at full speed, “we’ve got ourselves a templar to strip your mana from you, so the cuffs can go dormant and you can’t burn anyone. We sent everyone away as a precaution so no accidents. Once your mana is gone, we’ll need to prevent you from regaining it too quickly while we remove the shackles. Um, you’re looking a little faint there, Your Worship, do you need to sit down?”

Kaaras guided her to a chair and crouched in front of her, chaffing her hands. “I’m right here,” he said quietly. “The knight-captain is going to use a Silence on you to strip your mana. We have magebane to keep your mana suppressed. Solas,” he glanced over his shoulder to where Solas stood, “and I are going to monitor you closely to make sure that you don’t go into mana imbalance.”

“Do you remember when we discussed passive transfer of mana in Haven?” Solas asked, his voice low and soothing. “After the cuffs come off, Kaaras and I will both do a transfer to help you recover.”

She nodded faintly.

“So we have everything ready whenever you are, Inquisitor,” Dagna chirped.

Her fingers trembled as she plucked at the ties on her sleeves. Kaaras hands brushed hers away, undid the sleeves, and rolled them up to her elbows, all the while murmuring in a low voice that only she could hear, “you’re safe. I’ll be right here with you. You’re safe.”

“Adaar, you’ll need to step back so you’re out of range,” Rylen advised as he pushed himself off the bench he had been leaning against. He stood directly in front of her and gave her a reassuring smile.
as Kaaras reluctantly stepped away. “Inquisitor. Remain seated please. We don’t need you to take a tumble.”

She gritted her teeth and stared at him, her eyes fixed on his blue ones. She could feel the well of cold surge in him until it washed over her like a tidal wave, sucking her under until she couldn’t breathe. She coughed and gagged as she slumped in her seat; it had been wise of them to have her remain seated as her muscles trembled with such fatigue she didn’t know if she’d have been able to remain standing.

The room blurred before her eyes, she was barely aware that she had been picked up out of the chair and rested in Kaaras’ lap when he reclaimed it. Something smooth and cool was pressed to her bottom lip. Her eyes fluttered open.

Kaaras grimaced as he held the magebane to her lips, “I’m sorry Ellie, but you must drink.” She obediently swallowed the poison from his hand.

Someone picked up her left hand and held it onto the hard surface of an anvil. Eluned whimpered and instinctively tried to jerk her hand away but it didn’t budge. She was trapped. She automatically tried to reach for her mana and found a yawning void that left her defenseless. She cried out, Kaaras wiped away the tears on her cheeks and turned her face into his neck, crooning and making shushing noise until she finally fell unconscious from the combined effects of the Silence and magebane.

The weight of the blankets was comforting but unfamiliar as she cracked her eyes open and gazed up at the ceiling far over her head. She was in her new quarters. Her head ached a bit and she felt hollowed out from the combined effects of the magebane and Silence, but her mana was restoring itself and she could touch the Fade when she reached for it. Gingerly, she sat up; the bed was of such quality that it didn’t creak from the ropes straining or rustle from the straw shifting like the few beds she had slept in since arriving in Thedas.

She could smell the elfroot under the bandages, pale linen criss-crossed her palms and wrapped down over her wrists and half way down her forearm. Did removing the cuffs cause that much damage? She was almost afraid to see, but morbid curiosity had Eluned plucking the tucked end of the bandage free and begin the process of unwrapping her left arm. She held her breath as the skin which had been obscured by the thick metal band of the cuff for the better part of five years was finally visible; it was both better and worse than she expected, if such a thing was possible.

She rested the back of her hands on her knees and stared at the mottled skin, shiny and deep pink in some areas, ragged and white in others. She ignored the glimmer of the mark in her left hand as she ran her fingertips over the scars that wrapped for several inches below each hand, the sensation was like touching a limb that fallen asleep; she could feel the texture of the skin in her fingertips but only a dull pressure from the scarred skin of her wrists. It was so strange not to feel the unforgiving metal and rings of the cuffs on her arms that they didn’t seem to be her arms at all. The scars would never fade despite the magical and mundane healing available, the damage had gone on for far too long without intervention. It was a small price to pay for her freedom.

A crease ran the center of each wrist where the metal pin had been driven through. With a strange detachment she pressed her fingertip to the crease and jerked her hand back with a hiss after her finger slid in up to the first joint. She turned her hand over and saw the same crease on the back of her wrist and realised that the pin had been through her arm for so long that her flesh had healed and created a permanent piercing just like in her ears and lips. Hmm, maybe slide some ribbons through there and decorate with bells and shiny bits and turn it into a fashion trend. The Orlesians would love it if they could get past the whole mutilating yourself for fashion. Who was she kidding, they were Orlesians.
She flipped her hand back over and froze. That was—wrong. Her elbow was still relaxed at her side when she twisted her hand over and back again. She gave a breathless laugh—such an absurd thing to notice—that she could turn her hands over without having to rotate her arm through her elbow and shoulder because of that blasted piece of metal jammed between the bones of her arm prevented her wrist from rotating correctly. She flipped her hands back and forth and back, giggling with delight until her breath hitched and a tear rolled down her cheek, such a stupidly simple thing to be able to move her hands properly.

She reached up her hand to wipe her eyes and just about smacked herself in her face, the missing weight of the cuffs making her miscalculate her own movement. She snorted a laugh at her own ridiculousness. She fell silent with a huff. Her emotions swung back and forth so quickly she felt like she was going to give herself whiplash, she needed a distraction to calm her mind. She glanced around the room looking for something to distract her; it was too quiet, her mind too scattered to read, she needed noise. Decision made, she shuffled herself across the expanse of bed—it really was a monstrousity—and stood up. She wobbled slightly but remained vertical.

Standing up, she noticed that she wasn’t wearing the clothes she had gone down to the forge in, instead she was dressed in a long nightdress of very high-quality cloth. *At least it didn’t have ruffles.* She glanced around the room but had no idea where her clothes were and didn’t feel like calling Dehari to ask; a pair of soft leather slippers sat beside the bed which she slipped on her feet. She grabbed the heavy cloak that lay across the back of a chair and wrapped that around herself and slipped out of her quarters.

Quietly nodding to the guards at her doors, she kept to the shadows and slipped out the door to the garden. It was quiet with only the soft sounds of the sisters praying in the room set off for Chantry services. It was too mellow and not enough of a distraction. She headed up the stairs and onto the walls and stood gazing out at the growing dark as the sun slipped behind the mountains. From there she could hear the music and laughter from the tavern which she had yet to step foot within. Iron Bull made it his preferred hang out and his presence was louder than words, his gaze too sharp; she didn’t think it would be a place that she could relax despite the tavern being called “The Herald’s Rest”.

She stood on the ramparts and looked out over the mountains and the valleys below. She felt untethered and free, like she could lift from the earth if she just wished it. It was a strange buoyant feeling fluttering and beating inside at her ribs, she wasn’t sure what to do with it.

A hand touched her shoulder. “Inquisitor?”

Eluned startled and spun to come face to face with Cullen.

He pulled his hand away quickly. “I’m sorry for startling you. You had been standing here for so long that I… we became worried.”

She frowned in confusion and looked around, finally noticing that the torches had been lit and the guard had changed. “How long was I out?”

“You’ve been here for nearly two hours.” He paused and considered the other possible meaning to her question, “ah, it’s been a day since Dagna was able to free you.” He tipped his chin toward her hidden hands.

She nodded and after a few moments of silence turned back to the mountain view.

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck, “I’m not very good at this, am I?”
She tilted her head in question.

“Talking to you, I mean. I haven’t been very sympathetic despite my own—” he cleared his throat. “I don’t know if you are aware, I was stationed in Kirkwall. I saw saarebas when the Arishok was stranded there.”

She stared at him, not sure what point he was trying to make.

“I’ve never… really considered what that would have been like for you. To be treated like that. Iron Bull said you served in Seheron and—Maker—the stories you hear about that… And then I’ve taken out my own prejudices and fears on you. I’ve been trying to atone for the things that I’ve done but—” He breathed a loud gasp of exasperation and raked his fingers through his hair. “Maker’s breath, I’ve failed badly on the first trial to cross my path.”

She waited patiently for him to work through whatever it was he wanted to tell her.

He sighed. “It was not my intent to burden you with my confession.” He straightened up to attention. “I just wanted to say that what you did in Haven for us—I will not allow the events at Haven to happen again. You have my word.” He saluted with his fist over his chest and bowed his head. “Have a good night, Inquisitor.” Cullen spun on his heel but stopped at Eluned’s low whistle.

She held her hand out toward him, determined not to flinch if he took it, “please, call me Ellie.”

He smiled slightly and took her hand, “all right… Ellie. Cullen.”

She started to withdraw her hand but paused when he asked, “do you play chess?”

She scrunched up her nose and pinched two fingers of her free hand together.

His eyes widened, and he stuttered, “are you only wearing bedclothes?”

She looked down at herself and realised that her dark cloak had fallen open to show the gleaming white of her nightdress. She smiled sheepishly and nodded.

He jerked his hand away and diverted his eyes to anywhere but her. “I’ll bid you…” He trailed off as he took a step away then stopped himself. He couldn’t just leave her to walk back to her quarters, all that distance she had already traversed, unescorted, wearing nothing but a nightrail. The scandal. The danger. It hadn’t even been a full three days since a Venatori agent had tried to assassinate her. He closed his eyes and prayed for strength before he turned and faced her again, “would you allow me to escort you back to your quarters, Inq—Ellie?”

She pursed her lips with an automatic retort that she could look after herself but held it back. He had made the effort to try to patch things up between them, the least she could do was accept his offer. Leliana and Josephine would—as would Cassandra, no doubt—have words with her if she permitted Cullen to die of some apoplectic fit due to her lack of decorum.

She nodded and nearly burst out laughing at his explosive sigh of relief.

He glowered at her, but she merely rolled her eyes at him.

The walked silently for a while; Cullen leading her back along the same sheltered route she had taken to get to the walls. No doubt an attempt to minimize the number of people that would spot her. His hand hovered but didn’t touch her back as they walked. He nodded to the soldier that saluted and opened the door to the tower to let them pass.
“Um, chess.”

She tipped her head and looked at him from the corner of her eyes.

“Ah, er, yes. I was… I was asking you if you played. Perhaps you’ll join me for a game some time and we can expand on your skill?”

She stopped before the door to her quarters and faced him with a raised brow. “Are you certain? You might discover that I’m terrible at strategy and regret making me Inquisitor.”

He gave a soft laugh, “I’ll risk it.”

“Very well,” she gestured with a smile.

“Good night Inq—Ellie,” He returned the smile with a slight salute and waited until she closed the door behind her.

“My lady?”

Eluned cracked an eye open at the rattle of a tray being placed on the table before her. The spicy scent of tea laced with embrium tickled her nose.

“My lady? Is there something wrong with the bed?” Dehari looked worriedly at her and back at the bed.

She yawned as she sat up on the chaise. “No. I was restless. Fell asleep again here.”

“If there’s something wrong—”

“It’s fine, Dehari.”

The elf curtseyed, “as you say. Lady Josephine says that your advisors would meet with you after you’ve had your breakfast.”

When Eluned entered the war room, she found the advisors already present and deep in discussion. A wavy sword laying on the war table caught her attention and she missed part of the current conversation.

“—and they didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary?”

“No, nothing. I even had the Iron Bull sit in on the interviews in case his presence shook something loose, but nothing.”

Eluned frowned in confusion.

“Your pardon, Inquisitor. We were just discussing the interviews with the remaining mages and Tranquil you escorted and their knowledge of the Venatori assassin,” Josephine explained.

Her confusion cleared, “and what of Arl Wulff, did he know?”

“No,” Leliana replied. “He appears to be in as much dark about that as the mages. He also seems genuine that he didn’t know what the Venatori’s true intentions were with the mages. What do you wish to do about him?”

She pondered it for a few moments, “he said he still had contacts within the Venatori. Free him.
Let’s use him to feed false information to them.”

“As you wish,” Leliana replied and Josephine quill scratched across her parchment as she made a note of the decision.

Eluned’s eyes drifted back to the sword. She wasn’t sure what it was about the sword, but it almost seemed like she could hear it, like it sang.

Cullen noticed her gaze, “ah, the Chargers and Darrow’s templars returned from Haven yesterday while you were still recovering. They didn’t find any sign of survivors and Haven remains silent. They were able to salvage some things where they were able to break into exposed buildings, but they also discovered several previously abandoned mines and caves that were uncovered by the avalanche. In one of the caves on the eastern side, they found this sword. It appears to be ancient in construction and enchantment, but the sword is useless.”

She started to reach across the table to the sword.

“It vibrates constantly making it near impossible to wield.” He picked up the sword and reversed it, handing it to her hilt first. “Useless, but Dagna might learn something—” He fell silent on her gasp.

When Eluned’s hand closed on the hilt of the sword, it didn’t vibrate at all but instead she felt a surge of power, like she tapped into another source of mana besides her own. She opened her aura to explore the enchantment and lightning flickered over the blade in response. A big smile crept onto her face. She looked up then and caught the wary look on Cullen’s face, Josephine had stepped back and slightly behind Leliana. “Oh, I’m keeping this.”

“Do you know how to use a sword?”

“I was taught basic skills with the sword in the Qun before—”

Cullen frowned, “are you certain you wish to pursue that path?”

“Yes,” she looked at the sword in her hand, “it feels more right than any staff I’ve ever put my hand to.”

“Very well.”

“We should begin looking for a mentor to instruct you,” Josephine stated making additional notes.

Cullen nodded, “be sure to speak with Enchanter Vivienne. She may have recommendations.” He turned back to Eluned, “I will have the blade delivered to Dagna and have her examine it so you will know what enchantments are upon it and make sure the weapon is in good condition.”

Eluned nodded and, reluctantly, handed over the sword.

There was a knock on the door. Cullen barked an order to enter.

“Am I interrupting?” Varric asked, ducking his head around the door.

“We are done here,” Josephine said. Leliana and Cullen both nodded their agreement.

“Great.” He looked directly at Eluned. “Everyone acting all inspirational with your elevation to Inquisitor jogged my memory, so I sent a message to an old friend that might have some information of use regarding Corypheus. They arrived last night.” Varric hesitated, looking over his shoulder. “It’s better for you to meet privately on the battlements.”
Eluned’s brow twitched in confusion.

He sighed and turned at the door, “trust me Songbird, it’s complicated.”

She nodded. “I’ll be right there.”

She turned back to her advisors to see Leliana shaking her head. “I know one thing, if Varic has contacted who I think he has, Cassandra is going to kill him.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you as always for your continued support, comments, kudos, and subscriptions. You all are really amazing!

Note: the sword that is referenced at the end of the chapter is a canon sword: Spellweaver but I've given it a different appearance, that of a flamberge sword of a one-handed variety. I can't imagine that it isn't going to cause some of her companions heart attacks when she starts wielding that. 😊

I can't tell you the number of times I cried writing this chapter. I did a little writing exercise a couple of weeks ago to write in a different POV than you normally do. I wrote Eluned's POV after the cuffs come off. Some was altered to be part of this chapter, some of it didn't fit, but I liked the original so much that I'd share it with you here:

I felt like I was going to fly free. I was no longer bound to the earth.

The cuffs didn’t physically weigh that much, but they might as well have weighed a ton for how much they burdened me. The Qun said that I was a dangerous thing; that I could not be trusted to control my magic, to resist the temptations demons whispered in my mind. For nearly five years, they marked me as a slave.

My arvaraad told me, as he revelled in my pain and fear, that the only way I would be free of those shackles would be if I cut off my own hands. It was nothing as drastic as that despite being extremely unpleasant in its own way. Dagna figured it out; the runes inscribed on the cuffs prevented any magical or mundane means from removing them, and the irony was that it was my own mana that kept the runes working to prevent my escape.

It took a templar’s Silence to wipe out my mana and a dose of magebane to slow the restoration of my reserves to give Dagna time to cut me from my bonds. I was conscious long enough after the Silence to swallow the magebane that Kaaras pressed to my lips. I know it pained him, a healer and a mage, to urge another to willingly swallow poison offered from his own hand. We both knew it was necessary if I was going to be free.

I woke up a few hours later in my own bed. I could smell the elfroot liniment under the bandages wrapped around my wrists. I unwrapped them to stare at the expanse of flesh that didn’t seem to belong to me. The flesh was heavily scarred and would always remain so. A reminder, a livid red line drawn neatly in the middle to mark where the pin had sat between the bones, binding me to my slavery.
But no longer.

Now I was free.

And I felt like I could soar.
Eluned fetched a cloak from her quarters and after a moment’s hesitation, grabbed a scarf to wrap around the lower part of her face. She trusted Varric, but she had no idea who he had brought to Skyhold. There was no need to reveal the scars that marked her as saarebas before she learned their identity particularly considering the recent attempts on her life by the Venatori.

She kept a casual pace as she crossed the bailey, nodding a greeting to those that did recognize her, and headed into the tower where the new requisitions officer, Ser Morris, was located. After a brief update—it never hurt to show an interest and find out what was lacking—she headed up the stairs to the inside corridor that ran through the barracks to the opposite tower. From there she took another flight of stairs up and onto the ramparts at the top of the walls. Emerging onto the ramparts, she glanced around and spotted Varric’s red coat and two cloaked figures with him. She chuckled to herself and shook her head; honestly if the dwarf wanted to keep this meeting on the down low, he could change out of his garishly bright coat. She gave a low whistle to get his attention.

“Ah, there you are Songbird! Inquisitor, meet Hawke. The Champion of Kirkwall,” he introduced her to a dark-haired woman, whose hair looked like it had been hacked with a dull knife while riding a horse at a rough trot. In contrast, the armour visible under the travel worn cloak and the dual hilts of the daggers protruding over her shoulders to frame her face, gleamed and showed evidence of attentive care.

“I don’t use that title much anymore,” Hawke replied.

“The broody elf is Fenris.”

“I do not brood, dwarf.”

Eluned snapped her eyes to him, his voice deeper than she expected and with an accent unlike the other two. She could see a shock of white hair peaking out from under his dark hood; apparently, he and the Champion of Kirkwall shared the same stylist. She tried not to stare at the curious white tattoos that marked his skin, they were unlike any of the tattoos she had seen on any of the other Dalish elves, but more than that she got the strangest sensation from him, it was simultaneous like but unlike being around a templar. She couldn’t say why.

“She’s Ellie?”

She flushed with embarrassment at being caught not paying attention. “Sorry,” she gestured. Hawke’s brows rose at her non-verbal response.
Varric smirked and turned back to Hawke, “as I was saying, I figured you might have some friendly advice about Corypheus. You and I did fight him, after all.”

“You’ve already dropped half a mountain on the bastard. I’m sure anything I could tell you pales in comparison. But yes, we fought and killed him. When the fight was done, he was dead on the ground. Maybe his tie to the Blight brought him back, or maybe it’s old Tevinter magic…” Fenris sneered at her mention of Tevinter. “But he was dead. I swear it. Before I fought him, the Grey Wardens were holding him, and he somehow used his connection to the darkspawn to influence them.”

“Corypheus got into their heads.” Varric elaborated. “Messed with their minds and turned them against each other.”

Eluned pulled her scarf down and ignored the sharp hiss from the elf. “Could they be under his influence again?” Varric translated for Hawke’s benefit and shot Fenris a warning glance.

“It’s… possible. But we need to know more first. I’ve a friend in the Wardens. He was investigating something unrelated for me. The last time we spoke, he was worried about corruption in the Warden ranks. Since then, nothing.”

Varric sighed, “Corypheus would certainly qualify as corruption in the ranks.”

“Your friend has disappeared with the others?”

Hawke shook her head. “No. He told me he’d be hiding in an old smuggler’s cave near Crestwood. Hopefully he’ll will know more. We should speak with him together.”

“I’ll make arrangements and we can leave tomorrow.”

“Fenris and I will leave immediately so we can scout the situation in Crestwood. I assume you have scouts in the area I can leave word with?”

Eluned nodded.

“Good. If it isn’t too much of an inconvenience Inquisitor, is there somewhere we can resupply?”

“I’ll take them to Morris,” Varric told her, accepting the scribbled note with instructions for the requisitions officer she handed to him.

In retrospect, it probably would have been better if she handled the requisition herself. Cassandra’s fury after walking in on Varric and the others, realising that Varric had, in fact, known how to contact Hawke all along, was formidable and Eluned wasn’t entirely confident that she wouldn’t have killed the dwarf outright. Or toss him from the walls of Skyhold. Fortunately, the table she flipped bore the worst of her ire. Nonetheless, Eluned kept an eye on the two as they rode to Crestwood; a hastily erected barrier spell might still be required although Varric was wisely keeping a distance and his mouth shut. At least as well as a natural-born storyteller was able to remain quiet; fortunately, the discussion he was having with Blackwall regarding the best jouster in the history of the Free Marches tournies didn’t seem to set Cassandra off.

“I understand that you will be starting to learn the Knight-Enchanter discipline. Is that wise to charge into battle in such a way?” Cassandra asked.

“I’m more interested in the defensive aspects because we have all seen how others, particularly demons, are drawn to me because of the anchor.”
“But why not train with a staff now that you have been freed from your previous restrictions?”

“Damage to my hands still makes a staff too heavy and awkward even with the mobility restored. The sword is much lighter; Dagna is make a slight modification to the hilt of the sword to help secure it to my hand. Besides, a staff makes me an immediate target, a sword allows my enemies to misjudge me.”

“A clever strategy,” Vivienne reined her horse in on Eluned’s free side. “You will be joining the ranks of the most select mages, darling. We serve in the highest echelons of the Chantry and Circle. You are to be commended, so few have the discipline necessary.” Her voice carried and Eluned knew that she did so specifically to make a dig at Solas; they still did not see eye to eye on most anything related to the arcane. “I have recommended Commander Helaine to be your instructor. She is a dear friend and a master of the techniques, you would do well to heed her instruction over all others.”

She restrained herself from rolling her eyes at the mage, instead nodded her head in thanks. She knew Vivienne meant well but her haughty attitude, even if well earned, grated on her nerves.

Before she had a chance to reply, the anchor on her palm crackled to life. She gasped in surprise; the mark had been quiet, apart from occasional response to her emotional state, since their flight from Haven. She had sealed all the rifts in the Hinterlands and hadn’t been further a field since their trip to Val Royeaux and hiring the Chargers on the Storm Coast months earlier.

“Which way?” Cassandra demanded.

Eluned closed her eyes and concentrated on the mark. With her eyes still closed, she gave her horse’s reins a slight tug and turned the horse to the south.

“Well, that’s convenient. It’s still on our way,” Varric commented wryly.

After a short distance, she steered them off the main road and directed them to leave the mounts tied to trees a safe distance from where she could feel the rift. Without needing a word from her, the full compliment of her companions spread out to circle the rift and contain the demons that erupted as soon as she stepped within range. She flicked her eyes around the area, Cassandra gave her a faint nod—they were in position.

With Iron Bull at her back, a barrier cast by Solas over them, she stepped forward with her own fire in her hand. The aimlessly wandering demons immediately turned to her as the rift crackled as she extended the anchor and connected with it. Magic crackled around her as the other mages engaged the demons, Cassandra and Blackwall hacked and roared to draw them from her, Varric and Sera picked off the wraiths that floated around the edges trying to flank their group, and Cole flashed in and out taking care of any stragglers.

The ground bubbled a virulent green and black; she grimaced as she struggled with the rift, she knew what was coming and pushed her will through the anchor to get the rift closed before the demon could materialize.

“Boss!” Iron Bull shouted a warning as he hurried to close the distance between them.

A terror demon burst from the ground, tossing her into the air and knocking the wind out of her when she slammed to the torn earth and sending Iron Bull tumbling in the opposite direction. How she hated those things. Her eyes watered as she gasped for air, never taking her eyes off the advancing demon that stood between her and Iron Bull.
“Boss!”

“Inquisitor!”

Several voices called out in alarm.

The mark in her palm pulsed. A faint memory tickled at the back of her brain; pain, ice and cold, darkness, and demons. She raised her left hand toward the demon. *Pull.*

The terror demon advancing on her halted in its tracks as the anchor flared and she focused on the power in her palm. *Pull.* It started howling as another tiny rift opened above it sucking it into the Fade. Other demons in the rift’s proximity also started to screech and howl it began to tear and tug at their corporeal forms, ripping them to shreds as they were tugged back toward the well of energy she had opened. *Pull.* With one more tug, she snapped her hand closed into a tight fist and the rift closed; the terror demon imploded.

“Maker’s balls! What was—”

“Worry about that later,” Cassandra snapped. “Prepare for another wave!”

With the rift finally closed, they headed back to the road and continued their way until they reached their evening camp. Eluned ignored the worried glances from the others cast her way as they rode, lost in her own thoughts to understand what she had done with the mark. She absently rubbed her left hand along her leg to massage it.

Once settled into camp for the evening, she sat staring into the fire trying to understand what she had done.

“May I inspect your hand?” Solas asked quietly sitting before her and holding his hand out, palm up, waiting for her to offer her own. She placed her hand in his. “Does it pain you?”

Her brow pinched as she considered her palm and wobbled her head, “*it’s been worse.*”

Cassandra joined them, folding her arms across her chest as she stood before them. “Has the Anchor reacted like this before?”

“I’m—unsure. I think after Haven. When Corypheus tried to remove it, I think whatever he did might of changed it.”

“Why did you not say something before?”

Solas’ magic rippled over her hand as he examined the mark in silence.

Eluned shrugged. “I wasn’t certain. I don’t have a clear memory of what happened after the fall of Haven,” she rubbed at her head where she had banged her head against the trebuchet, “I haven’t used the mark on a rift since.”

“Is the mark stable?” she asked Solas.

“It appears so, yes.”

She nodded, “good.” She turned abruptly and turned back. “Do you have an explanation for what happened?”

“The Inquisitor appeared to have drawn on the raw substance of the Fade, likely using the mark as a catalyst to open a small rift.”
“Is there a danger to the Inquisitor using this magic?”

“I’m right here, Cassandra.”

“I shouldn’t think so, I use similar techniques with my own magic. With the Inquisitor’s blessing,” he directed his inquiry to Eluned, “I can provide some guidance on using this magic.”

“Very well. You will keep me informed of any changes.” Satisfied, Cassandra returned to her spot by the fire and turned her hand to maintaining her weapons.

“I think sometimes she forgets that she was the driving force behind naming me Inquisitor.”

He smiled slightly, “perhaps. She worries about you.”

She gave a small laugh, “I think she’s still more annoyed with Varric but at least she’s not trying to feed him his own crossbow any longer.”

He ran his thumb over the mark in her palm, massaging the tense muscles he felt there. “Dagna consulted me regarding the sword that was retrieved from Haven. It is ancient of Elvhen origins, possibly even as old as the fall of Arlathan. Cassandra mentioned that you will be studying the techniques of the knight-enchanter which if I am not mistaken, descend from those of the ancient elven mages called arcane warriors.” Eluned raised her brow, curious in the history he could share. “The formal name for the techniques was the dirth’ena enasalin, knowledge that led to victory. Those that followed this path were the living embodiment of will made manifest, mind shaping the body into the perfect weapon.” He lowered his voice so no one else would overhear, “I wonder what they would think to see their magic used in the defense of the Chantry.”

“You think I learn this to defend the Chantry? If necessary, I’ll use it against them.”

“Forgive me, I know you are not their pawn.”

Eluned worried her bottom lip with her teeth, “is it wrong that I pursue this; for a human to wield the sword?”

“I think they would be gratified to see their techniques carried forward, and it is good that you care to ask. Mages who focused on spirits or the Fade might sneer at the arcane warriors for their physicality, but never doubted their honour, nor do I doubt yours. If you wish, I can look for some of the Elvhen sources on the technique in case the Circle’s teachings are too restrictive.”

“Thank you, Solas. That would be appreciated.”

“Of course, lethallan.”

It started to rain a day’s ride from Crestwood, it started as a drizzle and grew heavier the closer they got to their destination. Her companions, especially Sera, Dorian, and Varric, complained about the damp and miserable weather, the horses became bedraggled and muddy and spent most of the time with their ears pinned back to the constant rain. If the mood of the group became more subdued with the weather, it positively darkened when they arrived in Crestwood and Scout Harding gave them the history of the village and the situation there.

“Crestwood was the site of a flood ten years ago during the Blight,” she told Eluned leading her along a path that wound along the edge of the cliff over a lake. The eerie green light of an open rift flickered and reflected on the choppy water in the middle of the lake. “It’s not the only rift in the area but after it—” she nodded at the rift, “appeared, the dead started walking out of the lake.” She led her
back toward the camp, “we haven’t spotted Messere Hawke or her Grey Warden contact. There’s still people living in the village but many have abandoned the area; undead, demons, and bandits preying on those that are left. You’re going to have to get through those first.”

“We can check with people in the village before heading to meet up with Hawke, perhaps someone can tell us how to get to the rift in the lake.”

Cassandra nodded in agreement, “there must be a way to get to the rift in the lake.”

“Swimming?” offered Iron Bull. Cassandra rolled her eyes and made a disgusted noise.

Blackwall contemplated the rift in the lake, “I always liked lakes; bet the fishing here was good before the Blight and the Fade rift, anyway. Here’s a question, does that rift mean water is pouring into the Fade right now?”

“That—that’s just weird. Why would you say that? Now I’m going to lie awake wondering,” Sera grumbled shooting him her own disgusted look.

Eluned whistled to them and waved for them to move out.

They made their way across the rocky shoreline and headed up the path indicated for the village. As they rose up the hill, they could hear fighting and hurried forward to find two Grey Wardens defending a couple of villagers from a swarm of undead. They jumped in and quickly dispatched the undead. The villagers hurried away with a quick nod of thanks to the Wardens. Eluned flicked a quick gesture to Blackwall to stay back with the others, he replied with a sharp nod and turned his back on the premise to speak with Sera.

“The Grey Wardens thank you for your aid Inquisitor,” one of the Wardens said as they wiped the remains of the undead from their blade before sheathing it.


A flicker of confusion crossed the man’s face as he looked between the two women before him, he straightened and replied to Eluned, “a Warden gone rogue is wanted for questioning. We heard he’s passed through here, but the villagers knew nothing. They have troubles enough,” the Warden fighter replied.

“What have you been told about this rogue Warden?”

“Warden-Commander Clarel ordered his capture. I can say no more than that. I hope Ser – ” the Warden stopped abruptly, catching himself from revealing the name. The other Warden shifted uncomfortably. “I hope he comes with us peacefully,” the first Warden said wistfully. “I trained under him for a time. He’s a good man. I’m sure of that.”

“Will you stay to fight the undead here?” Cassandra asked.

“Our orders forbid it. Crestwood was only a detour. If the Inquisition can help, I beg you to do what you can; the villagers have already lost too much.”

“We’ll do what we can.”

The Wardens sketched a salute to Eluned and headed down the path Eluned’s group came up without so much as a sideways glance at the others.
“Ser, are you sure we can’t help the village?” the second Warden complained as they left, “it just doesn’t feel right.”

“I know, but our orders were clear. If we couldn’t find him, then we are to return at all haste…” the first replied. “Harder decisions await—” The Wardens were out of earshot and they could hear no more.

Eluned looked at Blackwall. “Do their orders make sense? Would they ignore the need of civilians with all the undead assaulting the village?”

He growled a “no” and shook his head in disgust.

“Fine. We’ll split up. Varric and I will go find Hawke. I’ll take Dorian in case we run across undead on the way.”

“I should come with you also,” Cassandra said.

“I’ll go,” Iron Bull stated, swinging his axe back over his shoulder.

“You’re not exactly inconspicuous, Tiny.”

“Don’t care. The Venatori have been getting more brazen in their attempts on the Boss, so I’m not letting her out of my sight.”

Cassandra opened her mouth to argue but Eluned interrupted her. “It’s fine Cassandra. I need the rest of you to go to the village and see if we can help the people there. Some might need healing. Find out if they have any ideas how we can get to the rift in the lake.”

“Very well, Inquisitor,” Cassandra capitulated, although Eluned could tell that she wasn’t too pleased with the arrangements. “The area that Hawke had indicated is several hours walk from the village. We’ll expect your return by late tomorrow. After that, we’ll come looking for you.”

“Don’t worry, Seeker. Sparkler, Tiny, and I will keep her safe. Trust me.”

Cassandra’s lips pinched together in a thin line, “considering your latest behaviour, dwarf, that does not give me much confidence.”

Eluned rolled her eyes, “for fuck’s sake, get over it.” The miserable weather was fraying on her nerves and she had zero patience for their squabbling. She just wanted to bash their heads together sometimes. She waved to the others and walked briskly toward the edge of the village and the road beyond leaving the others to catch up.

They crouched behind some rocks and observed the cave entrance. Nothing moved apart from a few nugs that ran in and out; there didn’t appear to be any tracks or other signs of people having been in the area. Eluned looked at Varric.

“Pretty sure this is the place. Hawke and Fenris are probably tucked in out of the rain.”

Iron Bull nodded his head, “if it’s been raining like this for any length of time, any tracks will be washed away.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

They crept down the hill, sticking close to the shelter of the cliff face as they approached the cave entrance. Inside, a pair of torches flickered sulkily beyond the entrance cleverly hidden behind some
stalactites. Some pebbles skittered across the floor as a nug spooked and shot between their feet. Eluned found herself being yanked and spun off her own feet by Iron Bull, only to be pressed into his back by a large hand.

“Good to see you can still follow a map, Varric.”

“Hawke,” Varric replied. “You wound me.”

Hawke stepped out from behind a rock pillar, Fenris just behind her shoulder.

Eluned jabbed her thumbs into the small of Iron Bull’s back in protest, causing him to grunt, before she stepped out from behind him and shot him a dirty look as she walked toward Hawke. She looked around the cave and shivered, it reminded her of the cave she was exploring all those years ago although she didn’t get any sense of the magic, or whatever it was, that sent her to Thedas. Surprisingly, she found her herself feeling conflicted by that realization; she wasn’t sure if she should be happy or disappointed that the cave was simply a cave.

“Inquisitor. My friend is within. It would be better I take you in by yourself. Your friends can join us afterward.”

“She’s not going without me,” Iron Bull protested, putting a restraining hand on Eluned’s shoulder, halting her.

Fenris looked between Eluned and Iron Bull in surprise. “Fasta vass, you are bas-saarebas! Ashkost arvaarad?”

Eluned fadestepped out of Iron Bull’s grip and slammed her marked hand against Fenris’ breastplate and called a fireball into her free hand. “I am not a slave and I will kill anyone that tries to make me one again!” She snarled in his face.

In a blink of an eye, he raised his own hands and slammed them against her chest sending her flying backwards into the opposite cave wall which she slid down onto the floor. To her horror, the white tattoos illuminated and she could suddenly feel the raw power of lyrium. “You will not touch me, mage,” he snarled back.

“Andraste’s tits! Just stop it you two!” Varric swore, stepping between them just as Hawke and Iron Bull did the same.

“Well, this is highly entertaining. I think it’s safe to say that the Warden knows that we’re here,” Dorian said as he leaned against the pillar that Hawke recently vacated. He crossed his arms with an air of casual amusement.

“Indeed, I do.”
Fenris muttered and grumbled as the others stepped through the makeshift door that guarded the larger chamber of the cave to speak with the Warden; Hawke and Varric both decided it would be better to keep him and Eluned separated for a bit. Varric sighed and rubbed his forehead, “well that could have gone better.”

“You didn’t say she was saarebas, dwarf.”

“She’s not.”

“She has an arvaarad.”

“The Iron Bull is not her arvaarad. He’s the leader of the Bull’s Chargers mercenary group and has made it his personal mission to protect the Inquisitor.” Varric would bet fifty sovereigns that there was more to it than that—even if only on Iron Bull’s side at this point—because something had changed between them. “The Valo-Kas freed her from her arvaarad a few weeks before the Conclave.”

“She was muttering an incantation,” Fenris insisted.

“She doesn’t use words to cast.”

“Then what did she say?”

“I don’t know, Fenris! She was facing you.” Varric rubbed his hand across his forehead again in frustration. “Judging from her reaction, I would imagine she was protesting you calling her saarebas and whatever it was you said in Qunlat.”

Fenris frowned thoughtfully. “She said,” he puzzled out the silent words she spat at him, “‘I’m not a slave’, and then something about killing anyone that tried to make her one again.” He looked away from Varric, ashamed.

“Hmm, sounds familiar, not unlike someone else I know.”

“She still cast against me.”

“Seemed to be more of an aggressive warning. She’s rather prickly when someone threatens her newly found freedom—also like someone else I know,” he added.

“Is she still being hunted?”
Varric snorted incredulously, “you’re kidding, right? When the Valo-Kas attacked, she turned on the Qunari when her arvaarad went down; the Qun is looking for her, so are the Venatori. And, of course, let’s not forget Corypheus.”

“I still don’t understand. The Qun doesn’t keep human or elven mages.”

“She doesn’t know why either, Fenris. But I have a theory.” Fenris turned back to Varric and waited. Varric glanced at the door to make sure no one was coming back yet. He lowered his voice, “she doesn’t remember how she came to be in the Qun but she was there when the Arishok was in Kirkwall. When they found out she had magic, they made her saarebas. I think they did as an experiment.”

Fenris shook his head in confusion not following Varric’s logic.

“Think about it Fenris. The Qun doesn’t waste resources. They were in a city with an entire tower of mages. What if they could have turned them all into saarebas? Thank the Maker, Hawke killed him and ended the occupation.”


“Yeah, because they usually only come across the odd one or two at a time. It’s not worth the effort, but with hundreds of mages contained in one spot?”

“But the Arishok died. Why keep her around if the experiment failed?”

“The Arishok died, but the experiment didn’t fail. They successfully turned a human into saarebas.”

Fenris nodded thoughtfully, “until they dropped her leash.”

“Yeah...” he replied slowly, “she’s been adjusting to life without the leash.”

Fenris glanced at the door himself, “is she—is she alright?”

Varric shook his head. “Not really. She’s getting better; I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what she’s dealing with. She served in Seheron for nearly five years, got free then fell out of the Fade with some strange magic welded to her flesh, faced down Corypheus...” he trailed off when the door opened to very grim faces. He turned back quickly and said quietly, “just help her if you ever get the chance.”

“We’ll see you at the ritual tower, Inquisitor,” the Warden sketched a bow to Eluned, “we’ll find the answers.” He nodded to the others and to Hawke, then waited for her and Fenris at the cave entrance.

“I fear what those answers will be. I’ve seen too much blood magic to ever trust where it leads. See you there, Inquisitor.” Hawke reached out and gave Fenris’ sleeve a little tug and beckoned Varric to joined her for a quick word before they headed out with the Warden.

“Bah, fucking Vints and blood magic,” Iron Bull grumbled watching the four gather at the cave entrance. Dorian bristled but remained uncharacteristically silent.

“So Songbird, what now?” Varric asked rejoining them in the cave after Hawke left with the others.

“Hopefully, Cassandra has found out how to get to the rift. We’ll take care of that first for the people here, then we need to go to the Western Approach. Come on, let’s get a move on.”

They followed a more direct route back to the village since they were no longer trying to hide their
presence and accidentally lead anyone to Hawke’s Warden contact, instead now they made themselves visible to draw attention from the three leaving the area.

“Songbird. About Fenris—”

Eluned shook her head.

“I know you didn’t hit it off, but I think he could help you—"

She stopped abruptly, raised her brows and scoffed at Varric. “I don’t think so.” She turned and started walking again.

“Fenris is highly suspicious of mages, with good cause. He was a slave to a Tevinter magister who tattooed his body with lyrium and used him as a weapon.”

“I thought I recognized him,” Dorian commented. “I saw him once in the magisterium when I visited with Alexius. Danarius’ ‘little wolf’. Dararius liked to lead him around on a leash to terrorize the other magisters.” Eluned subconsciously raised her hand to her own neck and rubbed at the phantom sensation of her own collar. “Rumour has it that Danarius met his end at the hands of his slave.”

“That’s true. Fenris killed Danarius four years ago.” Varric turned back to Eluned, “I just wanted you to know that he’s been in the same place you are and he might be able to help.”

She gave him a terse nod and ignored his sigh of exasperation.

When the four of them walked back into the village just as the sun was starting to set on the second day, they found the rest of her companions gathered together at the village square. “We were about ready to come look for you.”

Eluned gave Cassandra a tired smile as she sat down on a bench and leaned back against the stone wall surrounding the square. “We ran into a small problem.”

“What sort of small problem?”

“The red templar variety of problem.” Cassandra’s brows rose sharply at Varric’s answer. “We ran across a red templar camp up in the hills on our way back. We eliminated them without problem. But more disturbing was the large red lyrium deposit that had burst out of the ground, just like at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. It looked like the templars were harvesting it.” Eluned spotted Dorian’s shudder; obviously he remembered what Fiona told them in the future about harvesting red lyrium from the corpses of prisoners as well.

“Was there a rift?”

Eluned shook her head, “no, fortunately.”

“We destroyed the deposit,” Varric said. “Hopefully that is enough, but I can’t understand why the red lyrium would appear here.”

“And what of Hawke’s Warden contact?”

“He had some very disturbing news. All the Wardens in Orlais think that they are dying, the Calling, he—called it. They are gathering in the Western Approach to perform a blood sacrifice ritual to prevent future Blights before they all die.”

“And every Grey Warden in Orlais is hearing that right now?”
“Yes, likely because of Corypheus. The Wardens fear that if they all die, there will be no one to stand against the next Blight. Only a Warden can kill the archdemon apparently.”

“And then they do something desperate and foolish and play straight into Corypheus’ plans.” Solas sneered in derision. Eluned was surprised by his uncharacteristic display of emotion. “Corypheus isn’t controlling them. He’s bluffing them with this Calling, and they’re falling for it.”

“What about you Blackwall? Do you hear it?” Eluned asked with concern for her Warden.

“I do not fear the Calling, Inquisitor, and worrying about it only gives it power. Anything Corypheus does will only strengthen my resolve,” he replied smacking his fist into his opposite palm. She nodded and smile fondly at him.

“Was there anything else?” Cassandra asked.

Eluned shrugged, “a pack of wolves circled us but oddly decided not to attack and disappeared back into the hills. Did you have any luck here with finding how to get to the rift?”

“The lake level can be controlled by a dam.” Cassandra scowled in memory, “the mayor was not very forthcoming about the dam but eventually he told us the controls are found in the local fortress that has been taken over by bandits. He told us it was a waste of time, that the controls were destroyed by darkspawn during the last Blight.”

“Why would darkspawn bother with a dam?”

“They wouldn’t,” Blackwall answered.

“What is he hiding? Doesn’t he want the undead to stop bothering his village?”

“One would think so.” Cassandra replied.

In the morning, they headed out to the fortress. After scouting the keep, only three sides were accessible as the fourth stood on a cliff face, they found the only access point was through a great set of iron-banded wooden doors. A gallows that listed and creaked with the wind stood to the side of the main entrance, Eluned averted her eyes from the moldering corpses swinging in the rain and wind. She looked at the doors and back to her companions. “Knock. With an axe,” she gestured.

“Oh, yeah!” Iron Bull grinned. He unhooked his axe and slammed it into the wood. Two more swings and the gates broke open. Cassandra and Blackwall immediately stepped forward with shields raised to deflect the arrows and bolts that struck as the doors crashed open.

The sound of a dog’s startled yelp caught Eluned’s attention over the rest of the noise of combat just in time to see the dog go tumbling to the ground, a crossbow bolt protruding from its ribs. She spotted another dog, a bedraggled, muddy creature, that was dashing between the legs of the bandits and her companions. It made a beeline for the open gate that she currently stood before. Dropping her hands, she stepped aside to let the dog pass. To her surprise, the dog leapt at her knocking her down, snarling and snapping, spittle flying from its jaws into her face as it tried to get a hold of her. It had no collar for her to grab onto, her hands slipped and slid across the fine, wet hair and heavily muscled body of the dog as it struggled to bite her, its front paws dug at her armour as it pushed with its strength with its back leg. It was stronger than her and her arms trembled to hold it back. Gritting her teeth, she channeled as much heat as she could directly into the dog and it dropped, smouldering. She let her head fall back in relief for a moment before picking herself up out of the mud; the fight was dwindling as the bandits retreated up into the fortress, she couldn’t just lay there to wait for the others to finish the rest off for her. Hopefully no one had noticed her mistake.
With the final bandit down, Cassandra strode over with the displeased look on her face. “Why did you hesitate to kill the mabari?”

“I thought it was someone’s over-zealous pet. The first went down quickly and I thought the second would spook and run past if I gave it an opening.”

Cassandra looked at her incredulously. “Have you never seen a mabari? They are war dogs, they do not ‘spook’.”

Eluned shook her head, she looked away and blinked away the stinging of her eyes before she replied, “I’ve never fought against an enemy that uses animals to fight like that. Tal-Vashoth and Fog Warriors don’t, and Seheron was inhospitable for a Tevinter cavalry.”

“Hrmph. Well you can expect them in southern Thedas, particularly in Ferelden. Let’s look for the dam controls.” Eluned followed her, struggling not to feel every bit like a chastised child.

After sending away a pair of mortified teenagers caught spending time together, without their parents’ knowledge, from the tavern located on the dam—how they managed to get there past the bandits was a mystery—the dam controls were located, in curiously pristine working condition, and the water level of the lake was lowered. Iron Bull was ecstatic that the water disturbed a dragon that had been nesting below the dam. “Please say we can fight that, boss!”

Eluned grimaced, hopefully they wouldn’t have to deal with the dragon. She had enough more than enough of dragons after facing Corypheus’ pet when Haven fell. “Let’s just focus on getting to the rift,” she replied as they carefully worked their way down the slippery path to the old village.

“The dam controls were intact with no sign of darkspawn so how did so many people get caught in the flooding of the village?” Blackwall asked as they stood at the center of Old Crestwood staring at all the bodies.

“Perhaps this is what the mayor was hiding,” Cassandra growled. “There’s nothing to be done for these people now, but we can at least take care of the rift. Hopefully that will take care of the undead.”

“They want to go home,” Cole said, tipping his head to listen. “That's why they take the bodies.”

“There was a sister in Crestwood, perhaps she can see the proper funeral arrangements for these people and finally put them to rest.”

Cassandra nodded approvingly, “let’s continue looking.”

“Wait,” Cole said quietly, taking Eluned’s hand. “It needs help.” He led her to rotted cabin where a spirit hovered in an agitated state.

“You there! I demand that you tell me why nothing obeys my commands.”

“A lost spirit. This should be—”

“Silence!” the spirit hushed Solas. “Let the other one speak.” The spirit rushed forward and stopped in front of Eluned. “Tell me.”

“Demon—” Cassandra growled raising her sword.

“Demon!” the spirit scoffed. “Those dolts would suck the world dry. I am called to higher things, but the world does not heed me. I ordered the sky to close, but it ignores me.”
Eluned flicked her eyes to the rift.

“Yes. It does not obey my commands.”

Eluned’s brows rose in surprise.

“Of course I can hear you.” It paused then reached out and touched Eluned’s cheek, “you feel familiar. You have walked between.”

Eluned raised her hand with the mark.

“No. That is part of you but also not of you. It is very old. You are very new.” The spirit dropped its hand. “I will not leave until something obeys my command. A spirit of Rage had the gall to chase me across the lake. I command you to destroy it.” After a moment, it continued, “I accept your pledge of service.” It floated away, satisfied.

“Inquisitor!” Cassandra protested.

“A simple enough request,” Solas commented. “A rage demon may threaten the villagers as well.”

“I’ve heard worse orders,” Blackwall added.

“We’d be taking care of it any way, Cassandra.”

They headed through the ruined village and found an old mine. “It's humming below us. A window, wanting, wandering, looking back at what’s looking.”

Dorian glanced at Cole, “well that’s not ominous at all.”

Through an old boarded up mining entrance, they followed a meandering path that wound around natural stone columns, stalagmite and piles of rubble. Periodically, torches jutted out from the walls, some half consumed by algae and whatever vegetation had thrived in the dark, flooded caves. Eluned shivered and jumped at every splash and kicked pebble; around every bend she kept expecting to see shimmering stones that showed her a path to somewhere else.

She shuddered when they came across clustered piles of corpses; the walls of the cavern bore claw marks. “Were people living down here when Old Crestwood flooded?”

“Yes,” Cole said softly. “A wall of water, washing over. Lungs tight to bursting, and then suddenly soft, sleepy, sliding away. Families wouldn’t leave the sick. They all drowned.”

Flames flickered over Eluned’s hands as she trembled with outrage. The mayor murdered all those people. Left them to die in the cold and dark with nothing but the roar of water and the screams of their loved ones in their ears.

A large grey hand came down on her shoulder. Iron Bull rubbed his thumb up and down the nape of her neck to soothe her until the flames died from her hands. “We’ll bring him to justice, Boss,” he murmured. She nodded sharply and stepped away.

They continued down through the cavern, fighting the undead that rose to meet them. As they descended, the temperature rose. Eluned drew her brows together and rubbed her right temple; she felt like she was developing a migraine, there was a constant buzzing sensation in the back of her skull, her skin felt like there were ants crawling all over her. She looked to the others to see if anyone else was affected; they all had grim expressions but didn’t seem otherwise disturbed beyond the knowledge of what they had found. The other mages; however, looked decidedly worse for wear.
Eluned stopped and gave a low whistle.

“Why are we stopping?” Cassandra asked.

“Any one experiencing a headache or a buzzing sensation?”

“Yes,” all the mages confirmed. “And it seems disturbingly familiar,” Dorian added.

“Explain.”

“Redcliffle.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Dorian turned to Cassandra. “When the Inquisitor and I were thrown into the future, Redcliffle Castle became overgrown with red lyrium. As we moved higher into the castle and closer to where Alexius was, the lyrium became louder; it gave us headaches, we could feel its song in our bones. And it was abnormally warm—like now. The Veil was so thin that Alexius could rip open rifts himself.”

“Well shit.”

Cassandra turned on Varric, “you said you destroyed a red lyrium deposit on your way back to Crestwood.”

“Yeah, but there were red templars there.” He shrugged, “thought they might have been responsible for it.”


They moved forward and came to what appeared to be the bottom of the cave; Eluned winced, the song of the lyrium was becoming louder and throbbed behind her eyes. She could see the other mages were also struggling and even the others were starting to wince. Sweat prickled along her hairline as the temperature rose. A sickly red glow lay ahead of them and as they rounded a corner in the cave they drew up short at the sight of precisely carved columns, statues and archways, clearly of dwarven design.

“Huh. Must be an old lost outpost,” Varric said.

Eluned cocked her head in confusion, “lost?”

“When the darkspawn overran the Deep Roads, much of it was collapsed to hold them back. Entire thaigs have been lost and no records remain to tell us where they are or were.”

Her eyes widened in alarm and she swung around to look at Blackwall, “could there still be darkspawn down here?”

“I—don’t sense any, but we should remain vigilant nonetheless.”

“I agree,” Cassandra said. The others wordlessly shifted their positions around Eluned putting both Cassandra and Blackwall on point with their shields up, Iron Bull at her back, with the others flanking to fill the extra gaps. Hallways branched off in either direction from the central corridor they walked down. “Ugh, I do not wish to become lost down here.”

Eluned closed her eyes and concentrated on the Anchor, she raised her hand and pointed.

“Left,” Iron Bull said quietly. They proceeded that way, Eluned sensing the direction from the
Anchor and Iron Bull relaying to the others, until they came to a large wall of red lyrium that blocked their way forward.

“What now? Do we go back and find another way around?”

Eluned closed her eyes and concentrated on the Anchor. They were still headed in the right direction. “We have to destroy the lyrium any way. Perhaps the path will be cleared once we do.”

Cassandra and Blackwall both hoisted their shields and Iron Bull his axe to strike at the red lyrium. “Some ice would help,” Iron Bull commented.

Eluned stepped up with Solas and Vivienne; her ability with ice was nowhere near as strong as her ability with fire but she could still help.

Solas closed his fingers gently around her wrist, “no, conserve your strength for the rift. It will likely be bigger than normal with all this lyrium.” She nodded after a second and stepped back to let the others deal with it.

Once the lyrium was down they passed through the crumbling remains of the corridor into huge hall. The mark on Eluned’s palm crackled in time with the rift flaring in front of them. Around the rift, the largest Rage demon she had ever seen coasted, it had to be the demon Command had been referring to. Immediately it turned to them as they spread out from the entrance. With Solas’ barrier protecting her, Eluned fade-stepped through the Rage demon partially freezing it and placing herself closer to the rift. She smirked at Iron Bull’s growl of frustration and mumbled “pain in the ass” as she put distance between them, she raised her hand to make her first attempt on the rift. It was massive, disappearing through the rock above their heads it was no wonder that it was visible on the surface of the lake.

Eluned lifted her hand a second time to the rift and struggled as the rift bucked and tugged back against her. She whistled out a warning to the others that another wave was incoming. As she incinerated a wraith, she marvelled as how well the group fought together like they had been fighting side by side, back to back, for years rather than months. They had learned each others’ strengths, and each others’ weaknesses. Looking at them now, she could see that they were tiring. She was tiring. She connected with the rift and struggled with it as it tugged against her efforts to close it. Frowning at the rift, she pulled harder, but the edges kept slipping from her grip; it wasn’t closing. She whistled a warning, catching the confused looks of some, concern from others. The rift kicked back flinging her from her feet as another wave of demons poured through.

Both Solas and Iron Bull, who were the closest, hurried to her side, keeping an eye on the demons and wraiths.

“Are you injured?” Solas asked.

She shook her head.

“Here, this will help,” Iron Bull handed her one of his potion vials. “Tastes like shit…” Eluned took a sip and spat it out. “Hey, that’s one of Skinner’s finest.”

“Will you be able to close the rift or do we need to retreat? I can get the Seeker’s attention—”

She put her hand out to stop Solas. “No. I’m so close. This time will do it.”

“You are certain?”

She hesitated for a moment, pressed her lips together and gave a determined nod. With a hand up
“Easy.” The heavily muscled arm slid around her back and gripped her hip to keep her on her feet as she teetered with exhaustion. “Just sit down here, Boss,” Iron Bull said quietly, leading her to a set of carved steps and handing her a water skin. “Alright?”

She nodded and handed the water flask back after taking a couple of sips.

“What happened? Why did it take you so many attempts?” Cassandra asked as she wiped off her sword and sheathed it. “It didn’t appear any different than others you’ve closed more easily.”

“It was different.” Eluned winced as she massaged her hand. Solas immediately sat down beside her and took her hand, she could feel the sensation of his magic creeping around the edges of the mark and the muscles in her hand as he examined it.

“How so?” Cassandra immediately demanded.

“Give her a moment to catch her breath, Seeker.”

Eluned nodded her thanks to Varric. “When I close a rift, I can feel the edges of the Veil. It’s like a thin piece of cloth that’s been split down the middle with a sharp blade.” Both Dorian and Vivienne perked up to hear her description of the fade rifts. “The edges are usually easy to grasp—elastic—a good tug and the rift will close. But this one… It was like the Veil was made of spider silk. When I tried to grasp at the edge of this one—edges shredded—I was afraid a good tug would have opened the rift further.” She shook her head and looked at Solas. “I don’t know why. Maybe the red lyrium?”

Solas returned her look thoughtfully, “red lyrium does cause the Veil to thin and doing so, may contribute to the way it responds to you and the Anchor.”

“Is the red lyrium here because of the rift, or did the rift form because of the presence of the red lyrium?”

Solas tipped his head thoughtfully.

“Is this part of a dwarven mine?”

Varric shook his head, “hard to say. We’re not that deep underground, and I’d prefer to keep it that way.” Eluned agreed with that; she wasn’t too keen going deeper underground either.

“What are you getting at?”

“We’ve seen both rifts and red lyrium in locations where there has been a dwarven presence; the Hinterlands with Valammar, the Stormcoast with the mine supplying the Inquisition with lyrium, and now Crestwood. If red lyrium appears where there is or may be regular lyrium, then rifts could also be expected. If the dwarves build around lyrium deposits and outposts to sell it, then we could predict rifts along those paths.” Understanding was starting to dawn on some faces.

Varric looked downright worried. “But much of the Deep Roads and thaigs have been lost. We don’t know where they are any more.”

“We don’t need to know exactly but how far it extends will give us an idea of where to look and send scouts to listen for reports of red lyrium or rifts. How far would it be, all of Ferelden?”
Varric shook his head, “no, Songbird. There’s a thaig in the Anderfels, northwest of Orlais. There are Deep Roads under Kirkwall—”

“And Tevinter history tells of a thaig on the northern coast of Tevinter that used to trade with Minrathous during the time of Arlathan,” Dorian concluded.

Varric gave her a sympathetic look, “the Deep Roads may even go further north than that. We just don’t know any more.”

*Further north than Tevinter,* Eluned thought. She paled. *Seheron. Qunandar.* She glanced at Iron Bull, he too looked grim at the thought.

“We can’t do anything about this now, but the others must be informed so they can make inquiries,” Cassandra concluded.

“Yeah. I’ll put out feelers with my guild contacts as well,” Varric added. “Can we leave now?”

“There’s a fresh breeze coming from this direction. Maybe a more direct route out of here,” Blackwall told them. They followed the breeze, twisting and turning through a few corridors. There was a loud splashing noise that brought them to a halt. “There’s something ahead of us.”

“They like it here.” Cole took Eluned’s hand and led her past the others through a doorway and then to sit near a pile of sticks, rotted fabric, mud and other debris. The construction reminded her of a beaver lodge. “It’s quiet. They like the quiet, like you do.”

Nugs emerged and scurried in and around their feet, but calmly, like they knew that they wouldn’t be harmed. A little spotted nug ran up to Eluned’s feet. It stood in front of her and chirped, then jumped into her lap, stood up on its hind end placing its weird little hand-feet near her collar to maintain its balance. Eluned pulled her head back unsure of what the little creature was doing. She tentatively gave it a little scratch on the chin.

“It likes you. It knows that you’re kind.”

The nug chirped like it was agreeing with Cole then jumped off her lap and ran from the chamber with the others.

“Well, that was…”

“Weird, yeah?” Sera finished Dorian’s observation. “For real, can we go now? I smell the damp. Just... in everything.”

Behind the nug lodge they located a ladder that took them up into another cave barricaded with wood at the entrance. With little effort, they pried off some wood that held the door closed and stepped out into the blinding sunlight.

“Did we do this?” Sera asked. “Close the rift and fix the weather?”

“It would appear so,” Solas replied.

Eluned held her hand before her face, shading her eyes as she stepped out the cave. The evening sun shone over the lake, lighting the waves with a warm glow. The clouds had already started to break up and evening stars were beginning to peak through.

Solas turned his gaze toward the old village, “there is something… One moment, I’ll be right back.”
“You there! You have destroyed the demon.”

Eluned turned to the spirit of Command that floated toward them. She lowered her hand from her eyes and nodded.

“You have done as I commanded, as you had pledged.” The spirit stroked its hand against Eluned’s cheek. “I release you from your service.” A wave of warmth and energy washed over Eluned as the spirit vanished.

“What did it do?”

She shrugged at Cassandra, “I don’t know.”

Cassandra narrowed her eyes and huffed, dissatisfied with the answer. “We should return to—”

She was interrupted by a thunderous roar as the dragon flew overhead. In front of them, the partial skull of a druffalo, bloody with tattered flesh, fell into the mud with a splash as the dragon continued to the west. Iron Bull crouched down in front of the remains and reached down towards it.

“Ew, parts! What are you doing?” Sera protested, making gagging noises.

Iron Bull stood up dangling a piece of decorated leather with an attached bell. “This was Tulip.”

Eluned sighed. So much for the dragon not bothering the villagers.

Chapter End Notes

Hello my lovely readers! Sorry about missing my regular update last week—I had the perfect storm of events that derailed me for four days (thanks for checking in sharkrunaway), but I should be back to my normal schedule. I have a nice big chapter ready for you today, I hope you enjoy it.

I'm dipping into my headcanons and taking us where the game couldn't—this totally means that I'm not sticking with the 12-18 month timeframe from Breach to defeating Corypheus, which I thought was unreasonable at best. To travel to Adamant from Skyhold with an entire army with full compliment of equipment and resources would be 4-5 weeks moving at top speed with an exhausted army at the end, returning with wounded would be at least the same length of time if not more. Do it again to the Arbor Wilds over more difficult terrain... yeah, I don't buy it. And for what I have planned, there's no way everything would get done in that length of time 😎
The people of Crestwood had gathered at the entrance of the village and cheered as Eluned and the others came into sight from Old Crestwood. The villagers readily shook the hands and patted the shoulders of the warriors in the group as well as Varric and Sera, they were more cautious with the mages offering nods of thanks. With Eluned, they were even more deferential; bowing and tugging at forelocks, the softest touch with fingertips to her hands, arms, or shoulders if they were brave enough to touch her at all, and murmured words of thanks and blessing. She concentrated on keeping her breaths even and regular, trying to ignore the urge to flinch away from the people that just wanted to express their thanks. Soon enough, the villagers were intercepted and turned away with a kind word and she breathed a sigh of relief.

In the center of the village, a bonfire had been lit. Benches, chairs, stools, even roughly hewn logs big enough to sit on had been dragged to the center for an impromptu celebration. Before the fire, the Chantry sister waited for them patiently, her hands tucked into her robes. “Your Worship,” the sister stepped forward and bowed to Eluned, “the village of Crestwood wishes to express our gratitude to you and the Inquisition. Without your help, we would surely have perished. The troubles have burdened our little community heavily but what little we have, is yours. Will you pray with us?”

Eluned caught the stiff look from Cassandra and bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from laughing. She nodded to the sister and bowed her head.

She looked up, through her lashes, around the square at everyone that had their heads bowed as the sister prayed aloud. There were a few heads that weren’t bowed, namely that of Solas and Iron Bull. Iron Bull raised a brow at her when she caught his eye and she gave a slight shrug in reply. When in Rome, or Crestwood, as the case may be.

“Maker guide you,” the sister finished. The devoted echoed the invocation.

As one, the village seemed to waken and come alive, shaking off the despair and fear that had gripped them in the previous weeks before the Inquisition had arrived. Mugs and goblets of drink, ale and mead from what Eluned could tell, were handed out to everyone. A tankard was pressed into her own hand, the astringent tang of hops tickled her nose, but before she could take a sip, a large grey hand nimbly took the tankard and replaced it just as quickly with a goblet of sweeter mead. She shrugged, whatever. She liked mead better than ale anyway.

“That was very gracious of you,” Cassandra commented sitting down on her right. “I know that you don’t believe but it was a nice gesture for the villagers.”

Eluned lowered her goblet and gave the Seeker an exasperated look. “I can be nice you know when people aren’t trying to bully me or generally act like assholes.”

“Josephine will be relieved.”
“Josephine knows how not to be either.”

“That’s not—” she stiffened. She sighed, “I apologize for earlier. I should have realized that you
wouldn’t have experience with something so Fereldan as mabari. It was wrong of me to chastise you
like I did. You are my leader, not a raw recruit on a training field, and it was inappropriate.”

“Apology accepted, Cassandra.”

Eluned took the opportunity to look around as the Chantry sister sat down on Cassandra’s other side
and started a conversation about the mayor’s whereabouts and funeral arrangements for the dead.
Varric had a large gathering around him and he looked to be in the middle of some riveting tale,
hopefully about the Champion but judging from the occasional glances being shot her way, he
wasn’t talking about Hawke. Blackwall seemed to be in a serious discussion with an animated young
elven woman. Surprisingly, or perhaps not, Dorian and Vivienne were sitting together; they existed
in their own bubble which probably suited the two of them well enough. She glanced around and
couldn’t find Solas; no doubt he had already retired or was keeping Cole company. Sera was—Sera
was flitting in and out of the crowd and was trailed by a bunch of giggling children.

“Here,” Iron Bull’s voice rumbled from behind her as he reached over her shoulder with a plain
wooden trencher filled with shredded meat and some sort of mashed vegetable.

She glanced over her shoulder as she accepted the food. “Are you going to take over for Dehari and
become my lady’s maid?” she joked. Something flickered across his gaze and she looked away,
thankful for the low light that covered the heat that crept into her cheeks.

“No, just making sure you got something safe.”

Her eyes snapped back to his, “safe?” She lowered the plate.

He shrugged. “Doesn’t hurt to be cautious. Made sure that all came from a communal supply and
never out of my sight.”

She gave him a weak nod and studied the plate of food. She never considered that someone would
try to poison her—stab her in the back, run her through with a sword—sure, but poison hadn’t really
crossed her mind. Her appetite fled. She forced herself to eat, she choked down as much as she could
despite the food tasting like ashes after that revelation.

With her dinner set aside, an older gentleman, a farmer by the looks of him, and a child approached.
The man twisted a cap in his hand nervously, by contrast the little girl looked excited enough to
burst. “I… beggin’ your pardon, Your Worship,” he faltered as three sets of eyes landed on him. His
own eyes widened further if it were possible as Iron Bull shifted behind Eluned. “Um… um, my wee
one—Cora—insisted on bringing you the flowers she picked.” Eluned beckoned the little girl
forward who didn’t look to be more than six or seven, and the farmer continued to speak. “Normally
she’d give her little posies to her mama, but, well,” he glanced away for a moment, struggling with
his emotions, “Cora hasn’t had anyone to give her posies to for goin’ on three months now.”

“I’m sorry,” Eluned gestured.

“We’re sorry to hear of your loss,” Cassandra said.

He looked at the ground, blinking rapidly, and nodded, “’twas the winter fever. Was nothin’ could
be done.” He shrugged helplessly, twisting his cap further.

Cora still held on to the handful of ragged wildflowers and looked at Eluned curiously. Her father
hissed in fright when she reached up her little hand and touched Eluned’s lips, running her fingertips
over the bumps of scars surrounding them. “Your Worship! I’m sorry, she din’t mean to cause offense!”

Eluned gently grasped the little girl’s hand and drew it away from her lips. She smiled at the little girl then looked up at the father. “It’s fine. Children are curious. No harm.”

“Thank you, Your Worship. She was so eager to give you the flowers. She picked ‘em when we was out looking for our druffalo, Tulip. With the bandits, an’ wolves, an’ Maker knows what else roaming the hills, we couldn’t afford to lose our last…” he trailed off as Eluned shot Cassandra a pained look.

Cassandra rummaged in one of their packs and pulled out the cleaned, tattered remains of the collar and bell. “I am sorry to deliver more bad news to you,” she said, handing over the collar.

“Oh.” He looked at the collar like he didn’t understand what he was seeing, then abruptly collapsed onto one of the stumps. “Oh Maker, what are we going to do now? Tulip was our finest druffalo. She was pregnant, and I had such high hopes that the calf would fetch a decent price at the market to get us back on our feet. We have nothing left now.” He stared at Cora like he was memorizing every hair on her head then he drew back his shoulders and stiffened his back. “There’s nothing for it now, I’ll have to indenture myself,” he winced as he studied his daughter, beckoning her over into his arms, “the Chantries still run the orphanages, don’t they? Cora will be safer there than selling—”

“No!” Eluned gestured sharply.

“Inquisitor,” Cassandra cautioned.

“No Cassandra. Selling himself into slavery is not the answer.”

“But—”

“No. The Inquisition is growing. Cullen and Josephine were both discussing our needs and that included our own food production. We’ll need farm hands, people skilled with livestock.”

Cassandra considered what Eluned was saying and slowly nodded her head. The farmer looked between the women unable to follow the conversation.

“Tell him Cassandra. Tell him to report to the Inquisition for a job.”

“The Inquisitor said that you are to report to Skyhold for a position. The Inquisition is in need of your skills.”

The farmer’s eyes widened. “What is the l-length…” he stopped, horrified that he questioned such a gift. “I mean, with respect Your Worship, what of Cora?”

Eluned pressed her lips together, he didn’t understand. She spoke slowly so he could understand her, “you will be paid a wage. You may leave when you wish. There are other families in Skyhold. I’m sure arrangements can be made for Cora to be cared for while you are in the field. You will be given quarters for the two of you to remain together.”

The farmer stared at her with his mouth open in shock for several very long seconds—she wondered if she was going to need to check him for a pulse—when he suddenly threw himself onto his knees before her. Before she had a chance to flinch back, he grabbed both her hands with his own and pressed his lips to the backs of them. “Thank you, Your Worship. Maker bless you! Thank you.”

She smiled tightly and worked on extricating her hands from his grip. On either side of her
Cassandra and Iron Bull shifted catching the attention of the farmer. He abruptly let go and stood up, gathering Cora to him. “Thank you, Your Worship. We’ll gather our things and make our way to Skyhold at first light.” He bowed and backed away, bowing once more before he turned and disappeared into the dark.

Eluned stood up, exhausted with all the attention, touching, and grabbing. “Well that was exciting. I think I’ll retire to my bed.”

Iron Bull stepped in beside her, “come on, Boss. I’ll make sure no one else accosts you on your way.”

The morning dawned cool with frost sparkling on every surface; it was blessedly free of rain. The bonfire at the center of the village still smouldered and more than a few people remained sleeping in piles close by, having had too much to drink to bother staggering back to whatever hut might have been their own. Eluned smiled to herself; Crestwood was probably going to have a population boom in about nine months time. She headed over to the fire and the spot she had occupied the previous evening to find Solas already there. He poured her a cup of broth from one of the pots he had hanging over their own little fire.

“You’re up early, Inquisitor.”

“Couldn’t sleep any more.”

He looked at her critically, “nightmares?”

She nodded, “kept dreaming that I was drowning. That hands kept pulling me under.”

He frowned and asked, “do you know how to ward your dreams?”

She shook her head. “No. Kaaras helped me immensely when I was freed of my collar, but he couldn’t help me with the nightmares except to comfort me after I woke.”

“If you wish, I could instruct you. It would be better to do so once we’ve returned to Skyhold, but if you continue to be troubled as we travel, I can ward the Fade for you at night.”

“Thank you,” she gestured. “Did you find what you were looking for yesterday?”

“Yes. I found an ancient elven artifact buried in some rubble in Old Crestwood.”

“Really?” She glanced around to see if there was anyone around to listen in on their conversation. “Like the orb?”

He shook his head, “no, nothing like that. It was a device to measure and stabilize the Veil. I was able to activate it, it should help to prevent future rifts from opening here.”

“Do you think there are others?”

“Yes, there should be. They’re meant to work together to create a net to bolster each other. We should look for them.”

She nodded and then scrambled to keep her balance on the log she was sitting on when it shifted sharply under Iron Bull’s weight. She hissed as her cup of hot broth splashing over her fingers.

He scratched at a horn and peered into the pots. “Got anything in those pots besides broth, Solas?”
“The porridge isn’t ready yet if that’s what you are after.”

Iron Bull looked over at Eluned who was busy licking the spilled broth off her fingers and brushed some drops from her breeches before it soaked into the leather. She scowled at him.

He grunted. “Prickly today.” He smirked when she flipped a single finger gesture at him. “We goin’ after that dragon today, Boss?”

“What’s this about a dragon?” Blackwall asked sitting down on another log and accepting a bowl of the porridge Solas had started to portion out.

“Asked the Boss if we’re going after that dragon.”

“Hmm, these people have been through enough. Would be good to take care of that for them too.”

She nodded reluctantly; the villagers had suffered enough. She had seen the extent of it the night before when that farmer had seriously considered selling himself and his daughter into slavery just to survive. How many others were that desperate?

Blackwall scratched at his neck under his beard making it stick out in unruly tufts until he smoothed it back down. “Better go wake the others; head out before the sun gets too high.”

Eluned was surprised to see how quickly everyone readied themselves to go hunting a dragon. She had stood and faced one dragon already—one on a leash—she wasn’t looking forward to taking on another. She had no clue how one took down a dragon without being eaten first. Fortunately, at least one of them—two, if Varric’s stories were to be believed—had real experience killing dragons.

Long before arriving at the crumbled tower the local farmers told them about the previous evening, they could see the dragon perched on one of the high towers on the edge of the cliff. The sun glittered on its scales in bands of bronze, ochre, and silver; it had three sets of horns, a great pair that swept back following the lines of its head but another two pair that curved around under its eyes and jaw. Perfect for funnelling its prey straight into its mouth, she thought. Its head draped down over the wall toward the ground below it, the wings laid loosely along its back, and its tail disappeared behind the wall towards the cliff behind it. The dragon looked like it was sleeping.

Cassandra waved for everyone to take cover; they were a good distance away from the dragon yet but any closer and they would have very little cover to stop and discuss a strategy. “It’s a Northern Hunter. They’re opportunistic, taking whatever prey is easiest so they aren’t particularly good fighters. It will stay close to the ground choosing to use teeth and claws, and its breath. If it rears up on its hind legs, it’s going to try to use its wings to pull you closer. That won’t be a problem for those of us that are in melee range but for the rest, you will be in the most danger.” She scanned the area below the dragon and pointed to four locations, “there are partial walls, use them for cover. Solas, Vivienne, and Dorian, keep barriers up.”

Eluned pressed her lips together at Cassandra’s omission of Cole, but then she supposed that Cole would do what Cole did and Cassandra knew it. She also wasn’t going to argue with Cassandra about her role in the fight; her barriers weren’t nearly as good as those of the other mages.

“Inquisitor, use your fire to distract it—aim for the head—the rest can go in for the legs and underbelly.”

The dragon was very perceptive, it didn’t give them a chance to get into proper position before it launched from its spot atop the wall and swooped down on them as they raced to the ruined walls. The mages threw barriers over everyone as they sprinted to the ruins, Varric’s crossbow thumped in
quick succession causing the dragon to veer away temporarily as they got to cover. Iron Bull, Blackwall, and Cassandra moved to the center where they wanted to draw the dragon and bellowed to get its attention. The dragon roared back and spat a ball of lightning at where the three stood, they scattered before it could do any damage to them, the lightning crackled over the damp grass and dissipated quickly.

The dragon hit the ground with a jarring thud that rattled Eluned’s bones.

The warrior rushed in hacking and slashing at the legs and under belly; Eluned saw Cole dart in and out, his blades flickering in the sunlight. Varric’s bolts and Sera’s arrows scored damaging hits sporadically but served to distract the dragon as they bounced off the tougher upper scales of the grounded creature.

Eluned held her mana ready to take a shot at the dragon if it turned her way, but so far, the action was on the other side of the ruins from her position.

Iron Bull roared at the dragon in Qunlat and scored a nasty gash to its back leg; it spun around, its tail slammed into the stone wall Eluned ducked behind knocking a few loose stones from the top of the wall onto her. A few larger stones fell, glancing off her shoulder but otherwise did little damage. She peeked out and took the opportunity to shoot a gout of fire into the dragon’s face as it focused on the qunari in front of it. The dragon bellowed in rage as she scored a direct hit to one of its eyes.

The dragon reared up on its hind legs just as Cassandra had warned them. Eluned ducked down behind her segment of wall with her back against it; dirt and debris from around the area started to rush past her, caught in the drag of the dragon’s wings. She ducked her head down and draped her arm across her eyes as more debris pelted her in the face. Abruptly the wall gave out behind her, apparently weakened from the tail strike, and she found herself being drawn across the ground on her back by the vortex, she flipped over onto her stomach and attempted to dig her fingers into the ground to resist the pull. The ground was soft and loamy, her fingers simply made furrows in the soil as she was pulled ever closer to the dragon.

“Inquisitor!”

Eluned flipped over onto her back once more and was greeted by the sight of the dragon’s open mouth growing closer as it descended on her, saliva dripped and foul, rotten bits of carrion flesh dangled from the jagged teeth, and she could see the spark of lightning crackling in the back of the creature’s throat. She shrieked soundlessly in terror and instinctively pulled as hard as she could on her mana and cast fire—napalm—down the throat of the dragon. The dragon reared its head up and staggered back, whipping itself back and forth as the liquid fire started to erode through the flesh of its throat and pour down its chest.

A hand grabbed her by the front of her jacket and yanked her to her feet. “Go! Now!” Iron Bull ordered her as he spun her around to face another segment of wall.

She sprinted for cover. The fine hairs on her skin and the nape of her neck rose, it was the only warning she got before she was knocked off her feet from the dragon’s last attempt to save itself by sending out a wave of lightning. She slid across the grass on her front and rolled over onto her back immediately in case the dragon was behind her. She let her head fall back to the ground, heedless of the dirt and debris, in relief as a cheer went up from the ruins that the dragon was dead. She closed her eyes and just breathed for a few minutes to gather herself.

“Inquisitor?”

Eluned could hear the concern in Solas’ voice. She cracked one eye open to look at him.
“Are you well?”

She nodded. He offered his hand to help her up. This time she could see a twitch in his lips as his concern morphed into amusement once he confirmed that she was fine. She must have looked a sight; her hair was escaping her braid and sticking to her face and neck, there were leaves stuck in her collar, chunks of grass and dirt smeared into the leather of her coat, and she could feel mud smeared on her face. She took a swipe at her cheeks and chin.

“Ah, you’ve scraped your chin,” he said pulling out a scrap of cloth from his pack and hesitated with it before her face.

“Solas, I swear—if you spit on that to wipe my face—I will punch you.”

A fleeting look of disgust crossed his face before he realized what she was referring to; the amused twitch turned into a snort of laughter that he quickly choked back. “I wouldn’t dream of it, da’len.”

“I know what that means, smart ass.” Her eyes widened in surprise as the normally stoic elf laughed out loud.

“Everything okay over there?”

“Everything is fine, Master Tethras.” He dampened the rag from his water skin and handed it to her to wash her face then healed the scrape on her chin.

They walked back to where the others were gathered around the dragon carcass. Eluned looked at the others who looked sweaty or a bit dusty, but none of them looked like they had been dragged through a hedge backwards like she had. “How come you guys are still so tidy?” she asked indigantly.

“Our walls stayed up,” Varric replied sheepishly. “You really okay?”

“Other than my teeth feeling like they should be vibrating out of my skull from that last shot, I’m fine.” She watched Iron Bull run his hands over the dragon’s scales, she gave her head a little shake and diverted her gaze; the look on his face was making her insides do weird things. She addressed Cassandra, “what do we do with this now? Is dragon meat edible?”

“Much of the dragon can be harvested for weapons and armour, as well as magical applications. The meat can be eaten. We’ll send some of the Inquisition people from the keep with butchery skills; some meat will go to waste, we won’t be able to harvest and cure it fast enough to be sent on to Skyhold. There’s simply too much of it.”

Eluned cocked her head in thought, “send a portion to every villager in Crestwood. If anyone if Crestwood can assist, they can have an extra portion for their efforts.”

“Splendid idea, Inquisitor,” Vivienne commented wrinkling her nose slightly, “however, you should not be seen in such a state. I believe there is a hot spring under Caer Bronach, you should avail yourself of it at your earliest convenience.”

Eluned ignored the dig that always seemed present in Vivienne’s words and smiled politely at the immaculate enchanter; a soak in the hot springs did seem like a wonderful idea. In the morning, they’d head back to Skyhold.

She was just about to lead them back to across the countryside back to the keep when she spotted something shining up on the ruined tower. She scrambled up the broken stairs, ignoring the scattered bones and remains of animals the dragon had feasted on, to the top of the platform where she found
another ocularum. *So, the Venatori were looking for those fragments here too.*

“All right, are you still collecting those creepy things?” Sera complained.

On the way back to Caer Bronach, Eluned gained three more fragments and another Tranquil skull to put to rest.
“You can’t go to the Western Approach right now! The Empress will be holding peace talks at the Winter Palace in five weeks time and we must be there.”

“While I agree with you Josie, we can’t not ignore the situation with the Wardens. If Corypheus is controlling them—”

“If the Empress is assassinated and Orlais falls, what happens with the Wardens will be of little consequence!”

Eluned glanced over at Cullen who was frowning at the map as if it had personally offended him. She rapped her knuckles against the table startling him out of his contemplation. “You are unusually silent today, Commander. Do you have any opinions?”

He studied the map again and she thought she'd have to jog his attention again, when he finally spoke, “you can make it to the Approach and back in twenty-five days if you move swiftly—”

“Commander!”

Cullen pulled himself upright and rested his hands on the pommel of his sword to address Josephine. “The world doesn’t stop for a party despite what the Empress might think or want. If the Wardens are responsible for this demon army the Inquisitor saw in that future, the Empress may in fact be appreciative of the Inquisition’s assistance in stopping it before her country is over-run and any future parties spoiled.” The ambassador blinked at him in surprise.

“It’s four days of travel from here to Halamshiral leaving you only six to provision yourself for your trip, meet with Hawke and her Warden contact, and deal with whatever you find,” warned Leliana. She chewed on the inside of her lip as she considered the map. “If I meet you in Halamshiral rather than return to Skyhold before the peace talks, that gives me an extra week leeway.”

“But that doesn’t give enough time to prepare you!” Josephine protested. “It’s not just a matter of walking into the ball and killing the assassins before they kill Celene. We will all have to play the Game. You need to know who all the players are, recognize all the houses by the masks they wear—”

Eluned’s face twisted with distaste.

“Be able to mask your own feelings and thoughts,” Leliana added, “know the correct things to say, when and whom to say them to.” Eluned shot her a look; she thought Leliana would have argued in favour of her trip to the Western Approach.
“There are other considerations as well, clothing, dance lessons…”

“Oh, come on! You can’t be serious?”

“We are deadly serious, Inquisitor,” Leliana replied.

Eluned huffed in frustration. A glance to Cullen offered no help as he was back to frowning at the map, although she was pretty sure he was just trying to keep his head down and not pulled into the Winter Ball preparations himself. “Fine. I assume that the seamstress or whomever is responsible for putting together our clothing for the event are already here or will soon be arriving in Skyhold?”

“Yes, they’re here and are discussing designs with Madame Vivienne. But several fittings will be needed for dresses…”

She held her hand up, “I’m going to stop an assassination not flirt and dance to land a husband.” Cullen snorted and fell into a fit of coughing to cover his laugh and wisely kept his mouth shut after she glared at him. “I need pants.”

“But…”

“Pants. I will see the seamstress later today. They can take measurements and work from that. Next, how are you to instruct me on the masks and family histories?”

“We have samples of the masks…”

“We have dozens of researchers and Tranquil that can draw. Have them make sketches and compile them into a book with the family history and any important information. I’ll study it on the road. What else?”

“Dancing,” Josephine said weakly, still scribbling notes.

“Dorian would know all the expected dances, wouldn’t he? Despite being from Tevinter. I’m sure I can get him to teach me, it will be very amusing for him.”

“Well, yes…”

“And Vivienne, I’m sure will be able to critique.”

“Yes…”

“So dancing and deportment covered. What else?”

Josephine opened and shut her mouth, pressing her lips together. Leliana smirked and shook her head; she had nothing else to be addressed personally by Eluned, nor did Cullen.

“Good. I will see Ser Morris about requisitions if you three can see to the rest.” Josephine raised her quill to interject. “I will go to Vivienne’s to meet with the seamstress as soon as I speak with Ser Morris.” The quill lowered.

Before the others came up with any objections, Eluned was out the door and headed down the great hall. “Songbird! I don’t think I’ve ever seen you escape one of those meetings this quickly.”

“If they want me to deal with the Wardens and Celene, arguing for days wasn’t going to help.”

“We have a plan?”
“Yes. We leave for the Western Approach in three days.”

“Well then, I guess we better make the most of tonight then. You’re joining us, right?”

She narrowed her eyes with suspicion, “joining you for what, precisely?”

“Cards and drinks to celebrate. It’s not every day you take down a dragon. Now before you say no, it’s only going to be your closest companions. Cabot’s already cordoned off the upper level for us.” Eluned hesitated. Varric put his hand on her arm to stall her, “because I know you haven’t been in the tavern yet, I’ll be your personal escort.” He patted her on the arm when she finally relented with a nod, “I’ll see you later, Inquisitor.”

Eluned tucked some loose hairs from her braid behind her ear and smiled to herself as she headed up the stairs to Vivienne’s solar. Seldom did the meetings go so smoothly with her advisors deferring to her as easily as they had today. Since Crestwood, particularly since the interaction with the spirit of Command, it was like she found a new confidence that she hadn’t had before, or rather she had reclaimed some of the confidence she used to have before her life was so drastically changed. She also had to admit that she was looking forward to doing something fun for a change, even if she just ended up watching the others play card games she didn’t know.

Vivienne’s normally open sitting area above the great hall was obscured with a series of folding screens affording her area with additional privacy from all other areas of the hall. The chaises had been relocated to the sides to leave the center of the balcony before the tall windows and doors clear and well lit for the seamstress. Small, portable braziers were lit giving the area additional warmth for standing around in one’s smalls while proper measurements were taken. Bolts of fabrics, laces, ribbons, and baubles were spread out over tidy stands, rows of shoes organized along the wall under the windows, but the display of masks laid out on a tray chipped at Eluned’s previous good mood as a feeling of dread welled up inside her. She tore her eyes away as Vivienne stood up from her own chaise.

“There you are darling,” she beckoned Eluned forward. Josephine was already present, as well there were a pair of elven women that Eluned could only assume were the seamstress’ assistants. “Inquisitor, allow me to introduce you to my favourite couturière, Madame Paonne. Her designs are the most highly coveted by members of the Court and she was good enough to honour us with her skills.” With barely a pause, she continued, “Matine, meet the Inquisitor.”

Matine Paonne dipped a curtsey to Eluned, “enchanté. The honour and privilege are mine, Inquisitor.” The seamstress held her hand out to direct her to a screened corner of Vivienne’s solar. “If you would disrobe—” she barely managed to curb her look of distaste for Eluned’s current clothing of breeches, tunic, scarf, and jacket, “to your smalls, à votre plaisir.”

Eluned ducked behind the screen and reluctantly doffed the jacket, unwound the scarf from around her neck, and then the rest of her clothing. She left on her wool socks that covered the bandages she wrapped around her feet to provide support for the missing toes. She didn’t like to look at her mangled feet and didn’t like showing them to anyone else either.

“There is a wrap you may use, Inquisitor,” the helpful voice of the seamstress offered. Eluned looked around and spotted the fine silken robe placed over the back of a chair. Settling it over her shoulders, she realized that it was the finest piece of clothing she had ever worn in Thedas and yet, it was nothing that she wouldn’t have found in mid-level lingerie store back home. She felt a sudden, odd pang of homesickness at the thought.

Steeling herself, she stepped out from around the screen. One of the elves tittered with laughter upon
spotting her socks but was quickly silenced by a look from Madame Paonne. She noticed, as well, that Leliana had arrived when she was disrobing.

“Come, come now, Inquisitor,” the seamstress hovered around Eluned herding her towards the little dais set up for measuring and draping fabrics, “we are all ladies here, nothing to be ashamed about.”

Eluned stepped onto the dais; five years of being unable to scratch her own nose, wipe her own bum, or bathe herself destroyed any sense of embarrassment at being bare before strangers, but the woman’s brisk demeanor irratified her, nonetheless. The seamstress might have been trying to be matter-of-fact about the process, but as a result, Eluned felt she had become an object to be scrutinized and critiqued. She gritted her teeth and repressed the urge to flinch—avoiding the arvaarad’s hand was forbidden—as the woman grasped the robe from her shoulders and drew it briskly from her arms.

The seamstress gasped. “Mesdames, il faut revoir les dessins! Son dos est une honte, nous ne pouvons pas montrer cette horreur à la Cour. Le scandale serait insurmontable!”

Josephine blanched as all expression leached from Eluned’s face and her eyes slid out of focus.

“I believe, Matine,” Vivienne drawled, watching Eluned closely, “that the Inquisitor understood every word you said.”

The seamstress stepped around, wide-eyed, and babbling apologies in both Common and Orlesian. Eluned slowly shifted her gaze to the woman before sliding her focus back to the view beyond Vivienne’s balcony. “Get on with it.”

The seamstress and her assistants fluttered around her, pressing the measuring tape here, wrapping it around there. Eluned silently lifted her arms and moved as directed, offering no other interaction with the woman. Even the chatter from other other women present fell into an uncomfortable silence.

“My lady Inquisitor,” Madame Paonne placed the robe back over Eluned’s shoulders, “we need measurements of your feet to send to the cobbler. ‘Would you be so kind to remove the socks?’

Eluned stepped off the dais, pulled off the socks, and stepped back on. The bandages that wrapped her feet still in place.

The seamstress hesitated after looking at Eluned’s feet. “The bandages—”

“Feet were severely damaged after Haven. They stay on.” She leveled a look at the seamstress when she opened her mouth to protest again.

The seamstress and assistants fluttered around her, trying to get her to try on one shoe after another. Josephine, Leliana, and Vivienne also made suggestions, but she rejected any shoes that had any height in the heel and placed pressure on the ball of her foot and toes. Finally, Madame Paonne threw up her hands in defeat. “A flat slipper or boot,” her lips twisted on the last word, “will have to do.”

Vivienne placated her as Eluned was excused to get dressed again. “Darling, you are brilliant. You will think of something to go beautifully with the Inquisitor’s wardrobe.”

Eluned stepped out from behind the screen, fully clothed and her feet hidden once again within her boots, already thinking about what else she needed to deal with before leaving for the Western Approach. She still needed to go check with Dagna on the sword the Chargers found in Haven and she needed to introduce herself to the person that would be training her in the techniques of the knight enchanter discipline.
“Inquisitor, before you leave there is one more thing we must address—” the seamstress said stepping in behind her. She lowered a mask over Eluned’s face and tied the ribbons behind her head with quick efficiency. “There’s a perfect fit, non?”

Eluned gasped at the feel of the mask against her skin, the hairs accidentally caught in the ribbon tie at the back of her head. Cold sweat popped out along the edge of her hairline. She looked for a chair to sit down but her view was obscured, and she couldn’t see where it was. Her hands flailed uselessly. Her breath started coming in sharp, shallow gasps. Panicking, she reached up with both hands and yanked the mask from her face, oblivious to the hairs she ripped out with the ribbon and dashed the porcelain mask to the floor.

She staggered away from the shocked women and hurried down the stairs, pressing her both hands against the wall to keep herself upright. She forced herself to straighten up and briskly exited through the door at the bottom into the hall, waiving off people that immediately gravitated toward her seeking a word or some reason for her attention, and ducked out the next side door leading to the garden. Following the path through the garden to a secluded corner, she sunk to her knees in the dormant grass, the cold from the earth seeping through the leather of her breeches. She closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind of the memories the mask brought up.

She finally got her mind calm and pushed aside the discomfort of her knees and other nagging sensations when a hand on her shoulder broke her meditation. She cracked open an eye to find Varric standing before her with a peculiar look on his face. She glanced around and noticed that the day had progressed further along than she thought it had and she wondered how long he had been trying to get her attention.

“There you are. Welcome back, Inquisitor.” He stepped back and offered his hand to help her up. “I came to escort you, as promised.”

Eluned sighed and tried to cover the wince as she regained her feet, “I think I’ll just call it a day Varric.”

“Oh no you don’t, Songbird. You said you were going to join us and join us you shall. If anyone needs to chance to unwind, it’s you.” He paused in thought for a moment, “huh. I seem to recall having this same conversation with Fenris.” He shook his head, “look, I might be shorter than you, but I can still toss you over my shoulder and carry you to the tavern kicking and—well, you get the idea.”

She raised her brow at him. “Did you threaten him with the same treatment?”

He snorted, “I haven’t seen you put your hand through anyone’s chest yet, so I’ll risk it.” He offered his arm which she relented and took, letting him lead her. “Good. Dignity is a good choice.” He led her to the tavern and upstairs past everyone on the lower level; as promised, only her companions minus Cassandra, Solas, and Vivienne were present.

Eluned sat down at the table next to Dorian, who moved around to the next seat, so she could sit with her back to the wall. A mug of mead immediately landed in front of her which she gratefully downed half of it before putting the mug down again.

After a few minutes to let everyone settle down, Varric piped up, “I heard a rumour, Songbird.”

She raised a brow at him in question.

“I heard a rumour that Madame Paonne was inconsolable after your fitting.”
She scowled at mention of the woman.

“I heard that they had to get a smith to take the hinges after she locked herself into a closet,” Dorian gleefully added.

Sera cackled. “What did you do to the woman?”

“Nothing. It’s not my fault the woman has a guilty conscience.”

“You musta done something.”

She huffed and shook her head. “She said some rather, rude things in Fr—Orlesian—thinking I didn’t understand. Vivienne helpfully informed her that I did.”

“What did you do?”

“I stood patiently and waited for her to take her measurements.”

Sera sat up in her chair and jerked her head back, incredulous. “That’s it? No fire or nothin’?” She slumped back down, disappointed, when Eluned shook her head. “But—"

Varric gave Eluned an appraising look, “you might not realise it, Songbird, but there are times when you can be terrifying. No magic required.”

She glanced into her mug, embarrassed. “They hardly think I was terrifying when I fled Vivienne’s solar.”

“Wot?”

“Buttercup…” Varric warned Sera, his pinched frown of confusion started to clear as he began to realise that her rush through the hall earlier in the day and solitary meditation in the garden was more than just impatience with the seamstress.

“Masks.” Eluned rubbed her fingers against a pale pressure scar along the edge of her brow. “They just put it on, and I couldn’t see.” Her eyes started to glaze over, “it always pulled and ached in my hair. Itchy from the sweat...sticking...and the flies—"

She startled badly when her hands were gently but firmly pulled from where she had been scrubbing at her face and the memory of the saarebas mask. Her eyes snapped into focus on her hands held in a pair of grey hands, thumbs rubbing soothing circles across the backs of her own. She jerked again in surprise and her eyes flew up to find Iron Bull watching her closely.

“There you are, Boss. You’re in Skyhold. No one’s putting a mask on you.” Her eyes remained fixed on his face as she blinked rapidly.

She lowered her gaze to the middle of his chest and glanced around quickly from the corners of her eyes. “Where is everyone?”

“I sent them downstairs for drinks to give you a few minutes.”

She sagged. “I thought I was getting better.”

“You are, but some things are still going to set you off.” He paused in thought and lowered his voice, “some things still effect me, and I left Seheron years ago. But you learn what gets to you and you deal with it.”
They sat silently for a few minutes. “You want me to get Kaaras?”

She shook her head and looked at him, weighing a decision. “Just… don’t make a big deal about this…” Eluned slid off her seat and sideways onto Iron Bull’s lap, she wrapped an arm around his waist while she rested her head against his chest to listen to the slow, steady thump of his heart.

Iron Bull gently wrapped his arms around her and after a moment’s hesitation rested his chin on her head. “Take all the time you need, Boss,” his voice rumbled in his chest under her ear. She steadied her breath, keeping time with his own until she finally felt grounded again. She extricated herself and pressed her right hand against his chest in thanks. He caught her hand under his own before she could pull it away and gave it a light squeeze, “any time, Boss. Any time.”

She froze for a second; she remembered him holding her hand against his chest in Redcliffe just as he did now. He held her hand and told her that she could trust him, then sacrificed himself to give her and Dorian time to return and prevent that horrible future from happening. She gave him a small smile and pulled away, returning to her seat while he got up and called the others back to the table.

By the time the others returned to their seats, Eluned had wiped away any signs of her distress from her face and had settled back onto her seat against the wall. Solas had joined the others and took an open spot off to the side of the table, happy to watch the card game.

“You’re not playing cards, Solas?” Blackwall asked.

“No, you have enough hands. I’m content to watch.” Solas hid the subtle curl of a smile in his cup before continuing, “besides, I think I’ve won enough from you.”

“There’s a story there,” Iron Bull prompted.

When Solas remained silent, Blackwall sighed, “I made the mistake of playing Diamondback with Solas. I had to walk back to my quarters with nothing but a bucket for my bits.”

Sera giggled, swinging her leg back and forth over the arm of her chair, “bucket o’bits!”

After several hands of Wicked Grace, during which she managed to steal some of Dorian’s coins from his pile to her own—she wasn’t sure if Dorian was aware—but Varric was having a hard time concealing his own grin, Eluned was feeling very light and warm. She seldom drank beyond the odd bit of mead or watered wine but that evening she had consumed two big mugs of mead and was ready for a third. Iron Bull got up after the last hand and disappeared to the lower level of the tavern, no doubt to check that his Chargers weren’t getting too rowdy.

“Hey Songbird, you know Qunlat, right?” Eluned nodded. “What’s the meaning of the words Tiny shouted when we were fighting that dragon?”

She paused to recall what she had heard then blushed. Taarsidath-an halsaam.

“Oh ho! From the colour of your face, it was something dirty,” Varric chortled.

“Come on, tell us!” Sera wheedled.

She felt the heat rise even more and ducked her head with the pretense of checking the level of mead in her cup. Finding it empty, she reached over and plucked Dorian’s unattended glass of wine from in front of him.

“It means ‘I will bring myself sexual pleasure later, while thinking about this with great respect’,” Iron Bull supplied as he returned to the table and distributed empty cups in front of everyone. He
filled each cup with a dark red coloured liquor before sitting down in his spot.

“You shouted that while fightin’ the dragon? You’re a daft tit, you are.”

He grinned at Sera, “I know, right?” He gave a grunt that Eluned couldn’t imagine being anything but sexual. “That roar, what I wouldn’t give to roar like that! The way the ground shook when it landed and the smell of the fire burning. Taarsidath-an halsaan.”

“I’m fairly certain the smell of fire was our dear Inquisitor’s contribution,” Dorian replied, dryly.

Iron Bull looked around at the others and stopped on Eluned, he raised the cup with the dark red liquid, “to killing a high dragon like warriors of legend!"

Dorian took a sniff of his glass and reared back in shock, “what exactly are we supposed to be drinking?”

“Maraas-lok,” Iron Bull replied, not taking his eye off Eluned.

“And what exactly does that mean?” Blackwall asked, cautiously peering into his cup.

“It means drink!”

Eluned snorted a laugh. *Well that was one interpretation of the phrase.* She took a deep breath and raised her glass and shot the alcohol back. She squeezed her eyes shut to stop them from watering at the fiery burn of alcohol pouring down her throat. Her eyes popped open and she slammed the empty glass down on the table and succumbed to the cough that had been trying to strangle her.

Everyone stared at her in shock. “Maker’s balls,” Blackwall swore, “the Inquisitor can drink.”

“Niiiiiiice! Put some chest on your chest.” He reached over and refilled her cup. He refilled his own and held it up expectantly.

She held his gaze and threw the second drink back just like the first. Her eyes watered but it didn’t choke her as badly as the first.

“Yes! The second one is easier; most of the nerves in your throat are dead after the first one.”

They fell back to playing cards and after a finding that she couldn’t concentrate on the cards anymore, Eluned bowed out and sat back to watch. The two shots of maraas-lok had ramped up the pleasant warm and light feeling she was experiencing earlier, and she realized that she was drunk for the first time in years. She leaned her head back against the wall and enjoyed the mellow drunk sensation and noise of conversation around her.

After a while, she noticed that the conversation around her had stopped but she didn’t remember anyone telling her that they were calling it a night. She cracked open an eye and found everyone staring at her again. She sluggishly lifted her head from where it rested against the wall and blinked owlishly at them. “What?”

“You were singing—well, whistling a tune,” Varric told her.

“Was not,” she protested.

“Yeah, you were,” Sera argued. “You were wavin’ your hands in time with the tune an’ everything.”

She was about to argue that they were having her on when Varric started to whistle. Her head fell forward in shock as she recognized the marching tune from “The Bridge Over the River Kwai”. One
by one, they all joined in and The Herald’s Rest tavern became the most bizarre version of the library scene from “The Breakfast Club” starring The Iron Bull as Bender, Blackwall as the jock, and—Eluned giggled—Vivienne was missing so that had to make Dorian, Claire. She clapped her hands over her mouth to stifle the laughter and watched each of them as they continued to whistle the tune in a silly little round before dissolving into laughter themselves. It made her a little homesick, but at the same time, she felt genuinely happy for the first time that she could remember.

Meanwhile, in Qunander…


Arishok held his hand out for the scroll as he continued to read another report before him. Placing the first aside, he unrolled the scroll and quickly perused the parchment and grunted in response. “You witnessed the interrogation of this Tal-Vashoth yourself?”

“Yes, Arishok.”

“You are also convinced of his words?”

“Yes, Arishok. Even under questioning with saar-qamek, he did not falter in any detail; a manufactured story would not hold up against such questioning. His conviction of the identity did not waiver. It is the one we seek.”

“And yet the Ben-Hassrath within the Inquisition has not reported such. Why is that?”

“Hissrad may not be aware of its identity—” the qunari faltered under the glare leveled on them.

“Is he still loyal to the demands of the Qun?”

“We have no reason—”

Arishok’s hard gaze pinned the other qunari in place.

“We don’t know, Arishok.”

“What of the other matter?”

“Shipments of red lyrium appear to be leaving from the north west coast of Ferelden. There is a sheltered cove with protection through a chain of several smaller islands.”

Several minutes passed as the Arishok continued to read various reports on the desk before him. He pulled out a new piece of parchment and wrote with bold strokes of ink before handing the parchment to the qunari before him. “Send the ambassador,” he sneered at the title, “along with someone Hissrad trusts to offer an alliance with the Inquisition. Between the two of them, they can find the truth of these matters, reclaim what belongs to the Qun, and put down the Venatori threat as well. We will send a dreadnought to catch the Venatori ashore and put an end to the operation.”

“Yes, Arishok. It will be done.” The qunari saluted and begun to turn from Arishok and stopped. “Regarding the Tal-Vashoth, how do you wish to proceed.”

Without looking up from the parchments her returned to, he replied, “re-education. Sanction granted for qamek if he doesn’t comply.”
Author's Note: Because the Qun doesn't do names, the name of the Tal-Vashoth wasn't mentioned but it was Ashaad Two, formerly of the Valo Kas.

Translations:
enchanté—(Fr/Orlesian) delighted
à votre plaisir—(Fr/Orlesian) at your pleasure
Mesdames, il faut revoir les dessins! Son dos est une honte, nous ne pouvons pas montrer cette horreur à la Cour. Le scandale serait insurmontable!—(Fr/Orlesian)
Ladies, we need to revise the designs! Her back is a disgrace, we cannot bare this horror to the Court. The scandal would be insurmountable!

I hope everyone is surviving the lull that is February. Thank you all for your continued support and following me on this crazy journey! ❤

I just realised that this story just became my longest fic. With this latest chapter, I just passed The Inquisition's Dragonborn by 3035 words! ☺
Interrupt

Chapter Summary

**Interrupt**

*Verb: stop the continuous progress of an activity or process*

A hangover; she had forgotten what a hangover felt like. If maraas-lok always produced a hangover like she was currently experiencing, it was no wonder that the karasaad of the Antaam were always so grim. She was feeling pretty grim herself and was thankful for the dark currently surrounding her. She had thought the massive bed they had provided was ridiculous monstrousity for a single person but at the moment, she was glad for the heavy velvet drapes that were drawn shut to keep out the cold and kept out the majority of the early morning light. She curled up in a ball in the middle of the bed and yanked the heavy covers up around her head only leaving her mouth and nose uncovered.

She had only closed her eyes when she heard footsteps on the stone steps. She recognized the sound of Dehari’s light gait but with the headache she had, the elven woman might as well have been one of the war nugs that Dennet recently acquired. The rattle of the spoon, cup, and pot of tea on its tray being set by the fireplace was as loud as a box of cutlery being chucked down the stairs.

“My lady?” The elf’s voice was very quiet. “Are you well?” The curtain on the bed twitched back when she didn’t respond to Dehari’s question.

Eluned threw her arm across her face and groaned when the bright morning light leaked through the open bed curtains.

“My lady! I’ll get the healer.”

She whistled to stop the elf, wincing as she did so. “No healer. Not ill.”

“But—”

She sat up carefully. “It’s just a headache. Water, please.” She raised in brow in surprise when Dehari returned with the goblet of water then reached out to touch her forehead and face to check for a fever.

Dehari flushed, “I beg your pardon, my lady. You don’t… you don’t look well.”

“I drank too much last night.”

The elf’s eyes widened in surprise, but she quickly collected herself and recalled the messages she had to relay. “The lady Josephine sent a message that Commander Helaine will be awaiting you to start your training this morning. Arcanist Dagna has sent word that she has equipment ready for you, and both ladies Cassandra and Vivienne have requested to speak with you regarding your upcoming trip.” She hurried off to the wardrobe to pull out clothing for the day and left with a murmured word.

Eluned slid off the bed and swallowed hard as her stomach rebelled at her being in motion. Carefully making her way across the room, she sipped on the tea and got herself dressed, hoping that the embrium and ginger tea would help both her head and her stomach. Hopefully Heliane only wanted
to meet her and she could do the rounds to speak with everyone quickly and return to bed for the rest of the day. She could hope.

She headed across the great hall and opened the door to the undercroft, wincing at the metallic crash of hammers on anvils and the screech of metal on sharpening wheels as she descended to meet with Dagna. The heat of the forges didn’t help her nausea one bit.

“Oh Inquisitor! I have your sword ready for you,” Dagna chirped in a far too cheery voice. She hurried off to one of the benches and plucked a sword, scabbard, and several leather straps from the surface. “I made an adjustment to the hilt to help secure your grip with those fingers that don’t move properly.” She set the sword at Eluned’s left hip and secured the belt at her waist. “See, when you grasp the sword to draw it from the scabbard, your fingers automatically get set to the right position and stay down where they should.” She adjusted the fit so the sword didn’t swing around. “There. I’ve also arranged for a baldric so you can wear the sword over your shoulder when you travel; more convenient on horseback and travelling in rough terrain than swinging at your hip. How is the fit? Can you draw the sword?”

Eluned practiced drawing and sheathing the sword for Dagna who made little adjustments until the Archanist was satisfied.

“Good. I’ll have the baldric included with your gear for your trip to the Western Approach. There’s also a couple of small daggers to hide on your person. Those will be ready too.” Dagna looked up at Eluned, “anything else you’ll be needing, Your Worship?” She shook her head. “Okay then! Now did you see a vial of spider guts?”

Stomach rolling at the thought, Eluned fled the undercroft.

“Inquisitor. Might I have a moment of your time.” Vivienne’s voice called from the doorway. Without waiting for a reply, the enchanter disappeared and Eluned was left to follow her up the stairs.

Vivienne’s space was transformed back to its original layout providing her with the opportunity to observe the coming and going of the great hall without sacrificing her own privacy. Gone were all traces of the previous day, not a scrap of fabric or a piece of shattered porcelain. She winced at the light as she emerged from the darker stairwell into the bright, sunlit space; Vivienne pursed her lips in disapproval.

“Our presence at the Winter Ball is of utmost importance and I feel it is my duty to assist your ambassador in your absence to ensure that everything is in place for the Inquisition to put its best foot forward. I request to remain at Skyhold to offer my services.”

Eluned considered the request briefly; she’d be down one mage, but she was more than capable of providing offensive magic should they need it and they would be meeting with Fenris, Hawke, and the Warden contact once they arrived in the Western Approach. Eluned nodded, ”we shall miss your company, but I’m sure that Josephine will be relieved to have your capable assistance.”

Vivienne studied her for a moment and then smiled. “Well done, my dear. There is hope for you yet.” She turned away and strolled to one of her chaises and sat down indicating for Eluned to take the seat opposite. “Your comprehension of the Orlesian language will be a boon to us. You will be under-estimated. This works to our advantage—if you can rein in your reaction to what is said around you, even if it is hurtful.

“You have been through what is likely one of the worst possible fates that could befall a mage and come out the other side. I am aware that you have scars, on your flesh as well as your mind and
spirit. Embrace them, my dear. Let them make you stronger.” She stood up then, indicating that their
discussion was coming to an end. “The fate of the Orlesian Empire rests upon your shoulders at the
Winter Ball. Do well and not only will your actions save Orlais, but open doors for the Inquisition,
yourself, and other mages of worth.”

She gave the enchanter a rueful smile, “no pressure, then.”

Vivienne replied with her own small smile, “indeed. I shan’t keep you. I am aware that Commander
Helaine awaits you to commence your training; it wouldn’t do to disappoint her on your first day by
keeping her waiting. I spoke very highly of you to her, see that my recommendation was not
misplaced.”

Eluned bit back the immediate retort that sprung to mind and tipped her head slightly to Vivienne in
farewell. There was no point in arguing with the enchanter about being late for an appointment when
she herself was responsible for Eluned’s tartiness. Instead of going back down the great hall, she cut
across Vivienne’s solar to the opposite door which led down to the bailey and closer to the stables.
The cold fresh air was helpful for the nausea that still plagued her, but the full sunlight that now
shone over the mountains was doing a number on her headache, as was the horse that kicked the
walls of its stall, impatient for attention.

She spotted an elven mage in the designated location. She took a moment to look the woman over, or
more specifically, the mage’s attire. Unlike regular mages, the woman wore a modified version of the
Circle robes, but the robes were cut short to a mid-thigh length coat over leggings. She wore greaves
along the fronts of her lower legs that rose to cover her knees, gauntlets, as well as scaled armour
over her shoulders and knees. Eluned was surprised to see that she still carried as staff; she could see
a sword hilt at her hip, but it didn’t appear that the sword had a blade.

The elf’s eyes sharpened on her, “hold and declare, Inquisitor.”

Eluned cocked her head in question. “What do you mean?” she gestured.

“Hmm, is it true that you do not speak?”

She nodded in reply.

“I ask your intent. I was summoned to oversee training and I would know my charge. I am your
commander in this matter; Commander Helaine.”

“I thank you for coming, Commander Helaine. I wish to better my skills as the Mark places me at
the heart of combat.”

“Commander will suffice,” she studied Eluned critically. “I teach the skills of the Knight-Enchanter.
It is a rank, it is a life. Understanding its hierarchy is the first step. You already know this. You were
not made Inquisitor and then taught to lead. I will teach you how to rise to your place, how to join
your warriors, spectral blade in hand.” She leaned to the side and looked at the scabbard on Eluned’s
hip. “You don’t plan on using a regular sword, do you?”

“Yes and no, Commander.” Eluned drew the sword and presented it, hilt first, to the knight-
enchanter. “This was found hidden in ancient caves below Haven. I claim it.”

Helaine looked at the sword with derision until her hand closed on the hilt. Her eyes widened in
shock. She quickly handed the blade back. “The path of the knight-enchanter is not easy. It requires
dedication and discipline. You must choose to commit to the role. To the burden of command. Are
you willing?”
“I am here, Commander.”

“Good. Come, the battlefield awaits, Knight-Enchanter,” she said heading toward the sparring ring. She caught up to the mage and whistled to get her attention. When that didn’t work she put a hand on Helaine’s arm and gestured, “right now?”

“There is no time to lose. As you do not have a spectral blade, we shall use the regular practice swords. Have you ever used one?”

“Yes. A few years ago.”

“Good. Then you are ahead of my usual recruits and we will jump straight to reviewing what you remember.” Helaine helped herself to a practice sword from the rack and with another cursory look at Eluned, chose a sword and handed it over.

Eluned removed her sword as Helaine did and took a position opposite the elf in one of the vacant rings. It had been years since she had been made to practice with the sword and wasn’t sure if she was up to displaying that skill quite so publicly for the first time. “Wouldn’t it be better to practice with the training dummies?”

“No Inquisitor. Your opponent will not stand still like a man made of straw, we will train in the way of combat.”

Iron Bull and a few of his Chargers were close by doing their own sparring and some of the Inquisition soldier were finishing up their own morning workouts. She hoped they’ll be too busy to notice what was going on and would be too tired at the end of their own exercises to stick around and watch hers.

She gripped and regripped the sword in her hand. It felt unsteady without the clever little bindings that Dagna had added to her new sword to keep her ring and little finger folded down around the hilt. Folding her fingers down with her other hand only worked for as long as she physically held them down, they slowly straightened to their resting state. Quickly, so not to keep Helaine waiting, she yanked the leather tie from the end of her braid and shoved her hair down the back of her coat before it could unravel from the braid. She wrapped the leather around her two fingers then pulled them against the hilt, holding the ends of the leather under the palm of her hand. It wasn’t ideal; neither tying her fingers down, nor having her hair loose but tucked into her coat, but for the moment, it was the best option she had available to her.

Helaine briefly reviewed the basics before she started pressing Eluned hard with both the sword and magic. On the defense, Eluned concentrated on keeping up her barrier and staying on her feet. Her hand and wrist ached from repeatedly blocking Helaine’s swings she couldn’t dodge, and her feet were cramping up as she shifted on the uneven footing.

Eluned caught a glimpse of a few of her companions around the edge of the sparring ring; the Chargers had finished their training and leaned on the fence to watch, Iron Bull leaned against the stone wall outside the ring with Dorian, Varric, and Blackwall. Distracted, the only warning she got was the collective hiss from the spectators before Helaine’s sword caught her across the back of the leg making her knee buckle, and she caught the woman’s forearm in her face as she went down.

The strike to her face finally did it. The combined nausea and headache from her hangover and the hit to her face had her rolling over onto her knees and heaving up what little contents she had in her stomach into the sand. Through watering eyes, she looked up and saw several people hand something to Iron Bull and something to Varric. *Fuck, they were making wagers on her*. Humiliated
—and yes, more that a little furious—she spat into the sand and wiped her hand across her mouth. Blood smeared on the back of her glove. Helaine had split her lip and she could feel the blood continue to trickle down her chin.

She stood back up slowly; her feet and arms ached, but she rolled her shoulders back and lifted her sword beckoning Helaine on with her left hand before drawing her mana to the ready.

Money passed between hands beyond the ring again. This time, it all went to Iron Bull.

Helaine studied her with narrowed eyes before relaxing her stance and letting the sword tip rest on the ground. “Very good Inquisitor. We shall continue your training tomorrow. We shall practice like this every day for the next sixty, then—”

Eluned shook her head, “I leave for western Orlais in two days time.”

“You must delay, Inquisitor! Your training must be put first. A consistent daily training with the sword and magical practice—”

She held her hand up to interrupt the elf. “Corypheus will not wait. You can either work with me around my other duties, or you won’t.”

Helaine pressed her lips together in disapproval. “If you lack the commitment,” she said stiffly, “then I can not teach you.”

“I do not have the luxury of putting the world on hold while I train. I thank you for your time. I will speak with Josephine to see that you are compensated.” She handed the practice sword to Helaine, hobbled over to retrieve her own sword, and left the ring, ignoring the spectators that watched and whispered as she left.

After speaking with Josephine and suggesting that they see if any of the other mages from Redcliffe had any desire to train as knight-enchanters, she headed up to her quarters to clean up. No sooner had she dropped her coat, there was a sharp rap on the door. She whistled and threw on a couple sticks of wood onto the fire to get the room warmed up.

“Inquisitor, I would like to speak to about—Inquisitor!” Cassandra’s question was forgotten when she spotted the blood on Eluned’s chin. She reached out and turned Eluned’s face towards the light coming through the windows. “Who did this to you?” she growled.

She lifted her chin out of Cassandra’s grasp, “Commander Helaine, when I was sparring with her. I allowed myself to become distracted by the money changing hands outside the ring.”

Cassandra’s face twisted in disgust, “those miscreants will make wagers on the consistency of nug shit. How dare they make wagers on you!”

Eluned blinked and burst out laughing, quickly slapping her hands over her mouth and nose to muffle the wheezy squeak she made.

Cassandra flushed. “I beg your pardon, Inquisitor, I didn’t mean—”

She waved her hand in front of her face, “it’s fine Cassandra. There was something you wanted to discuss?”

“Ah yes. I’ve been making inquiries to locate the missing Seekers.” She unrolled a map across Eluned’s desk. “I’ve recently received word that they had been spotted east of Crestwood at Caer Oswin.”
“And you wish to address this immediately? You know we leave for the Western Approach the day after tomorrow? This is the opposite direction.”

“Yes, I—"

“This is important to you.”

“Yes. I've a growing suspicion Corypheus has imprisoned them.”

She nodded, “I can’t go with you but I’ll have Cullen and Leliana provide you with support so you can find them.”

“Thank you, Inquisitor.” She gathered the map and headed for the stairs.

Eluned whistled, stopping the other woman at the top of the stairs. “One thing, Cassandra. This doesn’t excuse you from attending the Winter Ball. If I have to be there, so do you.”

Cassandra grimaced, “I will be there.” She headed down the stairs. The door opened, Cassandra said something to someone else and heavy footsteps climbed the stairs after the door closed behind her.

Iron Bull appeared at the top of the stairs. He gave a whistle of appreciation as he looked around the room. “I think you have a bigger bed than I do.”

“That’s the first thing you notice?”

“Well, yeah. Hey, I have an idea—"

“We are not trading. I have no interest in returning to my quarters to find wet sheets and your exhausted bed partners.”

He gave her a wolfish grin, “I can think of an alternative.”

She glanced at him and shivered despite the heat in the room. “You know Cabot’s going to start charging you double because you keep leaving him shorthanded.”

He shrugged, “they’re always back on their feet by the following evening.”

She snorted, “barely.”

He crossed the room and held a small vial out to her, the contents swirled sluggishly with the motion. “Here. One of Stitch’s concoctions. It’ll help with the hangover.”

She made a disgusted noise that would have made Cassandra proud. “You’re offering that now. I could have used that hours ago.” She took the vial from his hand and tipped it back and forth in the light. “I have reservations about drinking things you offer me. First the healing potion that was actually a poultice—Stitch’s told me—then the maraas-lok. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think that you were trying to poison me.”

He put on a pout, “I’m hurt, Boss. Truly. Besides, no one forced you to drink three glasses of the stuff.”

Three? She could only remember drinking two. She opened the vial and gave it an experimental sniff. At least it didn’t smell as bad as it looked.

“All in one shot, Boss. Just like the maraas-lok.”
She shot it back and was pleasantly surprised at how quickly her stomach settled and the ache in head dissipated. She froze as he reached out his hand and gently brushed his thumb across her chin. *Fuck. So many interruptions that she hadn’t gotten around to wiping the blood away yet.*

He dropped his hand, “that was a cheap shot.”

“It wouldn’t have been if I hadn’t been so distracted by the money changing hands outside the ring. How much did you make on me?”

He gave her an unrepentant grin, “a handful of silvers on the first one. You lasted longer than most people thought you would before you threw up.”

She scowled at him. ”*And the second?*”

“Ah, I did much better on that one. Enough to cover my tab for a month.” Eluned’s brows rose in surprise. He shrugged, “they thought you’d call the match after you took the shot to the face.”

“And you didn’t? Why not?”

He strolled to the stairs and stopped at the top, turning back to her. “You know what’s at stake. Have a good night, Boss.”
Expedite

Chapter Summary

Expedite

Verb: make (an action or process) happen sooner or be accomplished more quickly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The stable was a busy place the morning before she and her group set out for the Western Approach. All their alternate mounts had been brought up from the fields the night before and had been thoroughly cleaned and had a going over to check for loose shoes, injuries, or signs of illness. Dennet’s stablehands worked briskly to pick out the stalls as their charges quietly munched on their morning feed; others cleaned and inspected tack ready for the following morning.

Eluned found the stables to be a comforting place; it reminded her of her childhood as a horse-crazy kid that hung out in the barn hoping someone would take pity and offer a ride on their own horse. Even if it was just to hop on and walk on a loose rein to cool the horse out, it helped satisfy the horse-bug that a once-per-week lesson did not. She acknowledged each of the workers as she skirted the handcarts of feed or manure and made her way to Blackwall’s space just beyond.

“Inquisitor. Ruffling any more feathers today?”

“None yet, but the day is still young.” Blackwall chuckled. She wandered over to the work bench and ran her fingers over the carved toy—a griffon, if she wasn’t mistaken—admiring the skilled carving. “This is beautiful.”

He looked faintly embarrassed. “It’s nothing; just a little bit to keep the hands busy. I thought the children might like it seeing that they have precious little else.”

“You’re a good man, Blackwall.”

He cleared his throat and his eyes darted away as a blush deeped with ruddy colour on his cheeks. “Is there something I can do for you, my lady?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Yes. You are aware that I ruffled Commander Helaine’s feathers?” He nodded with a smile. “I need someone to mentor me with the sword.”

He looked up in surprise. “I can make some recommendations, if you like…”

She shook her head. “I’m not looking for recommendations. I’m asking if you will be that mentor.”

“Me? I would think Cassandra or Cullen would be better suited.”

“I don’t. I’ve seen you spar and hold your own against Cassandra—you’re every bit as good as she is. Cassandra is, by her own admission, hasty and impatient. I don’t think she’d be a good teacher for me. You on the other hand,” she ran her fingers over the carved toy again, “are patient. I think you’d be a very good mentor.”
The blush was getting darker on his cheeks. “I’m flattered, my lady.”

“Commander Helaine was not wrong about one thing: I do need to be working on my skills immediately. Since we will be travelling together—if you agree, that is—I thought perhaps you could instruct me as we traveled.”

“I—I can do that.”

“Excellent, thank you. Can I leave it with you to arrange for training equipment to be included with our supplies? Obviously, I won’t be training with a shield.”

“Right.” He gave her a wary look, “you won’t set me on fire?”

“No. Defensive magic only. I’ll leave the magical training to Solas.” She grinned at his sigh of relief. “We won’t be returning to Skyhold before the Winter Ball, anything you need there make sure it is included on your list for Josephine.” Blackwall fidgeted and glanced away at mention of the ambassador. His blush also darked—at that rate, he was going to combust. Interesting.

She headed back into the hall and into the rotunda to discuss further training with Solas. All thoughts of that discussion vanished as she stared in awe at the painting going up on the walls. She didn’t know how long she stood there admiring the work there before a hand gently grasped her shoulder. She startled hard. “Forgive me, Inquisitor,” Solas said softly, releasing her shoulder, “I had called to you several times to no effect.”

“Sorry. I was lost admiring the painting. It’s marvelous.”

Solas hummed, pleased. “The frescos will tell your story.”

She ducked her head, embarrassed by the thought of that attention, “I hardly think I’m noteworthy.”

“I disagree. The first two panels are complete; the first depicts the explosion at the Temple of Sacred Ashes and the opening of the Breach. The second—” Eluned followed his arm as he pointed out the various details of the following panels including two depictions of Redcliffe.

Redcliffe. Fiona, Cassandra, and Iron Bull had warned her about the assassination of Empress Celene and the rise of a demon army. They were still a threat; defeating Alexius in Redcliffe hadn’t stopped those threats, they were before her even now. Was there anything they did that made a difference. Had she made a difference?

She came back to attention to find Solas standing before her with a concerned look on his face and she realised to her mortification that she was frowning intently. She let her face relax and apologized.

“Does something displease you, Inquisitor?” Solas asked mildly, but she could tell that he was guarding his reactions.

“No, the paintings are beautiful. Truly Solas.” He relaxed imperceptively. “I was just—” she huffed in frustration. “Have we done anything to change the future? Everything that we were told happened in that red future is still coming to pass.” Her gestures became more and more sharp. “Are we doomed to walk the same steps? Have I done nothing?”

“What you have accomplished so far is remarkable; I do not doubt that you will continue to succeed.” He grasped her hands before she could start to protest and gave them a little shake. “Do not succumb to despair, Inquisitor. I am certain that you will find a way.”

She pressed her lips together and gave a slight nod to him, letting her eyes slide past him to the
Redcliffe panel. Solas was right; no matter what, she had to find a way to stop that from happening.

The next day, armed and supplied, with an accursed book of Orlesian history and genealogy painstakingly put together by the Tranquil stuffed into her saddlebag, and Spellweaver strapped to her back, Eluned and the rest rode out of Skyhold. It was strange to be leaving without Cassandra. She had said good-bye to the Seeker at the gates, her head filled with advice and admonishments not to do anything foolish—which she promptly ignored—and wished the Seeker well on her own mission. Vivienne did not show up to see them off. But there were two new companions for the trip that she was more than happy to have with her.

She nodded her thanks to Kaaras as she accepted the bowl of food he handed to her before sitting down beside her at the campfire of their first night. She hadn’t realized how much she had missed him and his company until he was with her again. His presence at her side was a comfort. He and Sata-Kas volunteered to join her for the trip to the Western Approach, even though they had only just arrived back in Skyhold the day before.

They, along with the rest of the Valo-Kas, had returned after spending a few weeks on the Storm Coast clearing out a nest of vicious bandits and murderers that raided the area and executed any Inquisition scouts they came across using the pretense of divine right under some ancient order called the Blades of Hessarian. Whatever justification they thought they had, they were all dead now. Leliana was planning to get more scouts out in the area to keep an eye on things but she was a bit shorthanded due to the loss of the scouts and the need to move scouts ahead of Eluned’s party to the Western Approach. In any case, the need wasn’t urgent as the Valo-Kas had cleaned it out, and the Arl of West Hills had promised to monitor the situation even as he continued his efforts on the part of the Inquisition to feed false information to the Venatori.

Eluned winced slightly when the hot stew touched her lip.

“Does your mouth still pain you?” Solas asked noticing her wince.

“What? Are you injured?” Kaaras’ hand dwarfed her head as he turned her toward him.

“It's nothing. A training accident.”

Kaaras frowned and his hand started to glow as he ran his healing magic over her.

“Perhaps, but it is healed,” she forcibly removed Kaaras’ hand from her face, “you can stop fussing, big brother. It’s just a little sensitive to heat. It’s no worse then when my mouth was sown shut.” Everyone froze and stared at her. “What?”

Solas’ lips pressed tight, but Dorian’s brows remained up, “that’s the first you’ve ever spoken of your time as…um, with…um…”

“You can say it, Dorian. ‘As saarebas under the Qun.’”

“Yes. That.”

“What was it like then?” Blackwall asked gesturing to his own mouth.

Kaaras glared at him. “You don’t have to speak of this, Ellie.”

She patted him on the leg, reassuring the protective Tal-Vashoth mage that she was not troubled by
the question. It had been long enough that she thought she could speak of it. “In retrospect, it was more horrifying than painful. Until that day, I had never been purposely hurt by another.” She paused for a moment, prodding at the memory before continuing. “It’s a thick needle like something used to stitch leather, not a thin needle a healer would use. The worst part was the tug of the coarse thread being pulled through the raw flesh.” She shuddered.

Sera looked faintly green. “So they just sew it up an’ that’s it?”

Eluned shrugged, ignoring the scratching sound of Varric’s quill as he took notes, “mostly. The thread must be replaced regularly. It’s treated to be resilient, but it eventually rots after a couple of months. More often if you have a saarebas that worries the inside of their lip with their teeth—” She chewed on her bottom lip like she often did, as an example.

“How do’ya just sit there and let them do that?”

“Sera!” several voices admonished her.

“Wot?”

“I’m sure those raised under the Qun would sit quietly as their duty demanded, but I wasn’t raised under the Qun. Even though my hands were bound, I struck at the hand that shoved that needle through my lip,” she replied with a rueful look.

Sera’s eyes widened. “Wot happened?”

Eluned snorted. “What do you think? I thought I’d suffocate under their weight when they sat on me to continue sewing.”

“I have to ask since you’re in a sharing mood; how do they teach magic? Yours is structured unlike any I’ve encountered before,” Dorian asked.

“Tamassrans—”

“—don’t teach magic,” Iron Bull interrupted.

She turned to him and balled her hands into fists on her hips, “oh, I wasn’t aware that you were a tamassran.”

“I’m not, but—”

“Oh, so you were an arvaarad, then?”

“No.”

She widened her eyes in mock surprise, “I had no idea you were the Ariqun.” He growled in frustration as they glared at each other. “You do not know everyone’s role. I was trained by a tamassran under supervision of an arvaarad.”

Dorian cleared his throat at an attempt to dispel some of the tension between the two of them. “But how does that work? I assume they do not teach with books.”

“No.” She shrugged. “Once the tamassran taught me how to find my magic, I was paired with another saarebas with complimentary magic to copy.” She laughed, “when I was first learning how to aim at a target, Crooked—” She gasped sharply and thrust her fists against her chest at the sudden ball of pain. Tears spilled down her cheeks. “I can’t. Not about that.” She shook her head. “Not
“about him.” She jumped to her feet and hurried to her tent, leaving the others stunned in her wake.

“Wot? I don’t get it—wots crooked?” Sera looked around bewildered.

“More importantly,” Varric speculated, “who’s him?”

Dorian glanced at the tent and back to the fire. “I better go apologize,” he muttered starting to get up.

Kaaras stalked across the ring around the campfire to follow Eluned. He glared and shoved him back down to the log he was sitting on as he passed, “leave her alone ‘Vint, you’ve done enough.”

It wasn’t until early on the third day of travel that Dorian found himself riding next to Eluned; Kaaras and Sata-Kas were a bit further back in the line for a change. He glanced at her and found her calmly looking back at him. “I want to apologize for the other night. I didn’t mean to dredge up unpleasant memories.”

“You didn’t. It’s—” she curled and uncurled her finger several times in front of her forehead, “complicated.”

“Still, I didn’t mean to upset you. If there’s anything I can do to help…”

She studied him for a moment and satisfied with what she saw, she brushed her hands together. Forgiven. “There is something you could do.”

He gave a wary glance over his shoulder to where Kaaras rode out of ear shot, “it isn’t something that’s going to get me ripped apart by a particular Valo-Kas, is it?”

She snickered. “Who, Kaaras? He’s a teddy bear; my emotional support Tal-Vashoth. Besides, it’ll give him a good opportunity to stare at your ass some more.”

“Your what?” he frowned in confusion. “Wait—what?” She ducked her head to hide her smile as Dorian sat up and preened a bit when her statement dawned on him. After shooting some coy glances over his shoulder, he turned back to her, “sorry, what were we talking about?”

She rolled her eyes with a shake of her head, “don’t worry about it. I was asking you for a bit of help.”

“He leaned toward her and lowered his voice to a conspirative level, “are we talking naughty dances?” He wagged his eyebrows at her.

“Sadly, no. Court dances for Halamshiral. It should be very entertaining for you.”

He sat back up in the saddle and gave an inelegant snort, “of that I have no doubt, but if you ever find yourself in possession of ten silk scarves, do let me know.” She swatted him in the arm with the back of her hand, but she did it with a smile to let him know that there were no hard feelings over the previous days’ tensions.

In the distance, they could see the smudge across the horizon that marked the location of Halamshiral. They had made very good time, Eluned pushing them to ride from first light until nearly the last at as brisk a pace as the mounts could travel and stay sound for the duration of their trip. As a result, they had already managed to shave a day off the predicted four-day travel time to Halamshiral.
that she was initially given by her advisors.

The weather was holding fair and as soon as they had cleared the Frostback mountain range and reached the Imperial Highway, travel became much easier. With the scouts gone on ahead, she could only keep her fingers crossed that they would continue to have a swift journey and didn’t get delayed too often by those that would take advantage of travellers along the roads unguarded due to the Orlesian civil war.

“Hey Songbird, we don’t have a lot of light left but if we push on we can make Halamshiral tonight.”

Blackwall hummed, “I wouldn’t say no to a proper hot meal.”

“You have only yourself to blame for the last meal, Hero. You burnt it after all.”

“I wouldn’t say no to a soft bed.” She could hear the pops from Dorian’s back as he twisted back and forth in the saddle.

“So, Boss?”

It was weird to have them defer to her; she might technically be the leader of the Inquisition, but it was always Cassandra that made the decisions when they were out on the road. Now she didn’t have the Seeker at her right hand, she laughed to herself—the Right Hand at her right hand—to turn to. It wasn’t like she didn’t have experience leading a team but managing a team for a PR campaign didn’t have the same life or death consequences, other than to her career, that her decisions now had. One thing at a time; camp first, save the world second.

She shook her head. “We’ll go on a bit farther, but we’ll camp away from the city. If the party or parties responsible for the assassination attempt we will be going to prevent are there already, we don’t need to tip our hands too early.”

“Yes. Tents and bedrolls, it is.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all, as always, for your continued support and comments on my crazy ride!
Promnesia

Chapter Summary

Promnesia

_Noun: the illusionary experience of thinking that a new situation had occurred before_

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Without the Seeker’s glowering presence, Songbird started to come into her own. Excluding the fact that surviving slavery taught one to become invisible, one could hardly blame her for maintaining a meek demeanor and deferring to the Seeker; keeping one’s head down generally spared you from losing it due to premature execution. Or getting stabbed in the book.

He scribbled down a few notes and sat back to watch the night’s entertainment. It was dance night. At first, she had tried to combine her efforts; sparring with Blackwall first and then dancing with Dorian after. It was a logical decision as less light was needed for dancing; however, after the first few practices Dorian balked at such a schedule, stating that “he refused to have sweaty seconds”. The blush that rose in Songbird’s face was a surprise and made for some good-natured teasing which she took surprisingly well; colourful insults aside. He jotted down a few beauties he had never heard before. He was quite certain that they didn’t originate from her time in the Qun based on Tiny’s reaction, nor were they something he had heard in his travels to the more civilized, or uncivilized depending on your opinion, parts of Thedas. The way Dorian responded, they weren’t from Tevinter either.

His curiosity to her origins reasserted itself. She had no voice so there was no accent to hint to where she was from. She had said that she had no recollection as to how she woke up and found herself in the woods outside of Kont-aar. Had she travelled by ship and became wrecked, wandering in a delirious state into the woods before being found by the Qunari? Could she have come from the north beyond the Donarks or even one of fabled travellers from across the Amaranthine Ocean? He shook his head, mysteries for another day.


He chuckled at the familiar gesture she shot back even as they started the dance steps again. It was uncanny sometimes the similarities between Hawke and the Inquisitor; both had an aversion to the nobility and their rules, both applied themselves beyond the call of duty despite their protests to the contrary to get the job done. His smile fell. Kirkwall wasn’t Orlais, and the Viscount’s Keep wasn’t Halamshiral. They’d need the Maker’s own luck to get out of that snake pit intact. If anyone could get them through it though, Songbird could, provided what they faced in the Approach didn’t break her first.

It set his teeth on edge thinking about what could be going on in the Approach. Rituals involving blood sacrifices never led to anything good. With desperate Wardens thinking that their collective ends were coming and Corypheus’ involvement, “nothing good” was an understatement.

“Varric?”
He blinked and realised, that lost in thought, he had missed the whole session and the others had started to turn in.

“You good for first watch?”

“Yes, I’ll wake you for the second.” He followed Iron Bull’s gaze to where Kaaras was ushering Eluned into their shared tent. Usually she shared with Cassandra and Sera, but with the Seeker’s absence and his presence, she reverted to staying with him as she had in Haven. He’d deny it because Qunari don’t do those feelings, but he’d bet good shiny sovereigns that Tiny was jealous. Kaaras and Sata-Kas were always close at hand, especially in camp where Kaaras was constantly at her side making sure she ate, drank, and got some rest; things that Tiny did when they were on the road. Earlier in the day, he watched the tension build when Kaaras lifted her from her saddle, having fallen asleep yet again from studying that book all night, to sleep against him as they continued to ride toward their destination. “You know there is nothing going on between those two? He’s like a brother to her.”

Iron Bull gave a lazy roll of his shoulder in feinted indifference and headed to his tent without another word. Yeah, nothing going on there.

For the first couple of hours after they turned off the Imperial Highway and onto the sandy granite trail that led into the desert, Eluned thought that she liked the Western Approach. It had a stark beauty to it that other areas she had traveled through did not have. Stunted, twist trees hung on stubbornly to cracks in boulder with tenacity to compete with more adapted plants like deathroot and witherstalk. Light and shadow changed colour of the sand as they moved into the dunes of the Approach, shifting colours of yellows and oranges to purples and browns as the daylight waned.

The novelty soon wore off.

It was hot and windy with a constant whisper of blowing sand that worked its way into every seam, hole, fold of cloth, and became a constant irritant. They saw very little wildlife except at a distance but there were signs of their presence; skeletal remains with bones cracked by tooth and claw, then picked clean and scoured white by scavengers and the relentless cycle of sun and wind.

At night, she was shocked to discover how the temperatures dropped sharply until she could see her breath as she shivered before their banked fire. They didn’t dare let the fire burn bright and announce their presence to the Wardens, bandits, or whatever was out in the desert. Solas and Kaaras warded the camp against any nocturnal agent that would try to take advantage of perceived easy pickings in a land had become a wasteland since the Second Blight.

They followed markers left behind by the Inquisition scouts moving ahead of them and came across the camp less than a day’s ride along the sandy trail. Eluned was pleased to see Scout Harding waiting for her as she slid from her horse. Several other horses grazed along picket lines off the edges of the camp. “Welcome to the Western Approach, Inquisitor. You’ve made exceptionally good time, we didn’t expect to see you for another two days.”

“Tell that to my bollocks,” Blackwall muttered with a groan as he dismounted from his horse.

She shared a grin with Harding. “You get around.”

“That’s what the Nightingale pays me for. We’ve sighted Warden activity to the south-west, but no one has been close enough to figure out what they are doing. Between the sandstorms and the vicious wildlife, we haven’t made it far out here. One of my people got too close to a poison hotspring and gave me a rather delirious report of a high dragon flying overhead. In short, this is
probably one of the worst places in the entire world. Be careful out there.”

“Do you know where Hawke is?”

“I received a raven yesterday from our second camp, directly to our west. Hawke and her party of three had arrived at the camp to await you.” She gave Eluned an apologetic smile, “I’m sorry but you are going to need to make your way to the second camp on foot. We haven’t been here long enough to locate enough water and bring in fodder for the mounts yet to support them deeper into the Approach. They’ll be safe enough here until your return.”

Harding led her over to a make-shift table set up under an awning strung up between a couple of tents and the tallest tree in the camp. Iron Bull and Kaaras followed. She looked up and gave a nervous laugh, “I’m suddenly feeling much shorter than normal.”

“Join the club, Harding,” Varric replied when he joined them. Eluned just smirked; he was the only one in the group that was shorter than her, Sera being the same height as her, and everyone else taller.

“Right,” the dwarven scout unrolled a map and pinned it down with a couple of rocks. “We’re here, and the second camp is here. It’s a full day’s walk but you take this trail here—” her finger traced a path along the map, “you’ll have shade from these cliffs along the south and there is a cave here where you can take a rest from the worst of the midday heat. I would suggest you get some rest and we’ll wake you before dawn.”

After a quick meal by light of the campfire, they filled up their waterskins from the available barrels, and headed out into the desert. The desert was quieter without the constant howl of the wind. The sound of the sand shifting beneath their feet kept them company. In the distance, they could hear the faint sounds of wildlife; the occasional screech of some animal or the coughing belch of a phoenix which was, by Varric’s explanation, a giant lizard with chronic digestive distress rather than a flaming bird of legend Eluned had quietly hoped for. Although the lizard did apparently have tail feathers, so there was that similarity.

About five hours into their walk, the air waved in the rising heat. Eluned pulled her scarf up over her head and around her face to protect herself from the sun and blowing sand that lashed at them from the sporadic gusts that blew down through the valley at them. The others had been given pieces of cloth before leaving camp as well and wrapped their faces. Iron Bull and the two Tal-Vashoth skipped the cloth; the thicker grey skin of their race protected them from the harsh environment. In the distance, they could see the dark shadow of large carrion birds circling in the air. A strong gust brought the sickly, sweet stench of rot on the hot air.

Several of them gagged at the smell and Sera whined, pinning her nose shut between finger and thumb, “wadizhad?”

“Probably some animal has died,” Iron Bull answered.

Blackwall coughed. “A big animal by the smell of it.”

Another gust brought a particularly strong smell of rotting flesh. With a squawk of distress, Sera veered off sharply and threw up behind some rocks. Eluned’s eyes watered and she pressed her knuckles against her nose to try to control her own reaction. She looked around at the others to see them handling the stench with varying degrees of success. They continued walking for another twenty minutes by which time the smell was a constant irritant regardless of the wind.

“That is becoming intolerable,” Dorian complained.
“You’re a necromancer, you should be used to it.”

He narrowed his eyes at Kaaras, “I animate the dead temporarily. I do not become chummy with them,” he retorted. “You’re a healer. I’m sure you’ve experienced your share of decay.”

“My charges never get that bad,” he shot back.

“Look, if it’s this bad, we must be close. Which means we’ll be past it soon.” Eluned glanced up at the cliff faces on either side. It must be a safe passage or Harding would never have sent them that way, but it didn’t stop her from shivering at the thought of an ambush. She didn’t want to spend any more time in the valley than necessary; backtracking was out of the question.

The sound of hyenas and carrion birds squabbling let them know that they had located the spot of the kill. If the eye watering stench didn’t make it clear enough. A large natural arch, wide enough and tall enough to drive a cart pulled by two horses to pass through, was cut into the cliff face. A hyena burst from the opening carrying its spoils, dropping it in the sand when it spotted their group.

Sera gagged, “ew, parts!”

“Boss—that looks like an arm.”

She nodded. “We need to go investigate. Find out who’s died.”

Sera looked green. “I’m not going in there;” she protested, shaking her head vigorously.

“Fine. Stay here and watch our backs. Somebody stay and watch Sera’s.” Eluned followed Blackwall and Sata-Kas through the gap in the cliff wall cautiously, uncertain of what they would find.

The hyenas didn’t take kindly to having their meal disturbed by potential competition, but it took little effort to kill most of them and chase off the few that decided that the two-legged predators were a bigger threat. Inside the opening, the gap widened into an open-topped cave almost perfectly round. Three wagons sat in a loose ring; no draft animals remained, the empty traces lay in the dust, but on the wagons… Large crude wooden cages made up the sides and tops of the wagons which held nearly a dozen corpses in each in varying states of decay. The hyenas and carrion birds had been trying to remove the bodies from the cages, ripping rotted limps and leaving the rest behind.

“Many of these people were executed,” Iron Bull said rolling a body over gently by wedging the head of his axe underneath, revealing the cut throat.

“Yeah, some of them died before,” Varric said sorrowfully and turned away to rummage through some camp debris.

“Most of these people are elves,” Solas said checking one cart then the second. “City elves. No Dalish.”

“And this cart is all human,” Dorian replied.

“Why? Why are they here?”

“Uh, Songbird—” he handed a crumpled, dusty piece of parchment to Dorian.

“This is Tevene.” He looked up at Eluned. “The Venatori were using these people to uncover something in the Western Approach.”
"You mean they were slaves. But why kill them?"

"The Inquisition presence in the Western Approach. Too risky to move the slaves from here so they cut their losses." Eluned glared at Iron Bull. He gave a shrug, "sorry, Boss."

She waved everyone out and then stood in the archway and started to cast. Sand started to swirl in the center between the three wagons, rising from the ground as the heat grew.

"Songbird… what are you doing?"

Flames started flickering across the dry bits of grasses and scraps of parchment and clothing.

"Uh, Inquisitor? Is this such a good idea?"

"The Venatori know that we are here. Giving these people proper rites won’t change that fact," Solas replied. "I would advice you all to step back." He walked down the path from the cave entrance himself not waiting for the others. After a few seconds of hesitation, the others joined him.

Eluned concentrated on the fire, pushing her power to build it faster as the vortex spun in the center of the cavern. It wasn’t right that these people were dragged out here against their will. It wasn’t right that the cowards slaughtered them, so they could run. It wasn’t right that they be left as nothing more than carrion for the animals. With a wordless cry, she unleashed the fire and it exploded outward incinerating the wagons, the bodies, the bits of debris, and rolled past and down the path behind her.

When they arrived at the second camp a few hours later, Eluned nodded to Hawke and the Warden and headed to the tent the Inquisition scout directed her to for her use.

Hawke frowned as Eluned disappeared into the tent. She turned to Varric, "did we do something wrong?"

"No. We just ran across a rather unpleasant sight and the Inquisitor is upset about it." He sighed. "The Venatori are running slaves through the Approach and we came across about three dozen slaughtered because the slavers got pinched between two Inquisition camps."

Fenris swore.

"Yeah, that pretty much covers it. They better hope that the Inquisitor doesn’t catch them because that’s going to be ugly."

"So what do we do now? I don’t know how long—"

A soft whistle interrupted them, they turned to find Eluned waiting for them. "What do we know?"

They all gathered around the map that Hawke and Warden spread out on a makeshift camp table. Not a single person commented on her reddened eyes or the suspicious tracks in the dust on her face.

They crept up the long ramp to the ruined temple in two rows, clinging to the low stone walls that lined each side. The early morning light cast shadows where they crouched. Blackwall volunteered the stay behind to watch for reinforcements or anyone trying to escape. Eluned gestured for Sera, Kaaras, and Sata-Kas to remain with them. Cole, too, she had remain behind; if they were summoning demons in the temple, she didn’t want to put Cole at risk. The others crept forward. The tang of copper rolled down on the breeze.

"I fear that they’ve already started the ritual," the Warden whispered.
“Blood magic, I’d wager. You can smell it…” Fenris growled.

Dead wardens littered the stones as they snuck forward.

“Wait… No.” A nervous warden backed away from another warden, he backed through a line of demons and mages on either side of him.

A man’s voice, clearly Tevinter by the accent spoke up, “Warden-Commander Clarel’s orders were clear.”

The nervous warden spun around to face him. “This is wrong!”

“Remember your oath: In war, victory. In peace, vigilance. In death…”

The other warden quietly walked up behind him.

“Sacrifice.”

The air rippled as the warden’s blood sprayed across the ground before he crumpled to the ground himself. A demon rose from where the blood pooled.

“Good. Now bind it. Just as I showed you.” As the mage held his hand out to demon and muttered an invocation, the Tevinter issuing orders did so himself. With a pleased look on his face, he watched the warden take his place to the side of the tower with his bound demon and calmly turned to address Eluned and her group. “Inquisitor. What an unexpected pleasure. Lord Livius Erimond of vyrantium, at your service.” He sketched her a mocking bow.

“You are no warden.”

“But you are,” Erimond sighed. “The one Clarel let slip. And you found the Inquisitor and came to stop me. As you can see, you’re a bit late. The Wardens were terrified on the calling, they looked everywhere for help.”

“Even Tevinter,” Dorian commented.

“Yes. And since it was my master who put the Calling into their pretty little heads, we were prepared to help. A simple little plan to raise a demon army to march into the Deep Roads and take care of the Old Gods before another Blight could occur. She was more than happy to sacrifice a few Wardens to do so.”

“A demon army marched across Orlais, not the Deep Roads,” Solas translated for Eluned as she gestured. "I've seen this before."

“And now you know how it begins,” Erimond replied with a sly grin. “Sadly for the Wardens, the binding ritual has a side effect that I forgot to mention. They are now my master’s slaves.”

Flames ignited in Eluned’s hands.

“Ah, careful Inquisitor,” Erimond admonished her. “If you kill me, you won’t hear the rest of the story.” She slowly let the flames die. “This was a test. Once the rest of the Wardens complete the ritual, the army will conquer Thedas. You’ll all be slaves to Corypheus’ will.”

Flames jumped in Eluned’s hands again.

Erimond tutted. “My, my, you are a sensitive one, aren’t you Inquisitor? The Venatori are looking forward to having you in our possession. You'll be so much fun to break. But for now…” He threw
his hand forward, red light like a corrupted rift writhed around his hand. The Anchor sparked to life in Eluned’s palm, crackling and snapping with a ferocity she hadn’t experienced since closing the Breach in Haven. It drove her to her knees.

“The Elder One showed me how to deal with you, in the event you were foolish enough to interfere again.” He flexed his hand and the Anchor responded, Eluned gasped at the pain. “You stole that from my master, forcing him to seek other ways to access the Fade.” He glanced at her companions that had pulled out weapons to defend her. “Kill them,” he ordered the wardens, “and bring her to me.”

Eluned struggled to get the Anchor under control as the fighting raged around her. It snapped and sparked with a painful intensity that took her breath away. She was vaguely aware of the striped pants of Iron Bull standing over her as the battle went on around her, without her.

“So—that went well,” Hawke drawled as the ritual tower fell silent finally. “Did anyone find Erimond?”

“No one came down the ramp where we were,” Blackwall replied as he and the others that had been waiting below crowded the only exit.

“Kaffas!” Dorian swore. “So there was another way out that we missed?”

“I believe I know where the Wardens are, Your Worship,” the Warden said as she accepted a hand up from Iron Bull. “There is an abandoned Warden fortress, Adamant.”

“The Warden, Fenris, and I will scout out Adamant and meet you back in Skyhold.”

She nodded to them and turned to the rest of her companions, cradling her left hand against her belly. “We head back to Halamshiral.” Kaaras hurried over, gently grasped her hand, and started casting healing on it. She hissed and yanked her hand away from him.

Kaaras backed away, masking his hurt—he knew it wasn’t about him, but she’d never pulled away from him like that before, not since the Valo-Kas first freed her.

“Come, Inquisitor,” Solas beckoned her to go with him.

Dorian fell into step beside Kaaras. “Don’t take it personally, I’m sure she didn’t mean to hurt you. I haven’t seen the Anchor react like that since the early days. No one other than our resident Fadewalker seem to have any success in treating the mark when it pains her. Despite my many talents, I have to concede that Solas is better in this respect.”

Kaaras gave a terse nod and followed the others out of the ruins. Dorian frowned at the receding group.

Iron Bull looked over the grim mage critically, “quite the stink-eye you’ve got going, Dorian.”

Dorian, not in the mood for his games, retorted, “you stand there, flexing your muscles, huffing like some beast of burden with no thought save conquest.”

Iron Bull chuckled that he succeeded in getting him to take the bait, “that’s right. These big muscled hands could tear those robes off while you struggled, helpless in my grip…”

The air rippled in front of them and Cole appeared stopping them in their tracks. “Stop! It’ll hurt her if you say it.”
“It’s okay, Kid. We were just playing a game. I would never do anything like that if the other person didn’t want it.”

“He did it anyway.”

There was a heavy pause as both men contemplated the cryptic statement; understanding dawned on their faces and they both looked to where Eluned walked with Solas. “Venhedis!” Dorian hissed. “What did your countrymen not do to her?”

“That’s forbidden,” Iron Bull growled, “especially with saarebas, willing or not. She should have been safe.”

“He knows that.” He fiddled with the dagger that had appeared in his hand. “He liked her pain. He was only disappointed that he couldn’t hear her scream.”

Iron Bull turned back to Cole sharply. “You said ‘he knows’. You can read the memories of the dead?”

“Yes,” Cole replied. He looked across the desert to the north-east. “But he’s not. He thinks of her often.”

“Fuuuuck,” Iron Bull said on a long exhale.


He slowly shook his head, “no. We don’t tell her.”

“You don’t think she has the right to know? We can’t keep—”

“No, we can’t, but she doesn’t need to worry about it right now. She’s got Venatori and desperate Wardens to plan for, she’s got a snake pit in a palace to head to; she’s got enough on her plate to worry about.”

“But—”

“She was calm—well, relatively—when she talked about some of it the other night, but you didn’t see her when I confronted her with what I knew about her. She was a heartbeat away from immolating herself than risk being sent back. Corypheus might scare the shit out of her but being sent back to her arvaarad? That terrifies her like nothing else.”

Chapter End Notes

I struggled with this one and the deadline; hopefully it didn’t suck! :)
Eluned rubbed her right thumb into the heel of her left hand trying to work out the spasms in the muscles that lingered after Solas treated her hand. No matter how closely she observed him, the layers of magic he applied to the Anchor and her hand were beyond complex and she couldn’t unravel it to replicate for herself. She skipped the healing potion she was offered, it would do nothing but ease some of her exhaustion which could be addressed by sleep well enough. She’d leave the healing potions for those that really needed them and wait for Solas’ magic to combat whatever corrupted magic Erimond had thrown at her. The mark felt just like it did after her confrontation with Corypheus.

Emerging from the tent she and Solas used for some privacy while he treated her hand, she looked around the camp. She had been so focused on the pain of her hand at the ritual site that she didn’t know who she had snapped at but Solas had helpfully informed her when she had asked about it. Kaaras sat on the other side of the camp cleaning his armour. She made her way over to him and stopped before him. He put his armour down and she knew he was looking at her, but she was so ashamed of her outburst that she couldn’t look him in the eye. "I’m sorry I snapped at you," she gestured.

“You have nothing to apologize for Ellie,” he said quietly. “It was entirely my fault. I should have have asked. Casting on top of magic I don’t understand—it was reckless—you were right to pull away.” She looked up at him and found him watching her with a tentative smile on his face. She blinked rapidly, she could feel her lip tremble as she fought the lump in her throat. He opened his arms to her. “Shh, we’re fine. Come here.”

She crumpled onto his lap, twisted herself to wrap her arms around his waist and tucked her face against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on her head. She didn’t care what the others thought, didn’t care what it looked like; with Kaaras’ arms wrapped around her and the steady thump of his heart under her ear, she felt safe and comforted. He never asked for anything from her, expected her to do or be something other than what she was. They simply were.

The rest of the evening was subdued; finding out that the Venatori were guiding the Wardens to their own destruction and enslavement with blood magic was deeply disturbing. Eluned scratched some notes to discuss with the advisors when they were reunited before the Winter Ball, then sat back to
study her book. The others sat around and cleaned armour, sharpened weapons, or traded stories while they played cards. She was happy to sit by and listen to them while she studied. Before long, her eyes drooped, and she excused herself to retire to her bedroll. They were leaving at dawn and starting the long trek back to Halamshiral.

She slept fitfully for a little while in the tent she shared with Kaaras, waking not long after he retired to his bedroll. As exhausted as she was earlier, her eyes failing to stay open as she studied, she was wide awake now and her eyes refused to stay closed. The desert night was surprisingly quiet for a change and she stared at the flickering patterns on the canvas of the tent from the fire. Her mind conjured up the memory of the sunlight flickering through the leaves in Seheron and the jungle falling silent before the Fog Warriors attacked. She shivered. Kaaras muttered as she turned over for the fourth time. Grabbing the felted wool blanket from her bedroll, she slipped out of the tent so not to disturb him any further.

A couple scouts nodded to her silently as she passed on her way to the campfire. She helped herself to a cup of hot tea that sat by the fire for anyone that wanted a warm up.

Iron Bull sat on one of the logs, his good eye to the outside so not to get blinded by the light. “Couldn’t sleep, Boss?”

She moved around so he didn’t have to talk across the fire and disturb the others. “Could ask the same of you.”

He rolled his shoulder in a lazy shrug, “I’m sitting watch. No slight against Harding’s scouts, but the missing Wardens and blood magic’s got me on edge. You?”

She gave her own shrug, “Wardens, Venatori, the shit show in Halamshiral. That’s just the short list.” She winced as her left hand trembled and spilt the hot tea over her fingers. “And my hand.” She put the cup down and wiped her fingers on the edge of the blanket.

“I thought Solas looked after that already.”

“He did, but his magic can only do so much, and the healing potions don’t help.” She clenched her hand into a fist as the muscles spasmed around the mark. She pulled the blanket up around her shoulders, held close with the marked hand while she spread open her book across her knees. If my damned hand was going to keep me up, I might as well study, she thought.

They settled into silence with only the sounds of the fire crackling and the scouts strolling along the perimeter of the camp to keep themselves warm and awake. The occasional cry of a wild animal would cause her head to jerk upright only to settle back when no one else took alarm. She returned to the book only to hiss when her hand gave a particularly nasty spasm. She dropped the blanket and rubbed her palm hard across her knee to try to interrupt the muscles.

“Can I try something?”

She looked at Iron Bull sceptically. “What? You have magic now?”

“No, but when the wyvern bit off my fingers, my hand would cramp up.” He gave a shrug. “Guess the muscles were still trying to move the fingers that weren’t there any more. Stitches used to massage it when it was bad. Thought it might work for you too.”

“Aren’t you afraid of sticking your fingers in the Fade?”

He shot her a grin, “I’d rather stick them—” He stopped himself as Cole’s words floated back into focus. He clenched his jaw briefly then answered, “I’ll risk it, if you will.”
She hesitated but another vicious spasm made up her mind. She dropped her book on the log beside her and turned toward him.

“No, right here,” he said, pulling a makeshift stool, little more than a large chunk of wood with a blanket folded on the top, in front of him between his spread knees and patted it with his hand.

She sat down and presented her left hand, palm facing up, to him. The mark flickered and gave a small crackle as her palm spasmed again and she waited to see if he’d change his mind.

Without hesitation, he took her hand in his and drew it closer to him. He flipped her hand over; it lay cool against his own warm palm, pale and small against his darker, grey skin. Supporting her hand with both of his, he carefully ran is thumbs along the back of her hand, feeling the delicate smooth skin over the thin bones, so much smaller than his own. Fragile, and yet he knew her strength. He worked his way down her fingers all the way to the perfect ovals of her nails, giving the fingers a gentle wiggle and pull to help release the tension. He pulled the tie that kept the sleeve snug to her wrist, pushing the sleeve back toward her elbow as he flipped her hand over to continue the massage.

She hazarded a look up and found Iron Bull’s gaze focused on her hand within his. She freely studied his face; for once having the freedom from his own watchful gaze on her. The mark glimmered casting reflections off his eyepatch and shadows into the scars of his face. She had seen that face shift with anger, with laughter, and tainted with the corruption of the red lyrium. Her eyes followed the lines of scars across the left side of his face to the one that caught the edge of his mouth; she wondered idly what his lips would feel like on her own. She shivered as goosebumps erupted over her skin as his thumbs brushed her wrist with a feather light touch.

“Cold?”

She looked up and found his eye focused on her again and she wondered how long he had been watching her. “Aren’t you?”

He shrugged, still massaging her hand, “I run hot. I’m surprised that someone with such an affinity for fire as you can be cold. I’m surprised that you don’t stick heat runes on everything.”

“I never think to use it for anything but combat. I lit myself on fire once and I’d rather not do it again if I can avoid it.”

“Here,” he urged her to stand up, pulled the stool closer to him, then guided her to sit down with her back to him. He pulled her blanket up around her. “Lean against me.” He reached around her shoulders and picked up her hand to continue massaging it. After a few minutes surrounded by warmth of his body she started to relax against him. “How did it happen?”

She hummed in question.

“You said you set yourself on fire,” he repeated quietly.

“Was my first day. Arvaarad told me to put out the fire... pulled it back instead of my mana.” Her words started to come more slowly as her eyes drooped, her head rested against his shoulder. “Never made that mistake again.” After a few minutes, she mouthed, “got tamassran the next day.”

Something stroked down her cheek and then down the side of neck. After reaching her collar, it left and started at her cheek again.

“Hey Boss?”

She woke with a start.
“Whoa, Boss, you’re okay. You fell asleep on me. Dawn’s not far off, thought you might want to move before everyone else woke up.”

Eluned lurched to her feet, snatched her blanket out of Iron Bull’s lap, and grabbed her book from the log beside them. She got halfway across the circle set around the fire and turned back, “thanks Bull.” She hurried away to her shared tent.

He smiled to himself; that was the first time that she had ever shortened his name.

The return trip from the Western Approach passed far too quickly for Eluned’s liking. Whether it was due to the phenomenon of the “return trip effect” or simply due to her dread at the approaching Ball, she couldn’t have said. The city loomed in the distance, growing larger and larger for every mile the horses covered with their easy trots. A message left for them at Vercheil informed them that there would be scouts waiting for them to escort them to their accommodations when they got to Halamshiral.

“Hold up,” Sera called back to the rest of the group, she and Blackwall had taken point after they passed Lydes, “there’s people at the side of the road ahead.” They collectively dropped into a walk and proceeded with caution. After a couple hundred feet closer, Sera relaxed, “s’okay. Inquisition scouts.”

Eluned moved up as they drew up on the scouts. “Right on schedule Inquisitor,” one of the scouts cheerfully addressed her. “We’re here to escort you to the estate the Inquistion will be using for the duration of the festivities and peace talks.”

Unexpectedly, the scouts turned south before they reached the main road that led into the city, and onto a road that led into a hilly, wooded area. “We’re not staying in Halamshiral?” she asked, one of her companions translated for her.

“No, Inquisitor. Sister Nightingale thought it best if the Inquistion remained outside of the city walls until the peace talks and out of sight from spies of the Elder One.”

“One of the Orlesian nobles has newly pledged their support and offered us the use of their estate,” the other scout volunteered, drawing his horse up alongside hers.

The scout ahead looked over their shoulder at her, “wait until you see it. It’s just around the bend in the road. These Orlesians sure know how to put on a show.”

Eluned kept her face still as the scout’s eyes flicked to the other riding beside her before he turned to face forward again. She turned to speak to Blackwall who was on her other side when her horse suddenly screamed and reared up. It took a step back, shook its head violently, then another step back, and Eluned had the sudden sick feeling that they were going to tip over. She kicked her feet out of the stirrups and shoved herself away from the horse as they both went down. Around her was chaos; yelling and shouting, horses screaming, clash of metal, the steady thud of Bianca firing, and sizzle of magic. Her horse kicked and thrashed to regain its feet but not without first catching her thigh with a glancing blow of its hoof.

She rolled to her hands and knees, a hand hooked under her arm and helped her to her feet. “Are you all right, my lady?” She nodded to Blackwall and pulled her sword looking around for whomever attacked them. “Bastards went for the horses. Keep your back to mine, your guard up like we practiced. Try not to set me on fire.” He added the last as flames flickered to life along the wavy sword blade. She shot him a grin and turned her focus to the fight going on around them.
There was very little she could do with her magic in this situation; she realized with frustration that her years as bas-saarebas had largely made her into a one-trick pony. She was very accomplished with fire and could focus well enough to light one person on fire versus the one next to them, but in the middle of a melee with friend and foe alike, not to mention all the deadfall and dry litter that surrounded them in the forest, her fire was a liability. Her companions would hardly thank her for toasting them with friendly fire. Her skill with cold was growing as she understood it as a counterpoint to fire, but lightning or nature-based magics beyond a simple barrier spell eluded her entirely. *I need to spend more time training with Solas,* she thought as she concentrated on holding the barrier over herself and Blackwall.

A Venatori swordsman rushed in and swung his sword at her. She gripped her sword with both hands and deflected his blow to the side. She silently thanked any deity that might be listening that her opponent didn’t have a shield, or she’d probably be picking her teeth up from a shield bash in that moment. As it was, she got an armoured shoulder driven into the front of her own; if not for Dagna’s clever modification to the hilt, she might have dropped her sword as her fingers went numb.

She whipped her sword up as she staggered back from the blow, catching Blackwall’s attention. He smoothly stepped around to guard her side and cut down the Venatori that was pressing her. Unfortunately, it opened her to an archer on the hill.

“**Inquisitor!**”

Eluned spun around in time to be knocked to the ground, the scout that had been riding beside her landing on top of her. She pulled the dagger from its scabbard at the small of her back to finish him off when she coughed splattering blood in her face.

“I’m sorry Inquisitor,” he drew a gurgling breath. “I didn’t know, I swear it.” He groaned in pain as she tried to wriggle out from underneath him.

She could see a pair of arrows sticking out of his back. She knelt beside him, holding him on his side so he didn’t roll onto the arrows, and looked around for Solas or Kaaras. Blackwall spun around and angled his shield over her as he scanned the area to see where the arrows had come from.

A Venatori archer nocked another arrow and started to draw the bow string back. “The Elder One will suffer no rivals,” he spat. Eluned sent a blast of fire in his direction while a massive axe slammed into him pinning him to the tree behind killing him instantly. The arrow went careening off into the trees.

She gave a shrill whistle and turned back to the scout that clutched at her hand. He coughed up more blood then drew a ragged breath, she could hear the rattle in his chest and knew at the very least one of the arrows had punctured his lung. “Forgive me, Your Worship. I didn’t…” he coughed again, and a bright torrent of blood spilled over his lips. “Go… Maker’s side… forgive me.”

She pulled her left hand out of the scout’s grip that had begun to loosen. Solas settled down behind the scout and after a quick scan with his magic, shook his head. She turned the scout’s face slightly toward her and crouched down close, so he could see her. “I forgive you,” she said in the loudest whisper she could manage. He closed his eyes slowly with a sigh of relief. His grip on her hand loosened entirely and his hands slid to the ground as his final breath left him.

Solas gave her a hand up and steadied her when she teetered on her feet. “Are you hurt, Inquisitor?”

“**Glancing blow from the horse.**” He ran his hand down where she indicated, and they went to help the others.
After searching the bodies of the Venatori, including the one that had either infiltrated the Inquisition or merely obtained Inquisition armour for subterfuge, they were left with no more answers than they started. Oddly enough, no one had incriminating notes or other evidence on them to point a finger at who had issued the orders for this latest attempt on Eluned’s life. They piled the bodies off the path and left them.

Most of the horses were injured, enough of them that they didn’t have enough horses to effectively double up and carry the two dead that they were bringing back; the false scout, and the one that took the arrows for Eluned. Her own mount had its shoulder sliced open from an arrow that been shot when it reared, and another sunk firmly in its hind quarters. Solas and Kaaras did what they could to patch everyone up enough to walk out of there, but superficially at best so not to tax their mana if the Venatori had reinforcements waiting for them should they turn back from the initial ambush.

She breathed a sigh of relief when they gained the Imperial Highway with no further confrontations. There was some initial discussion about her riding ahead with a tight group to get her to safety in Halamshiral or sending a couple ahead to gather help while she remained guarded with the rest, but in the end, they stuck together and continued walking. The clatter of hooves on the stone road sent them into high alert again, drawn weapons and shields, when another pair of Inquisition scouts appeared.

She found herself thrust back into the middle of the group behind a solid wall of three grey bodies. She peeked between the gap between Iron Bull’s elbow and his side.

“Inquisitor?” the newest scout called out. He gave the bristling group a wary scan for her. His eyes widened as he made note of the two corpses in Inquisition armour laid across the backs of two horses, and the general dishevelment of the group. “Maker! What happened?”

Blackwall stepped forward with his shield and sword at the ready, “identify yourself.”

“Lieutenant Farrow, ser.” He snapped out a salute as did the other. “We were sent by Sister Leliana to escort the Inquisitor and her companions to Halamshiral.”

“You’re the second party to offer,” Iron Bull growled.

“What?” The scout’s head snapped to the corpses again. “Is the Inquisitor…”

She stepped out and led the horses she was hanging onto over to the mile marker stone at the side of the highway and sat down upon it.

“Inquisitor?” The scout was clearly relieved when he recognized her.

“I’m not leaving this spot until either Commander Rutherford or Sister Nightingale come to personally escort me to the city.” She cocked her head to the side, “I would accept Seeker Pentaghast as well.”

“I—I understand,” Farrow saluted again. “I will return with one of them immediately.” He and the other scout flung themselves back onto their mounts and galloped back down the road to Halamshiral.

A little over an hour later, both Cullen and Cassandra arrived in the company of a dozen Inquisition soldiers and Farrow. “Maker, what happened?”

Eluned gave a weary sigh, “I do not wish to discuss it in the middle of the road.”

“Of course not, Inquisitor,” Cullen immediately issued orders to get her group remounted, for those
whose horses were too injured to ride, and the soldiers that relinquished their mounts to lead the injured horses back to Halamshiral on foot. He gave her a leg up behind Cassandra before getting back on his own horse.

“Are you all right?” Cassandra asked as she urged her horse forward once Eluned settled herself.

“Just tired. I’d sell my soul for a bath right now.”

Cassandra gave an uncharacteristic laugh, startling Eluned, “remember you said that once Vivienne and Josephine get their hands on you.”

Eluned dropped her forehead between Cassandra’s shoulder blades and groaned. So much for relaxing.

She tried to focus on the city as they rode through down the main road into Halamshiral. Unlike most cities she had been in thus far, the elves appeared to be on the outside sections of the city rather than confined to walled quarter within the rest of the city. Rough buildings of newer wood stood out next to older buildings that showed evidence of fire; charred timbers, scorched walls and roofs. The damage wasn’t relegated to one area of the elven portion of the city but was present in all areas along the road to the gates of walled section of the city the nobles resided behind.

It was supposed to be an ancient city to celebrate the reclamation of the Dales by the elves, but it was little more than a slum, filled with defeated, oppressed people. Eluned pressed her lips together in a firm line, she didn’t blame them one bit for the resentful looks sent their way.

Josephine, Leliana, and Vivienne stood waiting on the front stairs when they rode into the yard of the estate. Eluned grasped Cassandra’s elbow to steady herself as she dismounted and found Cullen waiting to catch her.

“Inquisitor! Thank the Maker you are safe!” Josephine looked her over with a concerned eye.

“You must come and tell us what has happened,” Leliana urged her.

“After I bathe.”

“The bath can wait. We must need to know what is going on with the Wardens and what befell you on the road. Farrow said there was an ambush.”

Eluned spotted Dehari—thank god for small mercies—she signalled to the elf to prepare a bath. She stopped on the steps and dug into her pack, pulling out her notebook thrusting it into Leliana’s hands. “Here are my notes on the Wardens. As for the rest, the dead will still be dead after my bath. I will discuss the rest with you then.” She brushed past them and followed her maid into the house.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart! Thank you so much to Beckily for this amazing fan art—I love it! I’ve posted this in Chapter 25 as well as this is the scene after Eluned first meets Iron Bull and he discovers who she actually is!
Potentiality

Chapter Summary

Potentiality
Noun: the possibility of something happening or of someone doing something in the future

Eluned stared at her reflection in the highly polished mirror and couldn’t have said that she recognized the woman that sat before her. The person that she knew and recognized as herself had been chiseled and stripped away by hardship and pain, leaving behind something harder, more brittle, and her new face showed that.

No sooner than Dehari had awoken her and brought her morning tea and breakfast, Vivienne had swept into her room with nary a “by your leave”; servants in tow armed with all the necessary supplies to bathe, massage, condition and moisturize from head to toe. She’d never confess it to the enchanter, but it was rather nice to be pampered for a change. Not once did she need to flinch from careless claws dragged indifferently over the scars that littered her body. Gentle hands washed away the dust and sand from the Western Approach and left her feeling renewed.

She was particularly pleased with the job they did tidying her hair. As bas-saarebas Tal'atkata had used her hair to keep her mask in place and to add ornaments to proclaim his glory as the handler for Vatasala, once free she had borrowed one of Meraad’s daggers and hacked it to a more manageable length. It has grown considerably since then and they had done a lovely job tidying it from her rough treatment.

The only thing that continued to bother her was something that she should have been used to, if she was being honest with herself; the way everyone’s eyes inevitably dropped to the scars around her lips. The threads had left indelible stains in her flesh that would remain even if the scars themselves eventually closed to nothing. She huffed with annoyance at herself. At least the burgundy stain for her lips that the women had chosen for her made the scars less stark than her normally paler lips did.

A tentative knock at the door was followed by the silent entry of an elf. Eluned studied the elven woman as she approached tentatively. She seemed familiar, but she couldn’t place her.

She curtsied. “Forgive my impertinence, my lady. I noticed your…discomfort…with the type of mask Madame Paonne had offered you.” She ducked her head at Eluned’s look of distaste.

Ah, one of the seamstress’ assistants from Skyhold, she thought. “Your name?” she asked.

“Ghenne, Your Worship.” She bobbed a curtsy again. “My sister and I made a different mask for you. It is not as fancy as the other,” they both glanced at the ornate mask of porcelain, metals, and semi-precious gems that lay to the side of the dressing table, “we made it from scraps from your wardrobe. It is soft, light, and will not obscure your vision. It will keep in place with a bit of resin and won’t shift even with the heat of the ballroom.” She held out the sculpted mask made of stiffened fabric with cleverly stitched silk and lace with a trembling hand.

She took the mask from the woman’s hand and turned to the mirror. With a deep breath, she raised the mask to her face and pressed it lightly against her skin. Any stiffness in the mask was restricted to
where it lay across her brow, the scalloped edge of the lace lay softly across her cheekbones; her eyesight was completely unhindered. The lace was cunningly woven with little metal rings that sparkled in the light without adding weight to the mask.

Eluned smiled; Vivienne, Josephine, and Leliana had argued continuously that she had to wear a mask, but they didn’t stipulate which mask she had to wear. She lowered the mask from her face and handed it to Ghenne with another smile and a nod.

Ghenne carefully applied the resin to secure the mask and between the two of them, positioned it in place.

She looked in the mirror and was surprised to see how much she liked the result. The mask was comfortable and no more oppressive than wearing her favourite Tevinter scarf with its clever little veil. She turned her head to gauge her range of view again and the little rings glittered, catching her eye. It gave her an idea that would be sure to shock everyone.

Arriving at the Winter Palace, Eluned didn’t see most of her companions. Arrivals had been planned in such a way to create distractions to disguising their numbers and permit some of her companions to be in place for security reasons for her own arrival. Someone knew that she would be present, based on the attempt to kill her two days earlier; the advisors weren’t taking any chances.

Josephine’s eyes quickly scanned her from toe to head to make sure everything was in place, pausing on the new mask and other alteration that she had made to her own appearance. She could tell from the pressed lips that the ambassador wanted to scold her, but it was too late now, and the hideous mask Madame Paonne had made was safely left behind at the estate. The ambassador contented herself with smoothing the dark charcoal-grey velvet collar of the coat and picking off some invisible bit of lint from her sleeve. The long skirt of the coat was pinned back in the front revealing the Inquisition red lining, and freeing her legs, which were clad in soft grey breeches and black knee boots. She felt surprisingly comfortable.

“Solas will be acting as your interpreter, Inquisitor. A role he’s played for you before,” Josephine reminded her when she frowned in dismay.

Redcliffe wasn’t the same thing at all. She had only told the Venatori agent that he was an interpreter to keep him and the others at her side when they went to confront Alexius.

“As an elf, he can remain at your side inconspicuously; no one will suspect him of being anything other than a servant.”

Eluned opened her mouth to protest, but Solas quietly interrupted her. “Do not fret on my behalf, Inquisitor. I care not what these nobles think of me. If the ruse allows me to safeguard you, I am content.”

She didn’t like it—it was insulting considering Solas’ contributions—she pressed her lips and gave a stiff nod. If Solas wasn’t going to take issue with it, there was little she could do if he didn’t permit.

“Inquisitor Treherne. We meet at last. I’ve heard so much about you,” Grand Duke Gaspard said walking up to her, his eyes flickered to her mouth as she graced him with a small smile and a bow. He looked at Solas with distaste, “would you dismiss your rabbit, I would speak with you in private.”

She kept her face blank and turned to Solas, tipping her head ever so slightly. She spotted the tiniest twitch at the corner of his mouth as he bowed to her and moved away.
“Bringing the rebel mages into the ranks of your army was a brilliant move. I heard that you were less successful with the Templars. Imagine what the Inquisition could accomplish with the full support of the rightful ruler of Orlais!”

Her first impression of the Grand Duke was less than favourable, and it wasn’t improving. She alternated pointing her thumbs over each shoulder, then scraped her right hand over her left, flicking it up at the end. She raised her right hand to her brow then circled her hands, shaped as claws, over each other.

The Grand Duke looked at her, bewildered. She repeated the gestures, but he didn’t appear to be enlightened. With a dramatic sigh, she waved Solas back over and signed again.

“Which was the rightful one? I get them confused,” Solas said.

Gaspard looked between them until finally he covered his confusion with an elegant bow, “the handsome, charming one of course, my lady.” He turned with a gesture of his own for her to walk with him and headed toward the palace. “I’m not a man who forgets his friends, Inquisitor. You help me, I’ll help you. The empire needs stability and security, now more than ever. If you have the safety of the Orlesian people at heart, perhaps you will investigate something for me.” His eyes flicked to Solas and back. “This Elven woman, Briala, I suspect that she intends to disrupt the negotiations. My people have found her ‘ambassadors’ all over the fortifications and sabotage seems the least of their crimes.”

She gestured. “That does sounds like something I should investigate,” Solas responded.

Gaspard sighed, “please be as discreet as possible. I detest the Game, but if we do not play it well our enemies will make us look like villains.” Eluned shot Solas an amused look when Gaspard glanced at the doors to the ballroom. “We’re keeping the court waiting, Inquisitor. Shall we?”

She stood before the doors to the Grand Ballroom alongside the Grand Duke, her left hand caught uncomfortably in the crook of his elbow, awaiting their announcement. The court herald unrolled a scroll and announced in a loud voice, “and now presenting: Grand Duke Gaspard de Chalons, and accompanying him Lady Inquisitor Elo—El-ee-ned Treherne—” She smirked at his stumble over her name. “— Champion of the Blessed Andraste herself!” He continued with her advisors and companions as she made her way down the length of the ballroom on Gaspard’s elbow.

Gaspard released her hand, walked forward and bowed to Celene and the woman behind her, “cousin. My dear sister.”

“Grand Duke. We are always honoured when your presence graces our court,” Celene replied, sketching a shallow curtsy to Gaspard.

“Don’t waste my time with platitudes, Celene. We have business to conclude.”

If Celene was displeased with Gaspard’s bluntness, she didn’t show it. “We will meet for the negotiations after we have seen to our other guests.” Eluned bowed when the Empress addressed her, “Lady Inquisitor, welcome to the Winter Palace. Allow us to present our cousin, the Grand Duchess of Lydes, without whom this gather would never have been possible.”

The Grand Duchess curtsied to Eluned. “What an unexpected pleasure. I was not aware the Inquisition would be part of our festivities. We will certainly speak later, Inquisitor,” she said before excusing herself from Celene’s side.

“Your arrival at court is like a cool wind on a summer’s day,” Celene remarked.
A shocked gasp rippled through the crowd as Solas stepped up beside Eluned and turned to face her, almost with his back to the Empress. Eluned gestured and Solas swivelled on his heel toward Celene, “I’m delighted to be here, Your Majesty.”

If Celene was surprised or shocked as her court was, she didn’t show it. Her eyes remained in Eluned, “how do you find Halamshiral?”

*How did she find Halamshiral? she thought. The abject poverty and ruin that the elves lived in? The appalling disparity between even the living conditions of the working-class humans and the elves? It was disgusting.* “My words can not do it justice,” Solas translated her gestures. Members of the court tittered nervously, unsure of whether she was making a joke at her own expense or was sincere in her compliment.

“Your modesty does you credit and speaks well for the Inquisition. Please enjoy yourself; I look forward to watching you dance.”

With a final bow, she was excused and made her way off the ballroom floor to where Leliana awaited her. “You did well. No one quite knows what to make of you,” Leliana commented. “What did the Duke say?”

“He said to investigate Ambassador Briala.”

Leliana looked thoughtful then replied, “she may be up to something, but the best place to strike at Celene would be from her side.” She glanced around and led Eluned away from the crowds that had started to gather. “She has an occult advisor, an apostate who charmed the Empress and key members of the court. I would look closely at her.”

She studied Leliana closely, “there is something else about this mage that you are not saying.”

“I’ve had dealings with her in the past. She’s ruthless and capable of anything. If there is anything to be found on either Briala or Celene’s occult advisor, it would be in the guest wing.”

Eluned, with Solas trailing along behind her in his role for the evening, headed for the guest wing of the palace. Between the two of them, they gathered an assortment of gossip, intriguing rumours, none of which was particularly useful for their objective that night, but Eluned was sure that either Josephine or Leliana would find use for them. They did find two pieces of evidence that pointed to Briala being up to something.

“What do you suppose Gaspard meant that Briala had a weapon that could turn the tide of every war?”

“I…I am uncertain, Inquisitor.” He frowned as he studied the page from Gaspard to Celene, that they had found.

She opened her mouth to say something, only to be interrupted by a single bell that chimed over the palace. “We need to head back,” she said, slipping another scrap of parchment into a hidden pocket. “I’ll deliver this to Leliana.” They slipped out the library doors and down the stairs, slipping unnoticed into the crowds.

“Well, well, what have we here?”

Eluned turned to face the woman that addressed her. She cocked her head slightly in question.

“I am Morrigan,” she curtsied to Eluned and beckoned her to step aside from the crowds. “Some call me advisor to Empress Celene on matters of the arcane. You…have been very busy this evening
hunting in every dark corner. Perhaps you and I hunt the same prey?”

“I hope so. I could use another ally here.”

“A sentiment I share, considering recent events.” Eluned raised a brow. “Recently I caught, and killed, an unwelcome guest within these halls. An agent of Tevinter. So I offer you this, Inquisitor: a key found on the Tevinter’s body. Where it leads, I can not say. But proceed with caution. Enemies abound, and not all of them are aligned with Tevinter.”

Elunned nodded her thanks and slipped the key into the hidden pocket within her coat’s tails while Morrigan proceeded into the ballroom ahead of her.

A bell chimed twice.

“What do you wish to do now?” Solas asked quietly.

“I have to make an appearance, but after that, we investigate this new lead. Venatori in the palace is not good.”

“Agreed.” They walked through the doors. Solas slipped back a couple of steps behind her shoulder and she strolled around the upper gallery of the ballroom to be seen.

“Ah, Inquisitor, I would like to introduce you to Marquis d'Lussard,” Josephine said, waving her over to where she stood with a large, older gentleman who appeared quite flushed and over-heated. The gilt buttons on his rich velvet coat strained at the holes keeping the coat shut with every breath.

“Inquisitor, I have so hoped to have the opportunity to meet you,” he grasped her hand in his. She resisted the overwhelming urge to jerk her hand back from his sweaty grip. “Might I have this dance?” Crumbs fell from his collar and there was a suspicious greasy looking stain on his sleeve that looked like he had been using it to wipe his mouth, ineffectively.

Bull was right, some humans do smell like sweaty pork. Josephine shot her a warning glance, she gave him a tight smile and let him lead her out onto the dance floor.

His large meaty hand enveloped hers and pulled her close. “I wonder if you’ve read my book, Inquisitor? ‘The Further Journeys of Marquis d'Lussard, with an Emphasis on Food and Drink, with Full Illustrations by the Author’.” He looked at her hopefully. “With focus on the southern Avvar tribes?”

She stiffened in his grasp, but it went un-noticed by him as he continued to prattle on. The dance came to an end, she curtsied and hastily escaped the dance floor before the Marquis had gained his breath enough to ask her for another dance.

“Oh, that is disappointing. Nevermind, I’ll send a signed copy to you at Skyhold.” He panted through the next set of quick steps. His moist breath, heavily scented with alcohol, bitter garlic, and something else she couldn’t identify, washed over her face. ‘I’m seriously considering writing the next installment, ‘Continued Journeys’ as it were, and I am looking to the north this time. I have a fascination with these barbarian cultures and their cuisines; is it true that you spend years with the Qunari?’”

She stiffened in his grasp, but it went un-noticed by him as he continued to prattle on. The dance came to an end, she curtsied and hastily escaped the dance floor before the Marquis had gained his breath enough to ask her for another dance.

“I’ll be sure to send you the book!” he called after her.

She surreptitiously wiped her hand on her hip and grabbed a glass of some bubbly alcohol from the
tray of a passing servant which she downed quickly. As Solas wasn’t where they had parted ways before the dance; she circled the room to where Iron Bull stood to find out what he had seen or heard from his vantage. She hadn’t had a chance to speak with him since arriving at the Winter Ball. She smirked; of course, he had gravitated to one of the buffet tables. Nobles milled around him but never quite approached, like they were afraid that he’d reach out and rip their heads off if they ventured too close.

“Got anything that needs killing because these nobles keep messing with me, and they think I don’t know they’re doing it,” he growled aware of her presence at his side. “This keeps up, I’m going to wear somebody’s skull as my fancy little mask.” He huffed with frustration and rolled his shoulders.

“How things going, Boss?” he asked as he turned toward her. His eye drifted down her face stalling on her bottom lip. Two rings crossed over each other on the left, and a single ring on the right; the metal rings glinted in the light against the darker burgundy of her stained lips. He sucked in a ragged breath and raised his hand to her face, gently dragging his thumb across her lip between the rings, his fingers resting against the underside of her chin to hold her in place. “Oh fuck, that’s hot.” His voice rumbled low, loud enough for only her to hear.

To her surprise, heat pooled low in her belly and she fought her own urge to move closer to him. She hadn’t felt anything like that in—well, years—and to feel it now with a Qunari…for him…

His eye was still fixed on the path his thumb took, lightly stroking across her lip between the rings. His gaze reminded her of something else; it was the same way he looked when they took down the dragon in Crestwood. Taarsidath-an halsaam. She narrowed her eyes; what game was he playing?

She opened her mouth and bit down on his thumb. Hard.

She expected him to pull away.

Instead he locked his eye on hers, stepped into her and with a barely audible growl, gently pressed his thumb against her bottom teeth. She gasped, releasing her bite, and fled; all her questions for him completely forgotten.

She found Solas in the next hall over close to the gardens. “I do adore the heady blend of power, intrigue, danger, and sex that permeates these events,” he remarked with vicious glee.

Eluned looked sharply in his direction, a blush heated her cheeks. How much had he seen or heard of her interaction with Bull?

“Are you all right, Inquisitor? You seem rather flushed.” His innocent tone was in sharp contrast to his previous statement; the first seemed so out of character for the reserved man she was accustomed to.

“It’s very warm in here.” She adjusted her collar to make her point. “I’m surprised that you are enjoying yourself so much. I wouldn’t have thought you had much experience with Court.”

He hesitated for just a second, “perhaps not with the Orlesian Court, but I have seen such in the Fade.”

“Too bad you aren’t the one dealing with the nobles. I’m sure you’d be very effective.”

“I doubt these nobles would see past my pointed ears, if they saw me at all.”

“I’m sorry Solas, that’s not right.”

“It is of no matter. Besides, you give yourself too little credit, Inquisitor, you are doing admirably.
I’ve heard that you have already made a conquest of the Marquis d'Lussard.” He surprised her yet again as he laughed out loud when she pretended to gag. “Come. Vivienne, Blackwall, and Sera are waiting by the servants’ wing.”
Full-fledged

Chapter Summary

**Full-fledged**
*Adjective: completely developed, or having all the qualities necessary to be considered as something significant*

Chapter Notes

Dance. Dance. Dance! Who is it going to be!?! 😊

Eluned handed Sera the key that Morrigan had given her, and hung back with Solas while Vivienne, Blackwall, and Sera ducked through the door, only for Blackwall to pop his head back out a couple of seconds later. “My lady.” She could tell from his somber tone that whatever was behind the door, was bad. “You need to come see this.”

She’d really have rathered not seeing what was beyond the door. The kitchen looked like it has been turned into an abattoir.

Sera paced back and forth, fuming, “caught in the middle of this crap. What fully qualified arsehole stops to kill a cook?”

“They always kill the servants first, my dear. Otherwise, they could run and warn someone.”

Sera glared at the enchanter even though she knew the woman was right. “Oh, sure, reasonable innit? Frigging garbage. Whoever did this oughta be down here somewhere and I have a couple of arrows to shove up their arse.”

Eluned clasped her shoulder, “we’ll find the ones responsible for this.”

“Friggen right.”

The trail of corpses told the infuriating tale of servants being cut down from behind or slaughtered where they hid behind barrels and boxes of foodstuffs. There were no weapons left behind by whomever killed the servants, nor were there any signs of the perpetrators being injured or killed themselves.

“Are we thinking the Venatori did this?” Blackwall asked.

Eluned nodded. “We haven’t seen anything that ties these murders to any one particular party. These murders aren’t the message; they were just in the way.” Sera continued to mutter to herself. “Let’s keep moving.”

It wasn’t long before they ran into Venatori upon exiting the servant’s quarters into a quiet courtyard. Several Venatori emerged from their hiding spots, no doubt expecting panicked servants. They were
soon the ones that panicked as Eluned’s group quickly cut them down.

“Oi! Here’s something.”

“That’s an emissary for the Council of Heralds.” Vivienne bent down next to the body, pulled a handkerchief from somewhere in her clothing, and used it to remove a dagger from the man’s back. “This dagger bears the Chalons family crest.”

“Chalons? As in Duke Gaspard?”

“The very same.”

“As much as he hates ‘the Game’, he wouldn’t be that reckless to leave behind that which would implicate him so thoroughly...or he did to claim he’s being framed and implicate someone else.”

Vivienne gave her an approving look.

“Ugh, this so stupid,” Sera said with disgust. “So what do we do now?”

“We carry on,” she replied, pointing to another door across the courtyard.

The new section of the palace they entered looked as if it were under construction or simply wasn’t used that much. Furniture and paintings were draped in clothes and dust lay on the floors showing them that someone had passed that way before them.

A sprinting Venatori agent appeared at the corner of the hall ahead of them; he was completely unaware of their presence, too busy looking back over his shoulder. Eluned drew on her mana to cast at him but before she could, the Venatori was felled with a thrown dagger lodged in his skull. They proceeded forward cautiously and were met by an elf.

“Fancy meeting you here, Inquisitor.” The elven woman put her foot against the neck of the dead Venatori and yanked the knife out, wiping it on the dead agent’s clothing. “Shouldn’t you be dancing? What will the nobility say?”

She shrugged. “No doubt there’s a line of people breathlessly waiting to dance with me.”

Briala didn’t even blink at Solas translating her gestures. “I wouldn’t be surprised if there was. We haven’t been properly introduced, I am Ambassador Briala.”

“What are you doing down here?” She signalled for the others to hold back while she and Solas accompanied the elven woman.

“I came to save or avenge my people, but it appears you have beaten me to it.” She walked out onto a balcony overlooking the courtyard they had just come from. “So...the Council of Herald’s emissary—” she nodded at the corpse below them, “that’s not your work, is it?”

“No. We found a dagger on him with a family crest.”

“Murdering a council emissary. Bringing Tevinter assassins into the palace. Those are desperate acts. Someone must be planning to strike tonight.”

“I take it that wouldn’t be you?”

“What would that gain me? I can not take the throne.”

“There are other ways to rule a country.”
Briala studied her. “I misjudged you, Inquisitor. You might just be an ally worth having. What could you do with an army of elven spies at your disposal?”

“Depends. What will this army cost me?”

“Help me help my people. I know which way the wind is blowing. I’d bet good coin that you’ll be part of the peace talks before the night is over. Think about it.” Briala said then dropped over the ledge of the balcony and disappeared into the shadows of the courtyard.

Blackwall scratched his fingers through his beard. “Does it seem strange that every single person at this party has tried to bribe the Inquisitor?”

Vivienne gave a dramatic sigh, “it’s the Game, my dear. Everyone plays it here.”

A single bell rang over the palace; Eluned growled in frustration. “I have to get back to the ballroom. Keep looking for evidence and kill any Venatori. Report what you find to Leliana and Cullen.”

The second bell rang out over the palace and moments later the main doors of the ballroom opened to allow Eluned to enter with Solas shadowing her. A low hum of approval fell over the room as every set of eyes inevitably turned toward her. So too, did Iron Bull’s.

She walked calmly into the room, acknowledging the highly ranked nobles that greeted her as she passed on her way to Leliana—Vivienne and Josephine will be pleased with her performance—but he could read the line of tension in her shoulders. She didn’t acknowledge him with so much as a flicker of her eyes as she walked past but he knew immediately that she had been fighting. He could smell the faint scent of her magic that lingered around her, like hot campfire ashes sizzling in the rain. And he could smell blood.

The Grand Duchess stepped into her path, drawing her up short. He growled in frustration that he couldn’t see Eluned’s face to read her lips, but whatever the conversation was, it led them out onto the dance floor to continue.

He moved his position closer to the stairs leading to the dance floor—just in case. Solas stood not far from the stairs as well. “Solas. What’s going on?” he asked quietly, still watching Eluned dance. “Has the Boss been fighting?”

“Yes, we ran into Venatori. They’ve slaughtered the servants.”

“So, whoever is planning on assassinating Celene is working directly for Corypheus.”

“That would seem the obvious conclusion.”

He shook his head, “this situation couldn’t get more fucked up.”

He slowly scanned the room. Too many soft nobles busy playing their political games, too many chevaliers with unknown loyalties, and too many of those annoying court jesters in their harlequin silks distracting everyone with their antics. He didn’t like it; it set his teeth on edge. The room was as chaotic as Seheron, and that was a sack of cats at the best of times. There were too many variables that he couldn’t control. He liked control, craved it; there was one thing he could control.

He made his way down the length of the ballroom in time to join the others when Eluned stepped off the dance floor.

“You’ll be the talk to of the court form months. We should take you dancing more often,” Josephine
“What did the Grand Duchess say?” Leliana asked.

“She said that I needed to stop Gaspard before he struck. She also said that the captain of his mercenaries was in the Royal Wing garden and would be able to tell me everything.”

“So we suspect Gaspard?” Cullen asked. She gave a slow shake of her head. “Vivienne said that you found the Duke’s dagger with a murdered Council of Herald’s emissary. It doesn’t get more damning than that.”

She nodded, “exactly. Too obvious.”

“I agree,” Leliana said. “Gaspard might not be a skilled player of the Game but he’s not that blunt.”

Cullen frowned, “we’re certain that the attack will happen tonight?” Eluned nodded.

“Warning Celene is pointless. She needs these talks to succeed, and to flee would admit defeat.”

“Then perhaps we should let her die.”

Josephine gasped. Eluned looked at Leliana in surprise.

“Listen to me carefully, Inquisitor. What Corypheus wants is chaos. Even with Celene alive, that could still happen. To spoil his plan, the empire must remain strong. This evening, someone must emerge victorious.”

“And it doesn’t need to be Celene. She’s right,” Cullen agreed.

“Do you realize what you’re saying, Leliana?”

“Sometimes the best path is not the easiest one.” Leliana gave Eluned a long look.

“What do we do now?”

“I follow the lead Florianne gave me, search the Royal wing.”

“You know it could be a trap?”

“Of course, but I don’t see an alternative. Get your soldiers into position.” Eluned signaled Cassandra and Varric to join her.

“I’m going with you, Boss.” She drew a breath to argue but the look on Bull’s face made her pause. She nodded and the others fell in as they headed to the Royal wing.

“We are here to save Empress Celene and it galls me. Why does she merit our protection?” Cassandra grumbled as they moved from room to room. “The empire would be better off without her. Gaspard is the leader Orlais needs in this crisis. Were it up to me—”

“It’s not up to you, Cassandra.”

“I…My apologies, you are right, of course.”

The Royal wing, surprisingly, was almost as bad as the servant’s quarters. What wasn’t a surprise was the level of depravity and complete disregard for life they uncovered. They rescued an elf, who thought she had been set up by Briala, and revealed that the ambassador had been Celene’s lover
when the Empress burned down the alienage.

Eluned fumed. She didn’t care who Briala was or wasn’t sleeping with, but she saw the evidence of the fire and the condition of the alienage when they arrived. For Celene to have done it intentionally—sometimes she really hated the humans of this world.

They continued on until a man’s voice shouted from a garden, “you painted Orlesian assholes! When I get out of this, I’ll butcher you like the pigs you are!”

She approached the doors to the garden and the anchor flared in her hand painfully. An echo of what Erimond had done in the Western Approach.

“A rift? Here in the palace?” Cassandra asked, concern sending her hand to draw her sword.

Eluned put her hand out to stall Cassandra. “I think so. This way.” She pushed open the doors, stepping into the garden, and into an ambush. She drew the sparking anchor behind her back.

“Inquisitor! What a pleasure! I wasn’t certain you’d attend.” Florianne strolled out from behind a pillar on the balcony above them while the Venatori archers drew their bows. “You’re such a challenge to read. I had no idea if you’d taken my bait.”

Eluned tipped her head slightly and gave Florianne a bored look.

The silence became awkward and Florianne floundered. “I see…such a pity you did not some one final dance for me. It was kind of you…”

Eluned tuned her out and covertly looked around the garden and the rift, in particular. It was not fully open much like the one in the Fallow Mire had been, and the one at the heart of the Temple of Sacred Ashes before it. She’d have to open it properly before she could close it. It would take time, precious time that they didn’t have.

“Corypheus insisted that the empress die tonight, and I would hate to disappoint him.”

She pushed her hand away from herself, tapped her fingers against her temple, then vibrated her hand like it was trembling. Iron Bull snorted a laugh and Varric chuckled. Even Cassandra looked amused.

Florianne looked between them, confused; she started to grow agitated, “you poor deluded thing. You don’t know half of what has been planned, and now, I suppose you never will.” She walked toward the opposite door and turned back looking direct at Eluned once more, “in their darkest dreams, no one imagines I would assassinate Celene myself. All I need is to keep you out of the ballroom long enough to strike—kill her and bring me her marked hand. It’ll make a fine gift for the master.”

No sooner did Florianne give her last order, arrows pinged off the barrier Solas had cast over her. Eluned dove out of the way so Cassandra and Varric could concentrate on the Venatori while she handled the rift, knowing that Bull had her back. Solas did what he did best, kept them protected and controlled the flow of battle.

It was a credit to how well they read and anticipated each other that the Venatori were dealt with and rift closed quickly.

“Andraste’s tits! What was all that?” The mercenary, with a pronounced Ferelden accent, struggled where he was tied to the post. “Were those demons? There aren’t any more blasted demons coming, right?”
“Good eye. Those were definitely demons,” Varric drawled in an amused tone. Cassandra cut the ropes holding the man in place.

“Maker bless me! Demons? How could there be demons in the fucking Winter Palace?” He rubbed his wrists which were raw from struggling against the rope. “I knew Gaspard was a bastard, but I didn’t think he’d feed me to fucking horrors over a damned bill.”

“You honestly believe you were captured, tied up, and thrown into a death trap…because of a bill?”

“Well it seems far fetched when you put it like that. He couldn’t get enough of those poncy chevaliers, had to pay us three times the normal rate to get us to come to Orlais.”

Eluned gestured, Varric translated, “want a new job? The Inquisition can always use a good mercenary company.”

“Hey, Boss!” Iron Bull protested.

“I’m game. Anything’s better than this bullshit.”

Eluned bit back her smile as he left. Same bullshit, different pile. “Come on, we need to get back before Florianne has time to strike.”

Eluned leaned on the balustrade, spinning the cold champagne flute across her palms; the cold glass felt pleasant against her sensitized skin after her hasty spell that engulfed Florianne in a blazing inferno, her screams cut short by two well placed bolts from Varric.

Celene was dead, and as much as she disliked the woman based on what she had uncovered over the course of the night; she still regretted having a hand in her death, even if her involvement consisted of waiting until Florianne struck. She snorted, of course, she traded one racist asshole for another, but at least Briala had enough evidence to keep Gaspard in line if she played the cards the Inquisition handed her well.

She shivered slightly in the night breeze. Her coat lay on a marble bench and the breeze cut through the fine lawn of her shirt, pressing it to cling against her drying skin. She twirled the empty glass in her hands again and held it out over the garden below by the rim. After a few moments, she sighed and drew it back; no doubt some poor servant would get a beating if they were missing a glass.

Soft steps behind her drew her attention and she turned around. Bull walked out onto the balcony with her.

“So Boss, now all that shit is over—do you want to dance? Seems a shame to waste all that practice you did in the desert.”

She looked at him in surprise and raised a brow, “with you?”

He made a show of looking around the balcony for someone other than the two of them. “Well, yeah.”

“Do you even know how?”

“Sure do, but if you’re scared,” he taunted her playfully, “I’ll let you stand on my feet.” His eye twinkled with merriment.

She smirked, the rings in her lips twinkling in the light. “All right. Show me what you’ve got.”
He flashed her a grin and gave her a surprisingly courtly bow, before gracefully leading her through the steps of a dance like a waltz. She knew that, despite his size, he could move quietly and with stealth. She knew he had a frightening ability to pick up and remember details, but it still surprised her at how well he was leading their dance.

She tipped her head to look up at him, then leaned back slightly into his hand. Through the thin fabric on her top, her skin cooling in the night air, his hand felt like a hot brand against her back. She shivered. He looked down at her himself and gave a faint frown. “Something wrong about this.”

Her own brow pinched in confusion, “what—”

Before she could react, he dropped her hand and bent down, wrapping his arms below her hips and hoisted her into the air. She flung her arms around his neck in alarm as he spun them around in wild circles, her feet dangling above the ground. She laughed hysterically as the world spun around them.

“You are ridiculous,” she gasped, out of breath, when he finally stopped. From the position he held her in, she had to look down slightly at him. Her left hand shifted back to his shoulder to brace herself, but her right hand curled under his collar around the corded muscles at the back of his neck. The laughter died as they stared at each other, Bull’s eye drifted down to her lips just like earlier in the evening. Nervously she worried the crossed pair of rings with her teeth; his eye darkened as he watched her tongue dart out to lick her lips.

A discreet cough came from the doorway, breaking the tension between them. Eluned took the opportunity to shift her gaze elsewhere.

“As much as I’ve enjoyed watching your antics—” Dorian drawled, “the others are looking for you, Inquisitor. Something about negotiating rights of passage for the Inquisition’s army.”

He felt her body sag as the weight of her responsibilities descended back onto her shoulders as he lowered her to the ground. She gave him a faint smile as she drew her hands out of his, “thanks for the dance, Bull. Best one of the night.” She grabbed her coat from the bench and pulled it on, buttoning it as she walked quickly back to the ballroom, and flashing Dorian a smile in thanks as she passed.

Dorian smiled back at her and then turned on Iron Bull with a hard gaze as soon as she was out of earshot. “What are you playing at?” he demanded.

“Nothing that you need to worry about, big guy. It was just a little levity to lighten the mood.”

Dorian gave him a sceptical look.

“Bah, you ‘Vints don’t know how to have fun without someone opening a vein,” he complained as he headed back into the ballroom.
Subversion

Chapter Summary

**Subversion**

*Noun: a systematic attempt to overthrow or undermine a government or political system by persons working secretly from within*

Chapter Notes

A little bird said I should post early—so I did! I'll be honest, I couldn't wait myself.

**Trigger warning:** brief (no details) mention of past rape, vomit

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Eluned’s great surprise, the morning after the Winter Ball, no one was knocking on her chamber door demanding her attention or presence for this or that discussion. She rolled onto her back in the over-stuffed bed and stared at the light filtering through the windows over the elaborately painted ceiling. Apparently ending a civil war and preventing the fall of a nation granted one a reprieve.

She rolled over and closed her eyes again, only to have them pop open no matter how often she closed them. The daylight crept into the room, light reflecting off glass and marble stretching across the floor like fingers. Beyond the doors of her chamber the sounds remained hushed, but she could hear the faint sounds of the guards beyond her windows in the yard below. Yet no one came to wake her for the day.

She sat up and hung her legs over the side of the bed.

*Was there something going on?*

She chewed on the inside of her lip with worry while she stared at the door.

*Was there already fallout for letting Celene die the previous evening and setting up Gaspard in her place?*

She pressed her knuckles against her sternum to still the fluttering, jumping sensation in her chest.

*Did she do something wrong?*

She swallowed hard at the rising nausea. She quickly pulled on a pair of breeches and grabbed a shawl to wrap over her sleep shirt and hurried to the door. Half expecting to find the chamber door locked against her, she stumbled back when it opened without resistance.

She rushed down the hallway toward voices, her bare feet slapping on the cold marble floor as she restrained herself from running even though it felt like disaster was snapping at her heels like starving wolves. She burst through the door and pulled up short to find nearly half of her companions sitting
around a table eating breakfast.

“Songbird! We didn’t wake you, did we? Thought you’d want to sleep after all the excitement last night.”

“Couldn’t sleep.” She darted a glance back over her shoulder.

“Are you alright, Inquisitor?” Cassandra asked. Concerned, she started to get up; Varric placed his hand on her arm and gave a slight shake of his head.

Eluned ducked her head to hide the blush of embarrassment. *What they must think of her flying in there like a mad woman?* She was half dressed, barefoot, and didn’t even stop to brush her hair. She never left her room or even her tent without tying it back and out of her way. She pulled her hair over one shoulder and twisted it around to form a crude rope.

“I’m fine. I just…I’m fine,” she lied.

A chair was shoved away from the table from underneath. “Pull up a seat and join us for breakfast,” Iron Bull said.

She nodded her head but avoided his eye, knowing that he’d see the remaining traces of anxiety. Settling in the chair with her feet tucked in underneath her, she took a few minutes to calm herself down, wrapping her cold fingers around a hot cup of tea offered by Blackwall. The conversation around the table resumed around her.

“—unhorsing more riders than her. I’ve seen her joust live, and I have to tell you, up close? She has magnificent ti—”

“Ugh.”

“Technique. I was going to say technique,” Blackwall protested at Cassandra’s dirty look.

“Smooth, Hero. Her victory in the Grand Tourney of Tantervale is pretty legendary, I’ll give you that, but I’d have to go with Reeve Asa, myself. Winning three consecutive Grand Tourneys? Who does that?” He took a deep swallow of his mug and continued, “hey, I have an idea. You know they’re holding a grand tourney in Markham soon. I think we should all go.”

Blackwall hummed thoughtfully as scratched his fingers through his beard, “there’s got to be... trouble or something up near Markham.”

“Right!” Varric exclaimed.

“No.”

“Come on, Seeker! Think of the reputation the Inquisition could build. We’d be doing a good thing, and if we have a little holiday out of it—who’s to know?”

“No, Varric. The Inquisition has more important matters to deal with than providing you with a holiday.”

He huffed at Cassandra and then turned to Eluned. “You know, Songbird, Val Royeaux is less than two days away. I know this famous—or infamous, depending on your point of view—seedy tavern, set between the university and the merchant’s quarter…food is so-so, drinks are watered down, but the entertainment is spectacular.”
Iron Bull chuckled as he rocked back in his chair, the legs squeaked ominously below him. He knew precisely which tavern Varric was referring to.

“No.”

“Seeker, did anyone ever tell you that you’re a spoil-sport. Don’t you think after chasing our tails across the breadth of Orlais and back in record time then ending the Orlesian civil war for them, we deserve a little respite? That the Inquisitor deserves some down time?”

“Perhaps…” Cassandra shook her head. “But you can not take the Inquisitor there, of all places!”

Eluned laced her fingers over her knee and rested her chin on her folded hands. “And why not?”

“Because you are the holy representative of Andraste! It’s…it’s so disreputable—”

She shrugged, “and Andraste was a slave, was wife to both a mortal man and a divine being, and led a slave revolt with an elven rebel. I have large shoes to fill.”

Cassandra’s mouth opened and closed soundlessly, while she turned an unflattering shade of red. She got up abruptly and left the room.

“Shit. I think we broke her.”

“Yeah, I better go talk to her,” she replied, feeling a bit guilty for taking a shot at Cassandra’s beliefs like she had. “It does sound like fun, Varric, so maybe next time. In all honesty, I’d like a day or two in my own bed over a night out.”

“Yes, understandable.” He nodded at the door, “you want backup with the Seeker?”

“No, I’m good. I’m still more valuable to her alive than dead.” She shot him a smile. “Not sure I can say the same for you.”

The Inquisition pulled out of Halamshiral later that day. Negotiations that needed to be done immediately had been accomplished and other treaties awaited further consideration that didn’t require them to wait around twiddling their thumbs. Baggage carts loaded to be escorted by soldiers were left behind while the rest of them rode ahead to Skyhold. Cullen hovered around the middle of the line with Eluned’s group, enjoying tactical discussions with Iron Bull, Blackwall, and even Solas. He seemed lighter out of on the road than she had ever seen him in Skyhold or Haven. The fresh air and activity seemed to do him some good.

She spent her time alternately dozing in the saddle or reading one of the books on the Fade Solas offered her. But consistently, she kept finding herself daydreaming about Halamshiral.

She still had the rings in her lips, she found she liked them more than she thought she would. Initially, she did it for shock factor—people always stared at the scars—it gave the something to stare it. But they were part of her, part of what she endured; why not turn it into something pretty, something hers. She played with them and shuddered at the memory of the way Bull looked at them which was completely unlike how others looked. Her stomach did a little flip; the feel of his thumb dragging across her lip, pressing against her teeth, the taste of him with a hint of spice from the snacks he had been eating. And then when he asked her to dance, she’s not sure what would have happened if Dorian hadn’t interrupted when he did.

She frowned; there was something wrong with her that she was attracted to him like that. He was Qunari. Not Tal-Vashoth, but Qunari. Worse still, he was a spy for the race of people that enslaved
her. Abused her. Raped her. They twisted her until she broke, and they made her into a monster. He never denied his allegiance to the Qun; eventually, he would deliver her back into their hands. He would do his duty to the Qun regardless of anyone’s feelings to the contrary.

A conversation behind her broke her out of her swirling thoughts.

“I have heard of the life of the saarebas, Iron Bull, but I’m curious about your viewpoint.”

“It’s sad, mostly. The magic appears late in childhood just like it does for you folks. Some kid’s gone years learning to be a baker or soldier or builder, and then one day, that’s all gone.”

“You sound as though you pity them,” Vivienne said in surprise.

“Well...yeah. In theory, they’re no different from anyone else. The tamassrans and the Ben-Hassrath protect everyone from their own mistakes. They’re people too, just serving the Qun. But too many Qunari are afraid of them including some of the arvaarads; that just leads to abuse.”

“Not you, though.”

“No, ma’am. Anyone who takes that burden and lives a good life with it has my respect.”

“Truly? And what of one that doesn’t live a good life? Such as our dear Inquisitor?”

“It’s one thing to take someone that’s grown up knowing that your life is dedicated to the Qun and move them into a new role, but a viddathari, a convert?” He paused and Eluned knew that he studied her, she couldn’t help but pull up her shoulders under the weight of his gaze. “Yeah, that was just cruel. They shouldn’t have done it.”

“What was the alternative?”

“Qamek, like the Rite of Tranquility, but you risk having an empty shell that can’t even look after itself.” She could hear his leather harness creak as he shrugged. “A quick, sharp blade probably would have been kindest.”

She was surprised at how calmly she could listen to their conversation. If only they knew what was in store for her if she had truly failed as bas-saarebas; it certainly wasn’t a quick blade or the mindless oblivion of qamek that the Viddathiss and ash-taardathras had planned for her. She shuddered.

Solas sidled his mount closer to hers and asked quietly, “are you all right, Inquisitor?”

She nodded. She wasn’t sure what exactly Vivienne was trying to achieve; the conversation was hardly kept quiet from being overhead by her. She didn’t know if the questions were for her benefit or Bull’s, but the answers didn’t help solve the questions still bouncing around in her head.

_________________________________________

“Inquisitor?” Josephine’s voice called from the bottom of the stairs.

Eluned whistled to acknowledge the ambassador. She wrapped her robe around her, putting down the half-drunk cup of tea she had been sipping, curled up in her to watch the sun come up over the mountains. She pulled the kettle off the fire as the woman reach the top stairs.

“I apologize for the early start, my lady, but we’ve received an envoy with a request for an alliance. Leliana and Cullen have already reviewed the request and it looks legitimate; however, the information they included was…unsettling. The others wish to discuss it with you as soon as you are available.”
“I’ll be right down.” When she arrived in the war room, she found three grim looking advisors. “What’s going on?”

“As I mentioned, we’ve received an offer of alliance. They are…” Josephine hesitated. “The envoy is from the Qun.”

“No. Refuse.”

“Normally, I would agree with you, Inquisitor.” Cullen grimaced remembering the havoc caused by the Qunari in Kirkwall, “however, they’ve brought to light a disturbing situation that, quite frankly, we could use their assistance. The Venatori have a large red lyrium smuggling operation off the Storm Coast.”

“Have our scouts confirmed this?”

“Yes. The Venatori are using a hidden cave that is only accessible by sea. We have no ships to stop them.”

“If it’s only accessible by sea, how are they bringing red lyrium in?”

“We think by the Deep Roads.”

Eluned studied the map for a few moments. “The Arl of West Hill. His is a coastal arling; surely he’d have something?”

“Unfortunately, the Arl’s duplicity has been discovered by the Venatori and he’s been murdered,” Leliana replied.

She gave Leliana a hard look, “are we certain the Qun didn’t do it? Wouldn’t be the first time someone buried a dagger to frame someone else.”

“No. The Venatori agent was caught in the act, but it was too late for the Arl.”

“Denerim…”

“Won’t be able to respond in time to stop the shipment,” Cullen replies.

Eluned looked at each advisor in turn, then in a soundless cry of rage, swept her arm across the end of the table in front of her. Papers flew into the air and markers clatter against the wall and fell to the ground as she spun away from them. She raked her fingers hard against her scalp and gripped handfuls of her hair, pulling against her braid. She wouldn’t go back—she’d die first. She’d go down fighting to take as many with her as she could. Pain prickled and brought clarity. She drew a shuddered breath and dropped her hands from her hair. She turned to face them again, “can we send a detachment of Inquisition soldiers to assist?”

“They’re asking for a small strike team that would not be easily recognized as being Inquisition agents. They’ve also asked for their own agent, the Iron Bull, to be involved.”

“How do we know that there isn’t a beresaad waiting for us?”

“My agents have reported no Qunari activity in the area.”

“Forgive me, Leliana, if that doesn’t bring me comfort.” She turned back to Cullen. “What did Iron Bull say?”

“He received the report on the smuggling operation and alliance at the same time we did. He said it
sounds legitimate. He’s ready to go when you are.”

*Of course, he is.*

“There is a short window to see this done so if we’re going to agree, we need to do so quickly,” he finished.

“The messenger said that ambassador wishes to speak with you directly.”

She turned to Josephine, the look on her face must have alarmed the ambassador because she squeaked and grabbed a pile of papers out of Eluned’s reach. “Who?”

“Who? Oh, the messenger said that the ambassador’s title was Ashsaar…saaraas.” Josephine stumbled over the name.

*Ashsaaraas. To seek…dangerous nothing? An odd title for an ambassador,* Eluned thought. “*Fine. I’ll see them before the mid-day meal. I… I need to go put on armour.*”

She settled onto the throne to meet the ambassador; the new ceremonial armour fitted well, but she could feel a strap dig into her ribs as she sat down. Harritt would fix it for her. She had planned to wear the armour she wore out in the field, but Josephine had informed her that a new set had been commissioned for this exact purpose. It was more decorative than practical, but it would still protect her should anyone try to assassinate her while she held audiences to meet nobles or pass judgement on prisoners.

She had debated whether she should use some of the cake makeup to obscure the scars around her mouth, finally deciding against it. There was no way that the Qun didn’t know who she was or who she had been. It was why the ambassador had requested an audience after all, they wanted to confirm her identity. As a solid “fuck you” statement, she left the rings in her lips. The piercings in her ears had never been removed and now with Dehari piling her hair up on her head in an elaborate crown of braids, they were more visible than ever. She wouldn’t hide who she was. Not for the Qun. Not anymore.

Her eyes scanned the room, but she could not spot the Qunari in the shadows of the hall. She needed to speak with Dagna and Harritt to see if they could come up with a way to use the clever reflective discs they had in the underforge to light the great hall better. Candles were too expensive, but she disliked the deep shadows that clung to the room in these situations.

“Inquisitor,” Josephine addressed her as she stepped up to the dais with her note board in hand to record the proceedings of the meeting, “may I present the ambassador to the Qun, Ashsaaraas.”

Nobles parted like water at the prow of a ship as the Qunari stepped out of the shadows. Eluned watched as he walked down the length of the hall; his gait rolled as if he had an injured leg or hip; his horns were blunted, likely to even them after being damaged. He stepped into the light and she could see the scars on his face from the way the light fell unevenly across his skin.

Every hair on her body felt like it was standing on end. Her eyes met his and it felt like the whole world fell away into the yawning abyss.

*Ashsaaraaas.*

She knew him by another name.

*Tal’atkata.*
“Inquisitor,” his lips twisted on the title. “It is… good… to finally meet you. I bring an offer of alliance from the Qun.” He lifted a small oblong box he held in one hand and extended it to her. “The Qun wishes to show their gratitude for the opportunity to work side by side with the Inquisition to eradicate this threat.”

Run, run, run! Black spots danced before her eyes; she wanted to give in to the panic, the urge to run away and hide. She wouldn’t let him see her terror. She raised her chin then inclined her head acknowledging the gift, Josephine hurried forward and accepted from Tal’atkata when she made no other move to accept it. She tried to unclench her cold fingers from the arms of her throne and willed the nausea back down as she swallowed over and over. She was afraid to take her eyes off him, but she forced herself to look to Josephine.

“Um, well, thank you for bringing the offer of alliance from the Qun. The Inquisition will consider your most generous offer and inform you of our decision.”

Tal’atkata bowed his head and looked at Eluned, “araast, itwa-ost. Ebasit esaam Qun.”

The audience was over. Forcing herself to not bolt from the room, she rose smoothly from her seat, gave Tal’atkata another nod of farewell and strode calmly to the door leading to Josephine’s office and the war room beyond. As soon as the door to the office closed behind her, she fell to her hands and knees and vomited on the stone floor. Immediately Josephine’s hands were on her shoulders.

The door opened and closed again behind them.

“Maker! What’s wrong?” Cullen asked, alarmed.

“I don’t know. The Inquisitor collapsed the moment we got through the door.”

Solas and Cole hurried into Josephine’s office from inner stairwell. Cullen, having delivered the ash bucket from the fireplace, now stood stiffly rubbing the back of his neck, unsure of how to comfort the woman crumpled on the floor. Josephine gently pulled back the stray bits of hair from her face while she continued to shake and sob.

“What has happened?” Solas said, his eyes immediately darting to the form on the floor. “Cole said that the Inquisitor was in great distress.”

“We just finished an introduction with the envoy from the Qun. He offered a small gift, then when the meeting was concluded, the Inquisitor came in here and collapsed,” Josephine explained.

“Could it be poison?” Cullen asked, concerned.

“It was a phrase,” Leliana said sliding through the door silently watching Eluned carefully. “I saw the change on her face when he said ‘the Qun wishes to show their gratitude’…”

Eluned immediately threw up again, this time into the bucket, and started to shake violently.

Solas dropped to his knees in front of her and gently grasped her face in both of his hands. Her eyes were glassy with unshed tears and darted everywhere looking for something, looking for escape. “Just look at me,” he said calmly. “Hold a moment.”

Her eyes slowed down their movement and fixed on Solas’ own.

“Good. Now look past me and relax.”

Solas held her face and waiting until he saw her eyes start to soften. “Listen carefully. There is
nothing to worry about. There is no true danger. You’re in control here. You are surrounded by those that care for you, would keep you safe. You are safe.”

Eluned gave a shudder and trembling started to subside as she felt Cole lean against her back pressing his head against her shoulder. Normally that would have caused her to panic, to feel hemmed in, but the spirit of Compassion radiated an aura of calm.

“Focus on what is here,” Solas said quietly. “Feel the ground... The breath in your lungs... Fabric rustling against your skin…”

She took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh.

“Good. It’s all right. It can be overwhelming for anyone,” he helped her to her feet and guided her to one of the chairs by the fire. Josephine hurried over and pressed a hot cup of tea into her hand. Eluned gave her a watery smile in thanks and sipped the hot drink to wash away the sour taste of bile that lingered on her tongue.

“Can you tell us what that was about?” Solas asked gently, kneeling in front of her to brush some hair away from where it stuck on her damp face. “It might help to talk about it.”

She hesitated for a moment. “He used to say that…” she swallowed the lump that formed in her throat, willing back the nausea, “saarebas should be... grateful, should show their gratitude.” She closed her eyes and let her head fall forward. “He said that every time he raped me. He was my arvaarad for years and I... I lost count.”

There was a gasp from someone in the room.

“I couldn’t... I should have…” The tears started to well up in her eyes again.

“Open your eyes. Look at me.” Solas’ hands cradled her face, lifting it up. “There was nothing you could do to stop it,” he said firmly, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “You did what you had to, to survive. You are not a fault for what he did to you, ma’falon.”

“I’ll kill him,” Cullen ground out, the leather of his gloves creaking under the pressure of his grip on the sword hilt.

“Commander,” Leliana cautioned, she turned to him keeping Eluned within her peripheral view, “at the risk of sounding callous, we can not take any actions against the ambassador. He used that phrase specifically to try to rattle the Inquisitor. She performed admirably and didn’t tip her hand before him. We can not allow that to be for naught. There’s more going on than we can see, it would be to our advantage to maintain the ruse that we do not know of the game he’s playing.”

“But what cost to the Inquisitor?” he argued furiously.

Eluned sniffed and wiped her sleeve across her face. “No, she’s right, Commander.” She let out a shuddered breath. “We need to play our cards, but um... I, uh... I don’t want to be alone.”

“We can make sure that one of your companions are with you at all times,” Cullen replied.

She nodded. “Maybe not Iron Bull.”

Leliana’s gaze hardened, “do you suspect him of something?”

“No... It’s just…”
“That’s perfectly understandable,” Solas interjected, letting his hands rest on her knees. “I will remain with you for the remainder of the day, if you wish.”

“That you, Solas. I appreciate it.” She offered him a weak smile, then lifted her head as she got an idea. She gave his hand a squeeze, “please do not be offended, but could someone get Dorian to accompany me? Tell him to put on his ‘Vintiest clothes and attitude.’”

Leliana smiled and slipped out the door to speak with Dorian.

Solas quirked a little smile. “No offense taken. Well played, Inquisitor,” he said softly.

Josephine stood in front her, the small box in hand. “Inquisitor, what should I do…” she shifted her weight from foot to foot in an uncharacteristic display of uncertainty.

“What is it?”

The lid of the box made a slight creaking noise as the hinges opened. “I… I don’t know. It looks like a stick?” She gingerly picked up the six-inch long stick and turned it around in her hand. “Oh, it’s hollowed all the way through! I don’t understand?”

“It is how a saarebas is fed.”

Horrified, Josephine dropped the reed back into the box and placed it into Eluned’s beckoning hand. The moment the box was in her hand, she flung it with all her strength into the lit fireplace; the box smashed against the stones at the back and dropped the contents into the flames.

Once Dorian had arrived to accompany Eluned for the day, Solas excused himself and found Iron Bull in his usual spot in the tavern. He caught his eye and proceeded up the top level of the tavern where they wouldn’t be overheard. Before he could say anything, Solas jumped right in, “you know who the ambassador is?”

“Yeah,” he growled. “I recognized him. He’s her arvaarad.”

“Will he try to take her?”

Iron Bull frowned, “I don’t think he’d do something that brazen, but there’s an ulterior agenda, that’s clear enough. How is she holding up?”

“She’s struggling but she’s remarkably resilient. She’s currently making herself visible and flaunting her Tevinter contacts,” Solas replied with a smug little grin.

Iron Bull gave him a sharp look and raised a brow. “Dorian? Well that will piss Tal’atkata off, to think that he might lose his prize to the ‘Vints, and to a magister’s heir, no less.”

“Indeed.”

He turned towards the stairs, “I should—”

Solas held his hand out, “she doesn’t want you near her right now, Iron Bull. But if you truly have her best interests at heart, you will report whatever this arvaarad has to say back to Leliana and Cullen.” He slipped past and headed out of the door at the top of the tavern, Iron Bull headed back downstairs where Tal’atkata was waiting for him.


Tal’atkata inclined his head. “Just so. You are aware of what your… *Inquisitor,*” he sneered at the title, “is?”

“What? You mean the lip rings? Yeah, these humans do freaky shit in the name of fashion.”

“Don’t play coy,” he snapped back at him. “You know what it is and you haven’t done anything to see it returned!”

“My job is to report how the Inquisition is handling the situation with the Breach and Corypheus, not hunt down saarebas for arvaarads that have dropped the leash.” He kept his face neutral but deep down felt a bit of satisfaction with twisting the knife to point out the arvaarad’s failure. That satisfaction disappeared like a wisp of smoke; if not for the arvaarad’s failure, he never would have met the Inquisitor. *No, not the Inquisitor, Ellie.*

“That was *not* your sole mission. It is one of the most powerful saarebas the Qun has every had. At this very moment, it is walking freely with a Tevinter *mage*! This can not be allowed to stand,” he hissed.

“If anything happens to her, Corypheus wins, and the ‘Vints will be the least of our concern.” He stepped into Tal’atkata’s space, crowding him with his greater height. “My instructions were to get close to the Inquisition, report to the Ariqun, and keep the Inquisitor alive to do what *she* needs to do. I do not take orders from you.”

Tal’atkata glared at Iron Bull for a moment before spinning away. People in his path jumped out of the way, nervous of the clearly enraged qunari storming through their midst; Iron Bull followed at a discreet distance in case he needed to intervene. The arvaarad stopped abruptly in the middle of the bailey and stared up at the ramparts. His fists clenched and unclenched, even from his vantage point, Iron Bull could see the muscle jumping in the other qunari’s jaw. He stepped away from the edge of the wall to see what it was that had enraged the other.

Up on the rampart, he spotted the Inquisitor with Dorian, which in and of itself was not an unusual sight. No, what caught the eye was the fact that the Tevinter mage was clearly kissing the Inquisitor; a hand threaded through her hair at the back of her neck, the other against her back pulling her into him, her own hands fisted into the fabric of his robes over his hips. A low growl in his own chest caught him by surprise as much as his own clenched fists. He held himself in check as the couple on the walls linked arms and headed back to the main keep, and Tal’atkata headed in the opposite direction to where he the rest of his escort were housed.

“*Do you think it worked?*” Eluned asked when she and Dorian reached the top of the stairs in her quarters. “*Was it convincing?*”

“Convincing that you were about to swoon from kissing the most handsome man in the Inquisition? I would say that more than a few people would have been convinced. Of course, none were close enough to know that you were hanging onto me because you were trying hard not to giggle.”

She grinned, “*I couldn’t help it. Your mustache tickled. Wine?*”

He gave her a sly look, “I noticed that Bull spotted us. He didn’t look pleased.”

She tipped her chin up and shrugged, “*why should I care?*”

“No feelings for the horned oaf?”

She ignored his question.
He sprawled in one of the upholstered arm chairs before the fire looking every bit the pampered noble’s son, his gaze followed her as she disappeared into the storage room and re-emerged with a bottle of wine that looked suspiciously like one of his missing bottles. Scooping up two glasses from the cabinet behind her desk, she sat down opposite him. “You know,” he looked around the room with a critical air, “we should trade quarters.”

“That’s what Iron Bull said when he saw them.”

“Oh ho! You say you have no feelings for him, but he’s been to your personal quarters,” he teased.

“So have you Dorian, and I’m not bedding you either.” She huffed when he continued to look at her expectantly. “It was after we had the celebration for bringing down the dragon. He dropped off a hangover treatment.”

“Well that was thoughtful of him. You’re certain there isn’t anything there?”

“We have a truce and I may even hazard to say we are friends. Anything more would be immensely stupid.”

“How so?”

“If I survive to defeat Corypheus,” she held her hand up to stop Dorian’s protest, “everyone will go back to their old lives. That means that Iron Bull will return to the Qun. It will be his duty to see me returned as well. I will die before I go back. There will be an ugly battle between us one way or another because he will never forsake the Qun and declare himself Tal-Vashoth for me.”

He pursed his lips to argue with her but thought better of it. “So when do we leave?”

“I leave first thing in the morning. You will remain behind.”

“What! You can’t be serious!”

“I will not deliver a Tevinter altus into their hands.”

“I’m not afraid of dying!”

“You are too valuable to kill; there are far worse things than dying, Dorian.” He jerked like she had slapped him, her words echoed those spoken to him by Felix so many months ago.

With word from Leliana that the delegates from the Qun had left Skyhold, Eluned stormed into the Herald’s Rest, pushed her way through the Chargers to stand in front of Iron Bull. “Hey Boss. How’s it going?” he asked casually. Her fury was like a physical presence, crackling and oppressive. A few of the Chargers shifted in their seats putting distance between themselves and her, a few other patrons simply up and left the tavern entirely.

“We need to talk,” she gestured sharply.

He nodded slowly, “sure. My quarters are close.”

She spun away and headed up the stairs. Cole drifted from his corner into her path. “Not now, Cole.” She brushed past him and up the next set of stairs.

“But I can help—”

“Leave it Cole. I’ll talk to the Boss myself.” He winced has he heard the door to his room crash
against the wall. He entered the room to find Eluned pacing back and forth in the center of the room. He closed the door quietly and waited.

“You knew! You knew he was alive.” Say you didn’t, please say you didn’t know.

“Yes.”

His admission stopped her in her tracks and she stared at him. “How long have you known?”

He hesitated for a moment. “Since the ritual tower in the Western Approach.”

She narrowed her eyes as she studied him then marched over and slammed her hands against his chest. It pissed her off that he didn’t even have the grace to rock on his feet at her blow. “Don’t lie to me!” She was so angry that she didn’t bother to talk with her hands and some of the words came out in a croaking whisper. She stepped back so she didn’t have the crane her neck to look him in the eye.

“I’m not lying Boss. I found out when we were in the Western Approach.”

“How?”

He shook his head, “it doesn’t matter.” He wasn’t going to throw Cole and Dorian into the path of her anger.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to protect you. You already had enough on your mind, and it was one thing you didn’t need to worry about.”

“That wasn’t your choice to make!” She paused as she considered him, “what else are you keeping from me?”

He studied her; tension radiated off her as she stood there before him, very faintly trembling with her hands balled up into fists and her jaw clenched. The Anchor crackled with her heightened emotional state, but she didn’t seem aware of it. His eye lingered on hers, reddened and glassy like she was trying hard not to cry. He sighed and stepped beside her to kneel at the edge of the bed.

She didn’t move from where she stood and resisted the urge to flinch when the curve of his horn brushed her hip.

He reached under the bed and worked something out from its hiding spot from under a board in the floor. He stood up and held out a cloth wrapped bundle to her.

She paled, recognizing the shape of the bundle she saw in his hands. Wrapped in fabric and jammed behind the stones to be forgotten. She thought it lost, buried under snow and debris never to be seen again. “Why do you have that?” It felt familiar when he placed it into her hands.

“The boys found it when they went to Haven, they found it jammed among the stones of a chimney —”

“But why do you have it?”

He opened his mouth and closed it again. Inwardly, he cringed at the look of betrayal on her face as she fled the room.
Translation:
Araast, itwa-ost. Ebasit esaam Qun—(Qunlat) You rose, you will fall. It is the will of the Qun

I have been *dying* to finally get to this chapter. It was written months ago, close to when I actually started the story! I can't wait to read your comments and your thoughts—my lovely, lovely readers.
Eluned scrubbed furiously at the tears on her face as she hurried past the few hangers-on that lingered in the great hall. Having them see her emotional state was humiliating and she growled at herself in anger. She shouldn’t have been surprised that he had the collar, that he had hung on to it. She had been stupid and had let herself become complacent, lulled into a false sense of security because of his jovial attitude and promises to keep her safe. She shook her head, he was Ben-Hassrath for fuck’s sake! His role might be that of a spy, but it wasn’t too far a step to becoming an enforcer. What she told Dorian was true, feeling anything for him was immensely stupid, and it was about time that she took that to heart.

She paced her quarters clutching the bundle to her chest. As terrible as the events at Haven were, she was ultimately relieved that the place had been buried; the mask, collar, and control rod were supposed to be gone and buried in the snow, but the damn things found their way back to her. She strode out onto her balcony that looked over the mountain-side and held the bundle over the railing. It was a long way down with no trails or paths for people to approach the side of the fortress; she held the bundle out over the edge and faltered. With her luck someone would invent skiing and find them. Again.

She retreated from the balcony with the bundle in hand, shut the door behind her, and let her eyes slide over her quarters. Where would be a good hiding place until she could throw them into the forge? Her eyes stopped on the small landing above the storage closet. The landing was only accessible through a small trap door and meant for extra storage. She didn’t have that much so it was currently empty, except for the couple of furs she had dragged up there for when her bed was too soft and the room too large. She doubted that Dehari even realized that she had made a nest up there. Best of all, the trapdoor was quite small so someone like a Qunari would never be able to access it. She climbed up into the landing and shoved the bundle into the darkest corner and covered it over with the pile of furs. It was the furthest from the trapdoor and the least visually accessible from the rest of her quarters. When she returned from the Storm Coast—if she returned from the Storm Coast—she’d borrow a chisel from the dwarven master mason, Gatsi, and dig loose a stone to hide them in the wall if she couldn’t access the forge. For now, it was the best she could accomplish.

“Inquisitor?”
She silently dropped through the trap door and grabbed a bottle of wine from the shelf before leaving the storage room.

“I brought your dinner, my lady.” Dehari set the tray on the table before the fire. “Is there anything else I can get for you?”

She shook her head, setting the bottle next to the tray, “no, thank you. I don’t need anything else. I’m going to have an early night.”

The elf nodded and turned away. She turned back and put a tentative hand on Eluned’s shoulder, “are you all right, my lady?”

She forced a smile onto her face and gave the elf’s hand a light squeeze, “I am. Thank you, Dehari.”

Dehari bobbed a little curtsy and left with a final soft, “good-night, my lady.”

She picked at the food but drank deeply from the wine in the hope that the alcohol would make her relaxed enough to sleep. She went to bed early as she had said but lay there wide awake. Whenever she closed her eyes, she felt like everything was closing in around her; like she was bound and burdened, buried under the restrictions of saarebas.

Tal’atkata’s face swam into view behind her eyelids. “Saarebas should be grateful. Saarebas should embrace its purpose. Ebost shok hisra.” His face and voice twisted into that of Iron Bull.

With a wordless cry, she threw back the covers and stumbled out of bed. She gripped her wrists tightly against the remembered pain that throbbed now with her nightmares. She accepted that she wasn’t going to get any sleep. She wished, not for the first time, that the Valo-Kas weren’t still in Orlais. Kaaras would…

Her mind stalled; she needed to write a letter to Kaaras. Sitting down at her desk, she pulled out a piece of parchment. Carefully closing her fingers around the quill, she wrote after a few false starts:

Kaaras,

I don’t think I’ll be here when you return to Skyhold, so this is my only opportunity to say good-bye.

I wish you were here and at the same time, I’m glad that you are not. I wouldn’t want your last memory of me to be of this night. We ride out in the morning to a joint operation with the Qun and I’m terrified. My arvaarad—oh yes, he’s alive—brought the offer of alliance to the Inquisition. I can not help but think that it is all an elaborate ruse to return me to the Qun.

I won’t allow that to happen.

One way or another, I won’t survive their trap. Whether I force their hand into killing me or I do it myself, I won’t go back. Please don’t be angry at my companions for not saving me. The choice is mine and I will take it while I still have the freedom to do so.

You have been my rescuer, my healer, my confidant, and my friend. You are more than all these things combined and I love you for it.

If Dorian offers you comfort, let him. Tell the rest of the Valo-Kas “thank you”.
Be happy that I am finally free.

Always yours,

Ellie

She carefully blotted the letter and folded it when it was dry. With a seal of the horrid green wax she flipped it over and addressed it simply with his name and propped it up against the ink bottle.

The faint light of dawn was peeking over the mountains; it was time to go.

The morning they left Skyhold was grey, miserable, and threatened to rain. To Eluned’s surprise, all her companions showed up to see them off with hugs and quiet words of encouragement for her. Dorian was still upset and hung back, sulking. She walked over to him and took his hand, “there’s a letter for Kaaras on my desk if I don’t come back. See that it gets to him please.”

He gave her a terse nod.

She gave him a nod in return and dropped his hand, turning away only to be spun around and enveloped in a fierce hug.

“Make sure you come back amata,” he forced out through his gritted teeth, and then gently pushed her away.

She blinked and swallowed hard against the lump in her throat, “I’ll try.”

Going back to the Storm Coast was like a story coming full circle, back to the beginning to her introduction to Iron Bull. Only this time, if felt like an end. Her end. Eluned rode silently with Cassandra, Varric, and Solas, with Iron Bull at her back with the handful of Chargers he brought along. The Chargers were noisy and boisterous at first, but by the time they arrived at the rendezvous point three days later, the somber mood affected them too. They left their mounts at their hidden camp and proceeded the rest of the way on foot with Iron Bull in the lead.

“All right, our Qunari contact should be here to meet us,” Iron Bull commented, his eye continuously scanned the area set up for them.

“He is.” And elf walked out from under one of the canvas canopies. “Good to see you again, Hissrad.”

“Gatt! Last I heard, you were still in Seheron!”

“They finally decided I’d calmed down enough to go back out into the world.”

“Boss, this is Gatt. We worked together in Seheron.”

She stepped out from between Cassandra and Solas.

“It’s a pleasure to meet—You!” He gasped, eyeing the scars around her mouth, and turned a stunned face to Iron Bull. “The Inquisitor is…is Vatasala!”

“Gatt…” he warned.

The elf paced in small circles under the canvas, muttering unintelligibly to himself before giving his head a shake and pulling himself together. “Par Vollen is concerned; Tevinter is dangerous enough without the influence of this Venatori cult. If this new form of lyrium helps them seize power in
Tevinter, the war with Qunandar could get worse.”

“With this stuff, the Vints could make their slaves into an army of magical freaks. We could lose Seheron… And see a giant Tevinter army come marching back down here.”

Eluned couldn’t care less if Qunandar fell, and good riddance if it did, but having the Venatori in alliance with Corypheus moving south with more power than they already had was definitely something to be prevented.

“The Ben-Hassrath agree. That’s why we’re here.” He shot a glance at Eluned. “Our dreadnought is safely out of view, and out of range of any Venatori mages on shore. We’ll need to eliminate the Venatori, then signal the dreadnought so it can come in and take out the smuggler ship.”

A dreadnought. Eluned’s heart plummeted. Once the Venatori were eliminated, there was nothing to stop the dreadnought from putting to shore. If it carried the usual compliment of two karataam consisting of infantry, several saarebas and their arvaarads, making up one hundred Qunari in total, they were grossly outnumbered. She looked around surreptitiously while the others talked; Tal’atkata wasn’t here with Gatt, he wouldn’t be on the dreadnought, so he was likely lying in wait elsewhere, but she had no idea where. She couldn’t shake the feeling of eyes watching her even though with a subtle target location spell, which only made Solas give her a strange look when he felt her draw on her mana, she knew that they were alone.

“We could have crushed the Venatori resistance with the Inquisition’s main forces. Why not use them?” Cassandra asked.

“Because then the Venatori would have seen you coming and run. They’d schedule a new shipment for later, and our spies might not know when or where. This is risky, yes, but it’s our best chance to destroy the shipping operation permanently.”

Eluned looked at Iron Bull and raised a brow in question.

He growled, “don’t know. I’ve never liked covering a dreadnought run. Too many ways for crap to go wrong. If the enemy numbers were underestimated, we’re dead. If we can’t lock down the Venatori mages, the ship is dead. It’s risky.”

“Riskier than letting red lyrium into Minrathous?”

They couldn’t argue with that.

“My agents suggested two possible locations for the Venatori to be camped to guard the shore. There…” he pointed to a low spot on the far side of the beach, “and there,” pointing up to a high ridge. “We’ll need to split up and hit both at once.”

Eluned jabbed her finger into her chest and flicked it in the direction of the ridge. If the Qunari were planning on landing, she’d see their intent in plenty of time.

The ridge also gave her a way out.

“I’ll come with you, Boss. Krem can lead the Chargers. Let me fill him in and then we can go on your order.”

She and Gatt ignored each other. Gatt fidgeted in the silence and looked at the only other elf in the group. “I don’t see any tattoos, but you’re carrying a staff. Are you from a Chantry Circle?”

“No,” Solas replied. “And I would prefer not to discuss it.”
“Have I done something to offend you?”

“You joined the Qun.” His tone made his opinion of that decision patently clear.

“After they rescued me from slavery.”

“And put you into something worse.” Solas’ voice was getting uncharacteristically agitated. “A slave may always struggle for freedom. But you among the Qun have been taught not to think.”

“Solas, not the time,” Iron Bull said, returning from his discussion with Krem. The Chargers disappeared into the tree line.

“Perhaps not,” she gestured. “But it doesn’t change facts.” No one bothered to translate for Gatt. “Let’s go.”

They crept up the hill, weaving their way back and forth using the vegetation and rocky outcroppings for cover as they advanced on the Venatori lookout. There were a nearly a dozen Venatori on the ridge including a spellbinder and a mage. Three Venatori were crouched around their fire passing bowls of food. Eluned slipped the sword free of its scabbard and pointed it in the direction of the fire to warn the others. She directed her mana along the path of the sword and the cookfire exploded outward catching the ones sharing food and the spellbinder who was close by.

Cassandra, Iron Bull, and Gatt took advantage of Eluned’s distraction and charged into the group of Venatori still stunned by the screams of their own men. Iron Bull plowed into one swordsman sending him stumbling back into the mage, both of them crashing to the ground to be quickly finished off the blows of his axe. Solas’ magic controlled the movement of the enemy, Cassandra’s sword and Gatt’s daggers flashed as they cut through those that stood against them. The thud of Bianca firing punctuated the fight.

A Venatori gladiator spotted Eluned and Solas and barreled at them with his tower shield in front of him. One of Varric’s bolts ripped through his side sending him skidding to the ground in front of Eluned. She thrust the point of her sword between his ribs to finish him off. She wiped off the blade and slid the sword back over her shoulder.

Iron Bull looked around. “We’re clear, Gatt.”

“Right. Signalling the dreadnought.”

“Chargers already sent theirs up. See ‘em down there?”

“I knew you gave them the easier job.”

Bells rang as the dreadnought slid out of the mist.

“There’s the dreadnought,” Iron Bull said eagerly. “That brings back memories.”

Eluned’s stomach churned as it brought back memories for her too; memories of being chained to the deck during vicious storms, not knowing if she’d survive to see land again. Memories of being tossed overboard into waiting arms of her arvaarad and then dragged into the jungles to fight people that slipped in and out of the mist like ghosts.

Two fiery streaks arced across the sea as the dreadnought’s cannons roared. Seconds later, two explosions followed as the smuggler ship was hit. The screams of its crew didn’t last long as the ship quickly broke up and sank beneath the waves.
Iron Bull laughed, “nice one!” He turned back to the beach. “Craaaap.”

Over a dozen Venatori mages and scouts were headed briskly across the beach to the Chargers’ location.

“Your men need to hold that position, Hisrad.”

“They do that, they’re dead.”

“And if they don’t, the Venatori retake it and the dreadnought is dead. You’d be throwing away an alliance between the Inquisition and the Qunari!” He paused for a moment, “you’d be declaring yourself Tal-Vashoth!”

Iron Bull gave him a dirty look.

“With all you’ve given the Inquisition, half the Ben-Hassrath think you’ve betrayed us already! I stood up for you, Hisrad! I told them you would never become Tal-Vashoth!”

“They’re my men.”

“I know. But you need to do what’s right, Hisrad… For this alliance… and for the Qun.”

Iron Bull turned to Eluned, “Boss?”

Gatt’s face flushed with anger. “You’ll forsake the Qun for it, for a bas-saarebas.” He spat at Eluned’s feet. “Saarebas mer-asala. Ebost kata maraas.”

She ignored Gatt and took a step away while he continued to rant at Iron Bull. She closed her eyes and let the fine mist from the sea that still made its way up to where they stood, wash over her face. The crash of the waves and the taste of the salt on her lips reminded her of her favourite beach on the West Coast. Home.

With her eyes still closed; she took a step forward. The edge was only a few feet away, plummeting down into the rocks and pounding surf below.

The wind tugged at her, whipping the loose strands of hair to stick to the moisture on her face.

A few more steps and she would be free.

She took another step, then another.

Iron Bull regretted many things.

He regretted not calling the retreat when the Venatori appeared on the beach.

He regretted sacrificing his Chargers for the Qun. “Horns pointing up,” Cole told him helpfully before he slipped back to the safety beyond the Veil.

He regretted not cutting her throat when he had the chance.

He regretted the look of hatred she gave him when the collar closed around her neck and Tal’atkata picked up the leash again.

He regretted that it is the last time she ever looked at him before she’s hidden behind the mask.
He regretted the tears and the looks of reproach from the Inquisitor’s companions and advisors. The never-ending itch at the back of his skull warned him that sooner or later, they’ll take their revenge. He knows he deserves it.

Finally, he regretted the death of Iron Bull, who died the day that the woman Eluned vanished under the burdens and chains of the saarebas, and he is deemed too unstable by the re-educators to remain as he was.

He lunged forward and wrapped his arm around Eluned’s waist yanking her back from the edge of the cliff. She struggled wildly in his grip, only going still when he raised the horn to his lips and sounded the retreat.

“Hissrad! What have you done? All these years, and you throw away all that you are, for this? For it?” he jabbed his finger at Eluned.

She tried to lunge at him but couldn’t break free from Iron Bull’s grip. “The Qun already threw me away,” he said quietly.

“That’s not—” Gatt looked at Eluned, then threw his hands up in the air with an exasperated huff. Without another word, he stomped off back to the the camp.

The Venatori on the beach changed their direction when the Chargers retreated and turned to the edge of the water. Two fireballs, followed by a third, streaked across the water and slammed into the dreadnought. Eluned knew what would happen and covered her ears with her hands. Fire raced across the deck of the dreadnought until it reached the munitions. In a rapid order, the barrels of gaatlok ignited pulverising the dreadnought and the Qunari on board into a slurry of kindling, blood, and bone that rained down upon the waves.

He released his arm from around her waist. “Come on,” Iron Bull said quietly. “Let’s get back to my boys.”

They made their way back to the rendez-vous point; there wasn’t a Qunari to be seen, including Gatt, much to Eluned’s relief. Soon after, the Chargers showed up.

“You’re late,” Iron Bull drawled.

“Sorry, Chief. A little sore from fighting off all those Vints. Good to see you, Inquisitor.”

“You too. How are the Chargers?”

“Just fine; a few cuts and bruises but nothing to complain about. Thanks to you and the Chief, we had plenty of time to fall back.” A guilty flush crept up her throat; she had nothing to do with the decision. She looked away and missed Krem’s puzzled look. He cleared his throat, “well, we’ll get cleaned up. Looking forward to that cask of Chasind Sack Mead you promised, Chief, when we get back to Skyhold.”

“Damn it, Krem. That’s the kind of thing you don’t have to mention to the Inquisitor.”

She turned back and looked at Iron Bull, “I don’t think you have a good grasp on what I should or shouldn’t know to be advising Krem.” She brushed past him and headed back to where the horses were waiting. The sooner she could return to Skyhold, the sooner she’d feel safer and put the whole thing behind her.

Eluned had barely enough time to explain to her advisors what had happened on the Storm Coast
after returning to Skyhold when the gate tower announced an arrival. She, accompanied by Leliana and Cullen, returned to the bailey to find Iron Bull waiting with a very uncomfortable Gatt. She circled her hand at the group and pointed to the great hall.

“That won’t be necessary,” Gatt inferred from her gestures. “Inquisitor, it is my duty to inform you that there will be no alliance between our peoples. Nor will you be receiving any more Ben-Hassrath reports from your *Tal-Vashoth* ally.”

“You under orders to kill me, Gatt?” Iron Bull growled at him.

“No. The Ben-Hassrath have already lost one good man. They’d rather not lose two.” He turned back to Eluned, “I have a final missive for you from the ambassador.” He handed her a small scroll of parchment. She unrolled it and read the text.

> I look forward to the day that we meet again 
and I can remind it of its purpose.

She called on her magic and let the scrap of parchment go up in an intense burst of flame, making Gatt flinch. She looked him dead in the eye and enunciated, “*tell him I look forward to it.*”

Before he could reply she strode forward for the stairs to the great hall, and he had to scramble to get out of her way. She didn’t look back to see or hear any of Gatt’s parting from Iron Bull, nor Cullen’s order to have the Qunari agent escorted out of Skyhold.

Chapter End Notes

**Translation:**

Ebost shok hissra—*(Qunlat)* Your resistance/struggle is an illusion  
Saarebas mer-asala. Ebost kata maraas—*(Qunlat)* Mages have no soul. You will die as nothing.
Eluned laid out a small woven mat under one of the trees to keep her knees warm and dry and knelt. She interlocked her fingers loosely and set her hands in her lap and closed her eyes. She drew in a breath slowly through her nose and exhaled through her mouth. She repeated this several times, focusing on keeping her breaths even and ignoring the small sounds of activity within the walled garden. She flinched as someone dropped some garden tools on the stone path and one of the Chantry sisters scolded them. She sighed and rolled her head to release some tension and tried to settle again.

She found herself increasingly jumpy and nervous after the disaster on the Storm Coast. After Gatt informed them that there would be no alliance and that Iron Bull was officially declared Tal-Vashoth, there had been no other repercussions. No requests for recompense, no threats, no attempts on anyone’s life. It didn’t make sense. She didn’t believe that the Qun would just wash their hands of the whole affair, as a result she was feeling increasingly paranoid that they were missing something.

She mentioned as much to her advisors; the guard had been doubled on her quarters and she, yet again, had a shadow albeit this time it was to protect her from danger rather than protect others from her.

Her eyes popped open at the sound of chairs being dragged across stone tiles and a quiet tick, tick, tick like someone stacking stones. Probably one of the gardeners building one of the small stone garden boundaries. She rolled her eyes at herself and her inability to focus on her meditation and closed her eyes again.

She was avoiding Iron Bull as well; they hadn’t discussed what happened on the Storm Coast, nor why he had been keeping her collar. She could feel his eye on her when she practiced the sword with Blackwall or walked with Dorian. It wasn’t the hard gaze of someone watching a barrel of gaatlok, watching for the errant spark getting closer and closer to igniting it. He watched her; his gaze intense, but it was somehow more intimate, like he was waiting for her to give him a signal. She had no idea what that signal was supposed to be or if she even wanted to give one. If she was honest with herself, she was afraid of what he might want if she did give him whatever it was that he watched for.

Combined, it built up into the nervous tension and anxiety she was feeling now.

“Gloat all you like, I have this one.”

“Are you sassing me, Commander? I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Her eyes popped open. Dorian and...Cullen? She had no idea that the two tolerated each other nevermind did anything together socially. She got up, giving her mat a shake and folded it over her arm; she obviously was not in the frame of mind to meditate despite how much she needed it, she might as well go see what was going on. She rounded the corner of the hedge to see the two men
seated at a table under the gazebo playing chess.

“Why do I even—Inquisitor.” Cullen started to stand up from his seat when he spotted her. How chivalrous.

“Leaving, are you?” Dorian drawled, his eyes flicked to her, but he didn’t otherwise move or acknowledge her arrival besides flashing her a little grin. “Does this mean I win?”

She waved at Cullen to retake his seat and leaned against the gazebo pillar. “I’d like to watch if neither of you mind?”

“No at all, although I would not suggest watching how Dorian plays. He cheats.”

“I do not!”

“All right, your move,” he reminded Dorian.

“You need to come to terms with my inevitable victory. You’ll feel much better.”

“Really? Because I just won.” Cullen leaned back in his chair, preening with a big smile on his face, “and I feel fine.”

Dorian studied the board for a minute before throwing up his hands, “don’t get smug. There will be no living with you.” He stood up and gave Eluned a little smirk before excusing himself.

“I should return to my duties as well… unless you would care for a game? You did tell me once that you knew how to play.”

She took Dorian’s vacated seat. “Terribly, if you recall. It’s been years.”

“I will go easy on you then,“

He reset the board and indicated that she moved first. They played quietly for a few minutes with Eluned losing several pieces in quick succession.

“Your swordwork with Blackwall is coming along,” Cullen commented as he took one of her bishops. “Have you considered sparring with anyone else? Cassandra, or myself, for instance.”

Her eyes widened and she shook her head vigorously.

“Why not?” he asked, confused.

“Because you two scare the shit out of me. Cassandra wouldn’t pull her hits and would likely break me.”

He hummed, “so you’re aware that Blackwall pulls his hits. Do you think a red templar would pull theirs?”

“No,” she answered reluctantly as he took one of her rooks.

“And what of me?”

“You wouldn’t pull your hits either. And you shout.”

“I… I shout? And that bothers you?”
“My arvaarad used to fly into rages. Something I did wrong, some failing on my part…” she blinked several times as the board swum before her eyes, “punishments were always worse if he had shouted.”

The silence stretched out for a few moments while she waited for him to play his turn. When he didn’t, she raised her eyes and looked at him. He was staring at her with a stricken look on his face. “I’m sorry,” he replied hoarsely. “You didn’t deserve that, Ellie. You didn’t do anything to earn that treatment.”

She shrugged and cocked her head to the side, “I am a mage.” She watched him have some internal struggle with himself.

“There’s no justification for that behavior, ever. He’s a monster.”

“Thank you.”

They played in silence for a few more minutes in which time she lost another bishop and a knight but managed to capture one of his rooks.

“You really are terrible at this.”

“Gee, thanks Cullen. Way to encourage a rematch.” She frowned at the board and moved her piece. “I did warn you.”

“That you did,” he chuckled. He moved one of his pieces. Immediately she spotted her mistake. “Checkmate. I have time if you would care for another game?”

“I think that’s enough humiliation for one day, don’t you think?”

He smiled at her as he gathered the pieces. “I was serious about having you spar with me.”

She worried her lip with her teeth and studied him. She could see the value of sparring with someone else, she really could. The thought of sparring with a templar filled her with anxiety but she knew sooner or later she was going to have to deal with the Wardens and relying wholly on her magic might not be an option.

“I promise that I won’t shout,” he said quietly. “Tomorrow is one of your usual sparring days, I’ll meet you and Blackwall at the designated time.”

Tomorrow? Tomorrow was too soon. She cursed to herself, of course he knew her schedule. All the advisors knew her schedule and where she would be at nearly any given point during the day. She was a creature of habit; routines made her feel safe. The first, third, and fifth days of the week she sparred with Blackwall. The second, fourth, and sixth days she spent time with Dorian or Solas, or even Kaaras, if he was around, to work on refining her magical skills. She knew perfectly well her routine was a remnant of the conditioning as a saarebas, but she couldn’t find her way to breaking it. She had no way of wiggling out of the session with Cullen without having to make excuses to Blackwall and he knew it. She nodded reluctantly and stepped through the door back into the great hall that he held open for her.

“Wai—” Cullen exclaimed as she slammed into a wall of muscle that she didn’t see as her eyes hadn’t adjusted yet to the darker lighting of the hall after being outside.

“Sorry Boss, I was just looking for you.” His grip on her arms loosened when she was no longer in danger of falling over. “Can we talk—in private?”
Cullen tipped his head to her with a quiet “Inquisitor” as he stepped around Iron Bull and left.

She gave him a wary look and hooked her thumb over her shoulder toward the war room. At least if he planned on throttling her, help with a short whistle away unlike her own quarters.

“Nah, it’s a warm day. Let’s take a walk on the ramparts; nice and public while still letting us talk without being overheard.”

It was disconcerting how well he could read her.

He led her out the main doors of the great hall, passed Varric, around the perimeter of the sparring grounds and Cassandra, past the tavern where Sera was hanging out on the roof, and up to the ramparts outside of Cullen’s tower. She watched him from the corner of her eye; he didn’t fail to greet anyone they passed, like he wanted to make sure that everyone knew that he was with her, or vice versa. It was…odd.

He strolled to the outside edge of the ramparts and looked out over the mountains before turning back to her. “You’ve been avoiding me since we got back from the Storm Coast. I don’t know if I can fix things ’tween us, but I want—”

He stopped talking as the door behind her opened for a scout. The scout nodded to her as he passed on his way to the opposite tower, and she turned back to Iron Bull with her arms crossed in front of her, defensively.

“Hey, I know it’s my fault. This is on me.” He stepped toward her, “about the collar—”

She pressed her lips together as another two scouts came through the door behind him. With interruptions this frequent, this conversation was going to take hours to complete.

She stepped aside to let the scouts pass when one of them lunged at Iron Bull. He knocked the scout down while the other threw a dagger catching Bull in the shoulder. He yanked the dagger out and threw it back, killing the scout. She was so focused on the fight in front of her she barely registered the reappearance of the previous single scout that simply ran past them and avoided the fight entirely; no doubt running to get help.

She gave a sharp whistle in warning as the downed scout got back up and pulled his own dagger.

“I got it.”

A sharp burning sensation flared up in her right arm, she glanced down to see red rapidly staining her sleeve. *She had been cut? She hadn’t felt anything hit her arm.* The burning sensation intensified abruptly shooting up her arm and into her jaw. She felt a flush of heat wash over her, her stomach bubbled with nausea and she clutched at her arm as she realized that she had been poisoned.

“Ebost issala, Tal-Vashoth!”

“Yeah, yeah, my soul’s dust.” He heaved the man over the wall whose screams ended abruptly when he hit the mountainside far below. “Yours is scattered all over the ground, though, so…” Iron Bull grunted at the wound in his arm and turned back to Eluned. “Sorry, Boss. I thought… Boss?”

She staggered and gave her head a shake as her vision wobbled and blurred before her. Her mouth watered uncontrollably, and she bent forward, vomiting as her stomach heaved violently. From the corner of her eye, she noticed a large dark shape move towards her. Her head snapped up and she saw horns, qunari horns. “No,” she snarled as it approached.
“Boss?” Bas…

She quickly threw a fireball at the qunari, but it easily dodged out of the way as her aim wasn’t very good with the world tipping and swirling like it was. She couldn’t focus as the qunari kept sliding back and forth from being one person then two.

“Boss, stop. It’s me.” He slowly approached with his hands visible and empty. Bas, shoh. Ebasit-ala.

She gagged, willing the nausea back down. “No, I won’t go back.” Her eyes slid past him to the gap between the merlons of the outer wall. The poison made her movements choppy as she shifted her weight to sprint for the crenellation that would take her forever out of the Qun’s reach.

“No you don’t,” he lunged at her. His hand closed on her arm, halting her abruptly.

She snarled at him, a fireball formed instantly in her free hand but collapsed as the world spun; his arms wrapped around her pulling her back against his chest.

He grunted as she thrashed in his arms landing a kick with her heel to the inside of his knee and then sunk her teeth into his bicep. He gritted his teeth as she managed to twist her hands to wrap around his arm and started to burn him, the smell of his own flesh scorching assaulted his nose.

Finally, the door to the tower crashed open, Cullen and Rylen stormed through, swords drawn to respond to the commotion. “What—” Cullen started to ask.

“Cut off her magic,” Iron Bull grunted through gritted teeth.

Cullen studied him closely, his sword drawn but his other hand out to hold Rylen from acting.

He groaned as the heat intensified between her hands. “I swear, I’m trying to protect her,” he took a step to the side to show them the dead scout on the ground behind him.

“Rylen!” Cullen barked but still had his sword drawn.

He felt the heat in her hands stop as she went limp under the templar’s Silence. “Sorry, Boss.” He apologized to her unconscious self knowing that she was going to be feeling doubly shitty from the Silence and the poison. He immediately changed his grip and scooped her lax body up high against his uninjured shoulder.

“What happened here? Why did the Inquisitor attack you?”

“The Qun sent assassins after me. Two are dead, one is at large. The one missing cut the Boss’ arm with a poisoned blade—saar-qamek—got her disoriented and she lashed out in confusion.”

“You’ve been hit yourself,” Cullen pointed out at the wound on his shoulder as he put his sword away.

“Yeah, but I’ve been dosing myself with the antidote in anticipation of their attack. I didn’t expect that they’d try on her too though.”

Cullen stepped forward to take her from him. “Nah, I got her. I need to see the healer myself. I’ll get them the antidote for the boss.” He gave Cullen and Rylen the description of the scout that had fled and headed down to the healers.

Eluned thrashed in the bed. She sat up abruptly as she woke from the nightmare, with a strangled whimper. She flinched at the horned shadow that rose from the corner of the room and tried to call
on her mana only to find that she was cut off. She scrambled back against the headboard.

“S’okay Boss, you’re safe.” Iron Bull emerged from the shadows and walked over to the bed slowly and quietly. His bandaged shoulder glowed in the low light of the room. “We had to give you a dose of magebane. Everytime you woke up while still under the influence of the saar-qamek, you cast.” He looked back over his shoulder to the bared windows. “Josephine’s gonna need to order you new curtains and a rug.”

She slid back down and collapsed back against the pillows with a sigh of relief.

“We’re going to have to talk about your penchant for running at cliff edges.” He looked at her and brushed some stray bits of hair out of her eyes. “I’ll go get the healer for you.”

As he turned away, a surprisingly insistent hand gripped his wrist stopping him. “Stay. Don’t wanna be alone,” she mumbled, eyelids drooping, and still groggy from the magebane, original poison, and antidote.

“Okay. I’ll just be over in the chair…”

“No, here.” She tugged at his wrist and moved across to the other side of the bed to make room for him.

“Uh…maybe this isn’t such a good idea. You’re delirious.”

“Kaaras’s not here,” she slurred her words and they came out as a hiss. “You’ll do.”

“Whatever you need,” he agreed cautiously. He sat down on the side of the bed and pulled off his boots after releasing the brace on his ankle. His usual shoulder harness had already been discarded earlier so the healer could treat his wound. He sat against the headboard with his feet up on the bed only for her to give him a tug again. He slid down until he was resting on the piles of pillows, accidentally scraping his horns hard against the ornate headboard. “Oops.”

She turned towards him, carefully picking up his arm and draping over her shoulder as she rested her head on his chest and wrapped her own arm around his waist.

“Um, Boss?”

“Shh, you’re warm.”

“Yeah, we run hotter than humans.” He suppressed the urge to flinch as she pressed her chilled fingers into his side. “Good to know I’m of still of use to you.” He lay still, lightly rubbing the heel of his hand in comforting strokes down her side and simply focused on the sensation of her laying against and over him. His chest tightened as he thought of how close they had come to losing her, losing her not once but twice because of him. He tipped his head and brushed his lips against her hair, drowning in the scent of her. “I’m sorry for everything that’s happened. I should have seen it earlier,” he muttered quietly.

She surprised him by looking up and replying, “s’okay. I did the math.”

“Math?”

“Yeah, two birds.”

He frowned. “Two birds?”
“Yeah. You and me. One shot. But I was ready.”

His brow rose. He knew she hadn’t been happy about the whole thing, but she hadn’t let on how aware she was that the whole operation was the Qun’s attempt to regain her and test his loyalty. She gave him no indication at all that she knew just how precarious the situation was. He swallowed hard on the lump that suddenly formed in his throat as his heart have a painful squeeze. He remembered how close she was to the cliff edge when he blew the horn. He squeezed his good eye shut and pressed his lips to her hair again. “I will not fail you again,” he promised.

She didn’t respond as she had already slipped back into the Fade.

She woke up to the sound like knitting needles clicking together and for one moment, memories of her grandmother sitting beside her bed when she had the chicken pox flitted through her mind. The smell of wood smoke, leather, and beeswax candles conflicted with the memory and brought her crashing down to reality. She pried open an eye to find Krem sitting in a chair at the end of the bed apparently performing some sort of needle craft.

She snapped her fingers when she found her mouth too dry to whistle. He jerked his head up in surprise. “What are you making?”

Krem jumped up from his chair and came over to the bed. “Your Worship. How are you feeling? Can I get you anything?”

She shook her head, then licking her parched lips, changed her mind. “Water?”

Krem immediately fetched a cup of water and helped her sit up to take a drink.

“Thank you, Krem. What are you making?”

“Oh, uh,” he flushed with embarrassment, “just a toy for some of the children. It’s a nug.”

“It’s cute. And kind of you to do that for them.”

He shrugged, “they don’t have much. I thought it might brighten their day.”

“I’m sure it will. If you have time after making them for the kids, I’d like one.”

“You—you would? Oh! All right, I can do that.”

The conversation trailed off to an uncomfortable silence. “What happened?”

He hesitated and looked over his shoulder to the stairs. “Ah, maybe I should go get the healer for you?”

“Krem. Tell me.”

“The Qun sent a hit out on the chief. He’s okay,” he hastened to add in response to her look of alarm. “Two of the assassins were killed in the attempt, the third escaped temporarily after wounding you with a poisoned blade.”

Her brows pinched together. “How long...I remember a scout saying something in Qunlat... but nothing after that.”

“Uh, that was two days ago. The chief said you wouldn’t remember the rest of the attack or trying to set him on fire after the blade got you.”
“What!” Her brows shot up and she shoved herself up until she was fully sitting upright on the bed. Krem flushed when he realised what he had said. “Kaffas! I wasn’t supposed to tell you that part. He’s okay, the healers took care of it. You didn’t mean to do it. The poison made you hallucinate.” The door opened and closed below, and heavy steps came up the stairs. He shook his head and muttered, “Chief’s gonna kill me.”

Iron Bull walked in and looked at the two of them. “Krem,” he growled, “what did you tell her?”

“Not a thing, Chief.”

Iron Bull looked at Eluned. She shrugged in response. He sighed, “you know you’re both shit liars?”

He gave his head a tip toward the door, Krem took the hint and scrambled to leave as quickly as he could. “Krem told you about the assassination attempt?” She nodded. He studied her for a minute and appeared to come to some decision. “The day on the ramparts, I had wanted to talk to you before we were interrupted. It’s about the collar.” Eluned stiffened. “When I gave you your collar back, you asked me why I had it.”

“You don’t trust me. I’m a dangerous thing.”

He shook his head. “I trust you. You are in control. You are never casual about your magic.” He sat down on the corner of the bed, leaving plenty of room between them so she didn’t feel pressured by his presence. “Krem kept it hidden from the templars that had accompanied them to Haven and gave it to me as soon as they got back. I hadn’t figured out why you had hidden them. I didn’t know if you were trying to get rid of them or if you were keeping them for some reason. We headed out to the Western Approach right away and… I should have just asked you.”

“You should have.”

He waited patiently.

She fiddled with the fuzzy cuff edge on her sleep shirt to avoid his gaze. “It’s a bit of both. I didn’t want them to fall into the hands of the templars. Mages are oppressed enough I didn’t want to give the Chantry another tool to use against them.” He remained silent. “Kaaras thought I might want to keep them as a reminder of what I’ve overcome.”

“And now?”

She raised her eyes to gauge his reaction. “I want to destroy them. I don’t need any more reminders than are already marked on my flesh.”

“All right. How do you want to destroy them?”

She was startled that he agreed so swiftly; she expected him to voice reservations despite him having said that he trusted her. “Losing them doesn’t seem to work because they keep coming back to me,” she said with chagrin. “I was thinking Harritt’s forge.”

He nodded, “good plan. When you’re ready, I’ll make sure he’s got it fired up good and hot and we can do it.” He stood up and turned to leave.

She gave a low whistle to catch his attention.

“Yeah, Boss?”
“How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” came his quick reply.

“Now who’s a shit liar.”

“Heyyyyy!”

She cocked her head at him, giving him a look.

He sighed, “I’m… figuring it out.” He scratched at the edge of his horn where the eyepatch strap crossed. “I… I’ll figure it out.”

“If you want to talk, you know where to find me. For what it’s worth, I’m proud of you Bull.”

He pulled his shoulders back in surprise and blinked. “Thanks, Boss.”
The last kick of winter brought a blizzard that filled the passes on their side of the Frostbacks, preventing any excursions out of Skyhold, or any visitors in. Ravens came and went, and still they waited for news from Hawke on the Wardens.

They received disturbing reports from a village just on the other side of the mountains that had been razed by a large influx of red templars. The area had plummeted into a frozen wasteland over in a single night despite the spring-like conditions that it had experienced earlier that day. It wasn’t an unusual weather phenomenon for a sudden shift in weather conditions, just as they, themselves were experiencing but the presence of the red templars proceeding it was highly suspicious. Considering the Inquisition’s recent efforts to disrupt red lyrium smuggling, it was a priority to investigate. Several large rifts had also opened in the area requiring Eluned’s personal attention and as such, added fuel to Cullen’s arguments that she do some sparring with him as well as Blackwall.

Bull watched Eluned cross the courtyard from the infirmary back to the great hall from his place at the sparing ring overseeing some of the Chargers go through their drills. She moved stiffly having take a hard fall during her own session with Cullen; she slowed down slightly and looked over to the ring. The moment she caught his gaze, she dropped her own and sped up again to disappear in the the hall.

“You should tell her.”

Bull gave a low growl, “Kid, what did I tell you about popping up on my left side like that.”

“She’s afraid. It would be better if you told her.”

“Nah, I don’t want to rush her. I’ll give her space to come to me on her own.”

“Hungry now, with intent. Patient or would he take, like he did. Better to hide so the look will turn elsewhere.”

“Ah crap.”

“Yes. It’s better that you tell her. Secrets hurt her,” Cole gave him a knowing look. “Fearing the unknown, hurts her more.”

Eluned flipped through the pages of parchment that Josephine and Leliana had handed to her on her way to her quarters; requests to review, disputes to mediate, and no doubt more than one marriage proposal. She curled her lip in disgust, proposals had arrived in a flurry after the Winter Ball. They had slowed down slightly since then, but every week there was still three or four pressing their suit.
As she got to the top of the stairs in her quarters, she shuffled the parchments aside to the book that was included in the stack; it was the book by the odious Marquis d'Lussard. Well, could rip pages out of that to wipe my ass, or use it start my fire, she thought. She flipped open the cover and found a florid dedication to her...complete with grease stain. She shuddered at the memory of his hands on her when they danced. Fire it was. She tossed the book on the pile of logs at the side of the fireplace.

“Huh. I’ve seen you and Solas, you and Dorian, pore over books like they were the most fragile treasures. Didn’t expect you to treat one like that.”

She jumped but collected herself immediately. “Bull.” She glanced back at the book laying open on the logs, pages bent and crumpled from how it landed. “Remember that Marquis at the Winter Ball that had his hands all over me?”

“You missed the fire.”

She gave him a knowing smile.

“So listen, I wanted to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“I’ve been getting the looks,” he said getting up from where he had been sitting on her bed and approached.

She shrugged nonchalantly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Now if you don’t mind—”

He continued to approach her, “I’m pretty good at reading people and you definitely want something.” He reached out and grazed her arm with his fingers.

She flinched and slapped his hand away. “You’re deluding yourself; I hear the gossip. Everyone clamouring to ‘ride the Bull’. I have no interest in being another notch on your bed post,” she spat at him. “You just want to stick your dick in a saarebas.”

He held his hands up before him to try to defuse the situation, “this isn’t about me or what I want. It’s not about what you are out there or what you were made to be either, but who you are.”

She stormed away from him, flinging the parchments onto her desk. “Why?” she demanded, spinning back around to face him. “Who do you think I am? Half the time I can’t tell if you are calling me Boss or bas!”

“After everything you’ve been through; defiant with your chin up, fists dug into your hips, standing up to me spitting and snarling—it’s damned hot. You are strong. You stand, and you fight, and you make the tough decisions carrying the weight of our survival on your shoulders. But you never lay that burden down that I’ve seen. You need a safe place to let go before you break.”

“I’m already broken... Why would you want…” she trailed off as she turned her back on him and fiddled with the parchments on her desk.

He approached her slowly so not to spook her a second time. He turned her around by her shoulders. “You might be broken, but you’re not destroyed. You’ve come so far... and I want to help you, if you let me. I have a pretty good idea of what’s been done to you; I’m aware of your arvaarad’s reputation,” he replied, not bringing up precisely what Cole revealed to him and Dorian.

She shuddered hard under his hands at the mention of her arvaarad. “I’m sick... I shouldn’t want…” she kept her eyes averted.
“It’s completely normal to want to take part of yourself back.” Bull gently grasped her chin between his forefinger and thumb and tipped her head up to look her in the eyes, “you will always be safe. I will never hurt you without your permission.”

She shook her head, interrupting him, “I don’t want to hurt…”

“I know. You’re afraid and that’s normal for what you’ve been through, but pain can be pleasurable, cathartic even. One day you may want that, so I won’t say never. But I won’t do anything like that, not until you ask. If you’re ever uncomfortable, if you ever want me to stop, you say ‘katoh’, and it’s over. No questions asked.”

“What if I… if I can’t?”

He shrugged, “don’t worry about it. We’ll find out together.”

She studied his face looking for signs that he had ulterior motives. He was trained as a spy, Ben-Hassrath—Liar—he could easily conceal his emotions if he wished to, but all she could see was a relaxed eagerness. He looked hopeful.

She tried one more argument, “I thought you were interested in Dorian.”

“I am interested in you,” he told her, stroking the side of her jaw with his thumb.

She gave a slight nod against the fingers that still rested against her jaw.

“Good.” He let his hands fall to her shoulders, and continued in a brisk tone, “why don’t you get changed out of that and into something more comfortable?”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Now?”

He chuckled at her expression. “I requested dinner for us to be brought up. I thought we could have a quiet evening away from prying eyes.”

“Awfully confident that I’d say yes.”

He shrugged, “yes.” His fingers slid along her collarbone to the top button of her jacket, never taking his eye off her. “You’ll relax better if you’re not in that leather armour all evening. May I?”

She sucked in a breath, her heart beating hard against her ribs again. She nodded. His fingers were surprisingly nimble as he quickly undid each of the hooks holding her jacket closed. He swept his hands under the leather, following the line of her collar bones to her shoulders taking the coat with him.

They heard a thump at the door below. Bull grinned as he handed her the coat. “Here, go change. I’ll go help your little maid with the extra dishes.”

Eluned tucked her feet underneath her and leaned back in her chair, rolling her wine glass between her palms as she studied the firelight flicking and shifting across Bull’s face. Aware of her attention, he got up, plucked the glass from her grasp, and took a hand pulling her to her feet. “Come on, I want to do something for you.”

“What?”

“Trust me, you’ll like it.”
He led her to the bed and guided her to sit down. Distracted, she noticed that there is a thick cloth spread over the bed that wasn’t normally there and a stoppered vial laying on top. Bull knelt down with a grunt and removed her slippers.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to give you a massage. You took a hard fall when you were training with Cullen today but you’re still carrying yourself stiffly even after going to see the healer.”

“I didn’t go to the healer for that—”

He ran his fingertips firmly up the outside of her thighs, stopping at the waist of her leggings. “Pants,” he prompted.

She lifted her hips after a moment’s hesitation. Before she could protest, he dragged her leggings and smalls off her. She shivered slightly, her long tunic fell into her lap providing some privacy but she knew it wasn’t going to last. He rocked back onto his heels and studied the wraps around her ankles and feet.

“Do you usually leave these on at night?”

“No, but… I don’t want you to see.”

He looked up at her, placing his left hand on her knee. The light from the fire and candles cast shadows highlighting the scars on his face, the patch over his eye, and his missing fingers. “Do my scars bother you?”

Her eyes widened and she shook her head frantically. She reached out hesitantly—she had never really touched him before other than in frustration or anger—and gently stroked her thumb across his cheek below the eyepatch then let her hand drop. “They’re part of you.”

“Then why would you think I would feel any less of yours?” He carefully unwrapped her feet and grasped her ankles lifting her feet slightly into the light. The skin was slightly imprinted by the wraps but was a normal healthy colour, with silvers scars where the flesh had been frostbitten and across the stumps of the missing toes. “This okay?”

“Yes, but… be gentle without tickling. They’re very sensitive.”

“They’ve healed all right?” He let go of her feet and shifted again so his hands rested on either side of her hips.

She nodded. “That’s why I saw the healer today. They check them every month. Did you know that you can still lose toes up to six months afterwards? Or fingers. Or whatever you’ve frozen.” He raised a brow. “Mine are okay though.” She pressed her lips together and balled up her hands to stop herself from babbling.

He gathered the bottom of her tunic but paused when she trembled. “Nervous?” She nodded. “Do you want to stop?” She shook her head. “Good.” He lifted her tunic over her head in one swift movement and quickly tugged the breast band loose. Her shoulders flexed as she fought conflicting urges; the freedom to cover herself and conditioned obedience of her saarebas training not to move. He took pity on her and nodded his head at the sheet laid out on the bed, “go on, on your belly.”

She flopped over and immediately went up on an elbow to pull the glass vial that lay beneath her. Bull plucked it from her fingers. She waited for the inevitable gasp or sound of surprise when someone saw her back for the first time. Instead, from the corner of her eye she saw his horn dip low
into her line of sight and felt his lips press to the top of the first—the worst—whip mark that opened her back from shoulder to opposite hip; Tal’atkata hadn’t taken into account that human skin was much thinner and more fragile than Qunari skin. Tears pricked at her eyes at Bull’s gesture. She rolled up onto her elbow again when he withdrew. “You knew about them?”

“Yeah, I have seen them before.”

She thought for a second about when he would have seen them. “After Haven fell.”

“Long before then. I saw you in Seheron once, right before I left. That’s how I recognized you when we travelled from the Storm Coast to Haven. And I, uh…kind of saw you bathing.”

“You mean you spied on me.”

“It wasn’t like that. I was worried about your soul sickness; that my presence would push you over the edge and cause you to harm yourself.”

She huffed and lay back down. The scars still itched and burned from the colouring Tal’atkata applied to them, she lay tense not knowing how long she’d be able to tolerate him touching her back for his massage. The smell of elfroot and some other, deeper, almost earthy scent tickled her nose right before his hands came down on her back, sweeping a long stroke from shoulders to the swell of her buttocks. His hands were so much warmer than her.

The scars pricked sharply. She started shifting to protest when he layed his fingertips against the back of her neck. “Give it a moment; it’ll be better, I promise.”

It wasn’t painful per se, just intense as the marks pricked all at once. Just as she was about to really protest, the sensation faded away completely. Not even the normal level of itching or burning was present. It was like her back was entirely unmarked. She looked over her shoulder and found Bull grinning at her.

“I told you. Stitches is really good with potions and poultices. It won’t stop them from burning permanently but long enough to make this feel good.”

And feel good, it did. By the time he had worked his way down her body, massaging her back, working out the tense muscles from her sparring efforts with Cullen and Blackwall, and the old wounds taken during her time as saarebas, she felt that she could quite happily melt into the bed. He dragged his fingernails lightly down her spine, but she didn’t react. He leaned forward place kiss on her shoulder blade, “still with me?”

She rubbed her cheek against the bed in a lazy approximation of nodding her head without opening her eyes.

Bull chuckled, “roll over and I’ll finish the front.”

She stretched her arms up over her head and rolled toward him, following the dip in the mattress as the path of least resistance. Lowering her arms, shimmed her shoulders against the cloth feeling the pleasant looseness of the muscles, and then lay still. Eyes closed, she revelled in the warmth and lack of pain in her back for the first time in long time.

After a minute or two of silence from Bull, she cracked open her eyes to find him staring at her. She raised her hands again. “What’s up?” she gestured.

He gave a slow blink, “what isn’t?” Her eyes widened at the implication. He reached out and caught her hands that started to creep up. “It’s okay. We agreed we’re not doing that ‘til you’re ready, but
you can’t blame a guy for having a reaction when you do something like that.”

Her brow pinched minutely until she realized what he was referring to. She shimmied her shoulders again.

Bull groaned as he watched her breasts sway with the motion. “You’re evil.” She flashed him a smug grin. “Shall we continue?” She nodded again.

He massaged across her shoulders and down her right arm, taking special care with the damaged wrist, massaging her hand, giving the fingers a little wiggle to finish. He did the same with her left and she was surprised that he didn’t skip her left hand.

“Huh.” She cracked open an eye. “I thought this hand would feel more different than the other. You can still feel the flesh and bones, but there is only a slight buzzing sensation, barely more than a muscle tremor when you touch it,” he said running his thumb slowly back and forth over the mark. “How does it feel to you?”

“Hard to explain. You know that tingling feeling you get when you’re too close to a rift when it shifts? Kind of like that in my bones, and at the same time, feeling like there should be a gaping hole in the palm of my hand.”

“Weird. Does it hurt?”

She shrugged making Bull’s eye dart with the movement. “It hurts when I close a rift, sometimes it aches afterwards. Like how yours would feel after practicing with a weapon the wrong size for your hand.”

He grunted in understanding. He ran his hands across the front of her collarbones again then dragged his hands down over her breasts, calloused palms scraping against her nipples as he passed. She instinctively arched into the contact and gave a little whimper.

He grinned, “someone likes that.”

“Yes. You could do it again.” When he didn’t, she huffed. “Now who’s evil?”

With long strokes, he ran his hands down her sides to her hips, pausing when he ran into the rough scars wrapping over her right hip. He ran his fingertips lightly following the despair demon scar and stopped when he felt a lump buried under one of the scars. “What’s that?”

“Preventative.” Bull’s eye flickered. “Tamassran used demon scar to hide it from arvaarad. Did it to all female saarebas—wouldn’t want to breed any more of us.”

“But you’re human…” Bull had a queasy feeling of disquiet. The Ben-Hassrath never mentioned anything about preventatives when they sent him south except to caution him against finishing in any Tal-Vashoths he might take to bed. Had they lied to him?

“She said it wasn’t likely but if he…can we not talk about that?” she dropped her hands. Bull nodded; he could figure it out.

“Do you want to stop?” As soon as she shook her head, he ran his fingers over the soft swell of her belly marvelling at the soft, silkiness of her skin. The muscles under his fingertips twitched and withdrew from his touch. “Ticklish?” he asked, tracing the same path for the same result.

“I lost so much weight as saarebas. It’s embarrassing how fast it came back.” She crossed her arms over her belly.
“You’re…uncomfortable with how your body looks?” he asked, incredulously. She pressed her lips together, refusing to answer. He pulled her hands apart and before she could protest, swept forward and planted a kiss on her belly. “You have wonderful curves,” he swept his hands along her waist and over the swell of her hips, “fantastic tits,” he ran his palms over her breasts again earning himself another arch and hiss from her, “and an amazing ass. Do you ever wonder why I’m so insistent about guarding your back?” He waggled his eyebrows at the last question. “The view is…stirring. Uplifting, even.”

She cocked an eyebrow, unimpressed, “really?”

“Trust me, you have nothing to be ashamed of.” He watched her shift and fidget under his gaze. “You’re undoing all my work. Lie still and let me finish your massage.”

The bed shifted, Eluned half woke and found herself pressed up against something that was wonderfully, blissfully warm. She seldom ever woke up warm, finding herself so had her wriggling under the covers and pressing herself even closer to leach off as much heat as she could before she had to face the inevitable task of getting up for the day. More discussions and staring at the map strategizing the Inquisition’s next move.

“You’re like a little nug, rooting and nuzzling into my side like that.”

She could hear the laughter in his voice. She clenched her hand into a fist and jammed her knuckles as hard as she could into the soft space between two of Bull’s ribs. He grunted in response.

“However, you don’t have their sweet disposition.” He sat up and swung his feet over the side of the bed.

“That’s not what you said yesterday,” she said. She closed her eyes and stretching her arms over her head, revelling in the loose feeling that remained after the massage. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt that good. She tipped her head to the side and cracked open her eyes. “Bull?”

“Sorry. Distracted by the view.”

Eluned flushed. She lowered her arms and clutched at the sheet uncertainly. “So, what now?”

“That’s up to you whether you want to continue or not.” She took a deep breath, but he interrupted before she could say anything. “You don’t have to tell me right now. Think about it and come find me when you when you’re ready.”

She watched him as he got up and wandered over to the fire. He sat down and pulled on the boots that he had kicked off with his ankle brace earlier in the evening. He picked up the book she had tossed onto the pile of logs for the fire. After opening it, he angled the book to the waning light from the embers remaining in the fireplace and read the inside cover. He looked back at the bed and tossed the book onto the embers. She snorted a laugh as the flames caught the pages.

Tossing his harness over his shoulder, he came back to the bed. He reached out and brushed some stray hair from her face, “it’s still early. Get some more sleep. I’ll talk to you later.”

Eluned caught his hand as he started to withdraw. She gave it a squeeze. “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes
*rolls eyes* These two talked and talked... I had plans!
But hey, I updated the relationship tag for the story, lol. 52 chapters and nearly 200K words, does that fall under slow burn or glacial slow burn?
Eluned woke a few hours later; it was later than she normally got up and she could hear the faint sounds of the guard changing in the corridor below her quarters. She wiggled across the bed and craned her head up to look out the balcony doors. The morning sky was clear in the wake of the spring storm that had kept them cooped up in Skyhold. As soon as the scouts reported that the pass was clear, they’d be heading out to Emprise du Lion to deal with whatever the red templars were doing there. Hopefully by the time she dealt with that, they’d have some news on the Wardens from Hawke.

She let her head fall back to the pillow and paused. She could smell Iron Bull on the fabric; the distinctive warmly resinous, slightly spicy scent typical of qunari, mixed with leather and smoke. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply, recalling the feel of his hands on her body; long firm strokes to soothe, feather light touches to explore; warm calloused hands that could rip an enemy apart, took her apart with gentle care. Heat pooled low in her belly and she squirmed seeking a bit of friction, she hadn’t felt anyone touch her with such tenderness since—she shied away from the memory of silver eyes and crooked horns the moment it popped into her head. That was another life and one that was never going to have a happy ending.

She rolled over onto her back with a huff and stared at the vaulted ceiling high above her. *What am I doing?* she thought. *I’m supposed to be working towards destroying some twisted creature and finding a way home, not falling into bed with someone to work out my issues.*

After a few minutes, she rolled onto her side and clutched the pillow with Bull’s scent to her chest and inhaled again. *What if there isn’t a way back? Amund said the way was closed and I had to find another path; what if he meant another path for my life because returning to my former one was no longer possible?*

Disturbed by her current train of thought, she sat up still clutching the pillow. *If my path is to defeat Corypheus, do I wait for something afterwards or take what I can now, even if it’s a distraction, in case there isn’t an after?*

She stood up and tossed the pillow back against the headboard. *Ugh, I’m just going to drive myself nuts over this, and I don’t even know what this is yet.*
After dressing, she headed down to the main hall for some breakfast before meeting with Dorian for their scheduled sparring session to find him already up and breaking his fast at Varric’s usual corner of the hall. Varric gave her the once over, “hey Songbird. You doing all right? You’re usually up and about much earlier than this.”

“I’m fine, Varric, thank you. Just had a long philosophical debate with myself.”

“A philosophical debate…” Dorian said, sceptically. Varric’s expression changed from concerned to speculative.

She nodded without elaborating on the source of her debate and tucked into some porridge and stewed fruits, ignoring the looks from the two men.

“I over-heard one of the scouts reporting that the pass should be clear tomorrow.”

“Then pack your bags, we’ll be heading out right away to see what these red templars are doing,” she gestured.

“Mountains, snow, and cold. ‘Let’s take Dorian’,” griped Dorian, his voice raised in falsetto.

Eluned fluttered her lashes at him. “Would you like me to leave you here, Princess?” Varric chuckled.

“Of course not! But I request a warmer destination next time.”

“You might get your wish. Hopefully we’ll have news from Hawke by the time we get back.”

Varric’s smile immediately dropped at the implication.

“Ugh. Sand.”

She laughed and stood up, giving Dorian’s sleeve a tug. “Talk to you later Varric. Come on Princess. Let’s go spar.”

The two of them claimed one of the rings set aside for the mages, separate from the regular melee rings on the other side of the bailey, and took turns casting against each other. It was decidedly to her benefit; while she was far more powerful with fire than Dorian was, his casting ability and range of skills was vastly superior to her own. His affinity for lightning, in particular, had proven very helpful for her to get a grasp of the intrinsic element of her sword, Spellweaver. The work she did with both he and Solas had helped her immensely; to be able to cast and maintain a barrier, while still casting offensive spells was something that the Qun never required of her. Her role was to attack and if she was hit, hopefully her armour would protect her, otherwise, well, she wore the scars of those incidents.

“You’re moving through your casting much more smoothly today. You’re limber, even,” Dorian commented when they paused to get a drink. “Are you doing something new?”

She sat down in a bit of shade against the fence and shook her head. She could feel a blush race up her cheeks and hoped that he’d think it was just from exertion from their session.

“You’re blushing!” he crowed. She closed her eyes briefly, then turned and faced him. “Who is it? Anyone I know?”

Just at that moment, the Chargers walked past their ring on their way back to their barracks next to the tavern. “Hey Boss. Dorian.”
She could feel the heat in her cheeks grow warmer.

Dorian acknowledged the greeting with a nod of his own and turned back to her, eyeing her flushed complexion critically. “If your philosophical debate had anything to with the source of that blush, I’d say seize it by the horns while you have the opportunity and to the Void with anything else.”

“I… I need to go speak with someone.”

“Yes, I think you do,” Dorian replied, giving her a hand up.

“Thanks Dorian.” She started toward the tavern then turned back and gave a whistle to catch his attention. “Don’t forget to pack!”

Eluned walked into the tavern and paused inside the doorway, blinking to let her eyes adjust to the darkness. Bull’s voice immediately drew her to him. She crossed the room to the Chargers’ usual corner and nodded a greeting in reply to their welcome. “Can we talk?” she gestured to Bull. Her eyes darted to the Chargers. “About our upcoming mission?”

“Uh, sure Boss,” he replied and pulled himself out of his seat. He guided her toward the stairs and his own quarters.

“Inquisitor!”

She closed her eyes and sighed. Grant me patience, she thought before turning to the scout.

“Inquisitor. Your immediate presence in the war room has been requested.”

She nodded sharply at the scout. She ground the heel of her thumb in the space between her brows, willing the rising headache away. Large hands on her shoulders gently turned her around.

“Why don’t I come see you later?” Bull asked quietly. She nodded and headed to the war room.

Eluned headed up in the great hall nodding to nobles and others that greeted her or sought her attention, walking briskly to discourage them from trying to talk to her further. Josephine’s office was empty, she continued across the space to the adjacent door to the war room. Voices beyond made her pause and listen.

“You did well, Varric. The Inquisitor is… just who we need.”

She recognized Hawke’s voice; she had returned from the Western Approach. I wonder how this is going to change our trip to Emprise du Lion.

“Oh, it’s been great. Murderous Wardens, archdemon attacks, plenty of blood mages, and crazy templars. Oh, and let’s not forget the Qunari. Just like home.”

“I know how much you hated leaving Kirkwall.”

“This is the ass end of Thedas, Hawke. You know they eat snails here?”

She smiled to herself at Varric’s disgust.

“Still, I think… I need to finish this out. If it weren’t for me and Bartrand, none of this would have happened.” He sighed deeply, “so much for changing our lives.”

Her smile dropped from her face; she had never heard him so down. I had no idea he felt so
“That’s what happens when you try to change things. Things change. You can’t always control how.”

The door on the other side of Josephine’s office creaked and Eluned jerked herself up right as if she hadn’t been listening in on the conversation on the other side of the door. She put her hand against it, giving it a little push, and looked over her shoulder to find Fenris entering from the great hall. She gave him a terse nod and opened the door to the war room corridor.

“Inquisitor,” Hawke called out. “I tracked that Venatori mage back to Adamant Fortress. They’re looking at assault options now in the war room.”

Varric shoved himself off the wall he had been leaning against, “that’s our cue, Elf. Come on, I’ll buy you a drink in the tavern while we wait. It’s not the Hanged Man but I’m sure Cabot could water down the drinks enough to pretend.” They headed one way while she and Hawke, the other.

“Inquisitor, Hawke, please join us,” Josephine said, waving to war table as they both entered the room.

The discussion lasted many long hours and into the night before everyone was satisfied with their next course of action. When they finally managed to escape the war room, the great hall was quieter with most people having retired for the evening. A few tables had people sitting around for a late evening snack. Varric’s table was empty and Hawke promptly excused herself to head to the tavern and join him and Fenris there.

Eluned nodded to the few guards on duty in her wing that were sitting at a small table playing cards just inside the guardroom. She waved them off when they started to rise and bid Dehari good night before starting up the long flight of stairs to her quarters. She unbuttoned her heavy wool jacket and shrugged it off, relieved of its weight. A stone castle wasn’t likely to be that much better in the warmer months so far to the south as they were, but she hoped that she could soon forego the heavier garments for something lighter and more comfortable.

She startled when Bull began to speak, forgetting that she had invited him. “I was beginning to think that you forgot where your quarters were located.” He sat in one of the bigger chairs next to the fireplace and facing the stairs, his finger kept his place in the book he had been reading.

“Some days, I think I should just throw a pallet on the floor in the war room.”

“Get things settled then?”

She nodded. “The runner came and told you we leave in the morning?”

“Yeah. Dorian was bitching about the destination.” He watched her closely; the tension was back in her shoulders.

“Still?”

“Yeah. Told him to pack extra socks so he doesn’t freeze his tootsies off.” She snorted a laugh and disappeared into her dressing room. “You said you wanted to talk?” he called out to her after a few minutes of silence. She hopped into view and crashed against the door with her shoulder as she pulled on some socks of her own. He snorted a laugh at her antics. He stood up and dropped the book on the seat where he had been sitting and sat on the couch facing her. “Come here,” he beckoned, holding his hand out and drawing her to stand between his knees. He let go of her hand and place a hand on either hip.
She shifted uncertainly, unsure of where to put her own hands. She rarely had ever touched him, and she suddenly felt shy, even though in their current position she stood over him. If only by a head.

He took pity on her. “You wanted to talk,” he prompted.

“How does this work between us?”

“Well, how about we start off with some ground rules, just so everyone is clear.”

She nodded. Rules can be good; clear lines of expectation.

“Out there you are the Inquisitor, you’re the boss; that doesn’t change. But in here I’m in charge, I’m in control; you will do whatever I tell you to do, let me do whatever I want to you.”

Her heart jumped into her throat and she went rigid. She tried to yank his hands off her hips, “I won’t be your slave.”

“That’s not what I’m asking of you,” he said, resisting her efforts. He rubbed his thumbs up and down her hips, just enough pressure to find the hard edge of the bone underneath. “Hear me out, I have reasons for wanting control here; you don’t need to be afraid, and you can use the watchword if you need me to stop. If there’s something you want, you ask.”

“What reasons?”

He gave his head a small shake, “I’m not taking away your right to know or to choose. I’m asking for your patience and trust.” Her brow pinched in frustration as she tugged ineffectively at his hands. He sighed, “all right, listen to me. I’m asking you to give up control over this,” he gave her body a little shake, “so you can concentrate on controlling this,” he pressed a fingertip to her forehead.

She raised a brow at him, “you’re a re-educator now?”

“No, but I know you have asala-taar. I want you to keep your mind focused on being here with me than getting lost in bad memories. You can do that easier when you’re not worried about where to put your hands.” He raised his own brow at her, daring her to contradict what he read of her so easily. “Will you trust me in this? I promise you that you will be safe, you will always be safe. You can trust me.”

She nodded slowly, warily. “You said that…in Redcliffe when we faced Alexius.”

He frowned, “I didn’t go with you to Redcliffe.”

“I saw you when Dorian and I were tossed into the future. You were Alexius’ prisoner, corrupted by red lyrium, but you told me I could trust you.” She looked away, blinking quickly, unable to hold his gaze. “Then you threw yourself into the path of the demons to buy Dorian and I time to return.” She felt a minute tremor go through him. She looked up at him then. “I saw you die.”

He was silent as he digested that news. “I’ve noticed that you didn’t take my advice.”

“You didn’t have the same perspective. You didn’t see me fall and the world go to shit.”

He continued to study her. “That’s not all that got you twisted up in a knot, is it?”

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. “I’m just worried that you…I don’t want you to be…disappointed if I can’t…”

“The only thing that I would be disappointed about,” he replied calmly, “is if you lie to me. When I
ask you something, I need to know that you’ll tell me the truth even if you think I won’t like it.” He raised his hand to her face and pulled her lip from between her teeth with his thumb, stroking it across the red marks left behind.

Eluned sucked in a sharp breath at the look on his face. The same look he wore when he did the exact thing at the Winter Ball.

He tore his gaze from her lip and looked at her, shifting his hand around the back of her neck. “Ever kiss a qunari?” His voice had taken on a lower timbre, sending tendrils of heat into her belly; she shook her head. “Do you wanna?” She nodded. The moment her chin dropped, his rose and he pulled her forward.

The gentleness of the kiss surprised her. Even though he had been nothing but gentle with her, it was still unexpected. His lips were warm and dry against hers, coaxing and teasing in such a way that had her melting towards him. Her hands crept from where they had been holding onto his wrists earlier to drift up his chest, over his shoulders, to curled around the back of his neck. One hand slid up his neck, her thumb scraping against the stubble of his jaw before she brushed her fingers along the bottom edge of his pointed ear.

Bull groaned and pressed into the kiss, sweeping his tongue across the seam of her mouth. The kiss became a little bit more heated, more demanding, seeking entrance. The moment she parted her lips, he pressed his advantage sweeping his tongue into her mouth to seek her own.

Her eyes popped open in surprise; his tongue was not like a human’s but thicker, stronger, with a rougher texture, and had a more tapered shape than rounded. It was different. It was pleasant. She gave an experimental suck on his tongue and was rewarded by a pleased sound from him.

He pulled back leaving her to gasp for much needed air while he nudged her chin up with his nose. He attacked her neck with his lips and tongue; following the hard edge of her jaw then down, open mouthed, hot kisses along the column of her throat, and especially tender kisses over where her voice should have been. He scraped his teeth across her collarbone bared by the loose collar of her shirt earning him a hiss of pleasure; he smiled against her neck when he withdrew slightly, and she followed.

“Up,” he said. She blinked owlishly at him. “Arms. Over your head.” As soon as she raised her hands, he yanked her shirt up over her head sending it sailing to the floor somewhere behind him. A quick tug at her breast band sent it falling to their feet. He pulled her towards him and pressed his lips to the valley between her breasts before she even had time to lower her hands. “You have fantastic tits,” he praised.

His hands felt like brand against her back, pulling her into him. Running a calloused palm around her ribs, he lifted a breast to his mouth and dragged his tongue across the pebbled nipple making it tighten in the cool air after. A flood of sensations sent heat spiralling to her core, her fingers dug into the thick muscles of his shoulder to keep herself standing as she felt her knees wobble.

He could feel the heat coming off her; a banked fire stirred to life again, she was like living flame in his hands. As he felt her legs start to buckle, he wrapped his arms around her hips and back, picking her up and standing in one smooth motion. He groaned at the feel of her thighs pressed against his cock as he carried her to the bed. This was about her. Taarsidath an-halsaam.

He quickly stripped off the socks, pressing a kiss to each mangled foot he knew she was self-conscious about. Crawling onto the bed, he made short work of the tie holding up her pants and pulled them and her smalls down her legs, tossing both over his shoulder.
Eluned raised a hand to her mouth and laughed silently.

“What?”

She pointed over his shoulder at her pants hanging from the top of the bed post over his head.

He shot her a rakish grin and waggled his eyebrow, “that’ll give your little maid something to think about.”

His lips, tongue, and fingers went back to work, tracing patterns over her ribs and belly. She sucked in a sharp breath when he gave her hipbone an experimental nip with his teeth. He looked up at her catching her gaze as he trailed his fingertips through her curls. She stiffened slightly. “I’m just going to use my mouth. Do you want me to stop?”

She considered his question then shook her head.

He resumed running his fingers over her while watching her closely. “Remember the watch word?” She nodded. “Say it out loud. I need to know what it sounds like because I’m not going to be able to lip read.” He grinned when she blushed.

“K—Tuh.”

He nodded, rubbing the scruff on his chin against her hipbone; he didn’t react when she unconsciously shifted her legs parting them slightly. “Keep your hands over your head. If you can’t say the word, for whatever reason, tap me three times.” When she nodded again, he coaxed her legs apart. He was pleased to see she was wet; he was less pleased to see the faint silvery scars on the insides of her thighs. He closed his eye and swallowed the rage that welled up at the thought of how the scars came to be there. He nudged her legs open and moved to lie between them, placing one over his shoulder to give him more room; he caught her gaze once more and then dropped his mouth to her flesh.

At the first touch of his tongue, she bucked against him with a breathy sound; he hummed with pleasure, the sensation vibrated through her very bones. He placed a slow lick the length of her slit. Slowly he built the fire within her belly; teasing and tasting until she was writhing in his grasp. The flames in the fireplace leapt up as her control slipped and she channeled her mana to the flames.

Bull didn’t back off at her slip but coaxed her towards her peak, alternating lapping at her and sucking on her clit. She trembled on the edge to have it ebb as he moved away. She tried to grind herself against him, seeking more friction, only to find her hips held immobile in his hands. Large hands holding her tight, unable to move; her arvaraad’s face swum into view behind her eyelids and she stiffened. She wrenched her eyes open.

“I’m in Skyhold. I’m with Bull. I’m safe.”

She released the breath she was holding and relaxed, letting go of the tension in her body.

“Good girl,” Bull murmured before he dropped his mouth to her cunt again, sucking and licking until she crashed over the edge; her body arched, and head thrown back in a soundless cry as she clutched at the bed covers.

She floated back to blissful awareness to him lazily dragging his calloused hands in long strokes over her body. “You knew that would happen,” she mumbled without opening her eyes.

“Yep, although I didn’t think it would take as long as it did.”

“Sorry.”

He snorted a soft laugh, “don’t be sorry. It was my pleasure. Well…some of it was yours.” She
cracked her eyes open and smiled at him. He brushed stray hairs from her face and gave her a quick kiss before pulling back. “You did good, Ellie. I’m proud of you.” He reached behind himself and pulled the covers of the bed down. “Come on, let’s get you in bed. You need your rest for tomorrow.”

After getting settled under the covers, Bull crossed the room and banked the fire. When he returned to the bed, she clutched at his hand, “stay?”

“I can’t. I have some things I need to see to with the Chargers before we leave tomorrow.” He leaned down and kissed her once more. “See you in the morning, Ellie.”

She let her eyes drift closed, a soft smile lingered on her face. *Maybe I can be me again, after all.*

Chapter End Notes

I love you guys—your comments give me life!
Chapter Summary

**Revanchism**

*Noun: a policy of seeking to retaliate, especially to recover lost territory*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Signs of spring’s arrival in southern Thedas were everywhere when they emerged from the mountain pass onto the Imperial Highway. The foothills were dotted with pastel shades of wildflowers and pale shoots of green peeking from rapidly melting snow and ice. The little dots of colour reminded Eluned of when she was a child; she and her friends would go exploring in the natural parkland adjacent to her school looking for the first crocus and other flowers.

The snow melted turning the roads into a soupy, muddy mess that splashed and caked their mounts’ legs and bellies. Blackwall eyed the road critically, “hopefully the spring rains aren’t heavy this year, otherwise moving the army to the Western Approach is going to be exhausting for everyone.”

“I assume we’re taking trebuchets or something to take down those fortress walls, Boss?”

Eluned nodded. “From Lady Seryl of Jader.”

He grunted. “Too bad it wasn’t closer to Adamant. Gonna take at least a month to get there, even in good conditions.”

“That’s why we have time to do this.”

They turned south and followed the river toward Sahrnia. She wrinkled her nose in disgust when told the river was called Elfsblood. It ran—the river, not the blood although the implication was clear—from Halamshiral into the Dales which was formerly one of the areas traditionally populated by the elves before they were exterminated by the Chantry and one of its Exalted Marches. She kept her mouth shut from commenting or condemning the history of the area; it wasn’t like her own world wasn’t guilty of similar things, and she had enough battles to fight ahead of her without trying to enforce her morals on the peoples and governments of Thedas. It did; however, reinforce her personal distaste for the Chantry.

As they continued, the temperature dropped dramatically. Spring vegetation was present but encased in ice like they had been sprayed with liquid nitrogen, freezing them in place.

“This cold is not natural,” Solas commented, looking around as they continued south.

“Indeed. This weather is not ideal for travel in the mountains, my dear,” Vivienne remarked to anyone that would listen. “I should have brought my fur coat.”

They rode into the Inquisition camp and handed their mounts over to the scouts that hurried forward to secure them. “Watch your footing,” Cassandra cautioned, as her foot nearly skidded out from under her.
“Inquisitor.”

Eluned turned to the familiar voice. “Scout Harding. Are you all right? You look a little cold.”

“Me? I… well, it is a touch chilly. My toes are freezing.”

“See!” Dorian exclaimed, yanking his collar up and then blowing on his hands. “I’m not being unreasonable!”

Lace hastily covered her laugh with a cough. “I’m sorry, you—you didn’t need to know that.” She cleared her throat nervously but relaxed when Eluned winked at her. “We’re on the outskirts of Sahnia. This is what’s left of the town. The lucky ones got out before the river froze over. The rest? Penned in by Fade rifts, wolves, and red templars. We’re the first friendly faces they’ve seen in a long, long while. Sahnia relies on its river for everything—trade, food. They weren’t expecting this.”

“If we freeze to death and get eaten by wolves,” Varric grumbled, “I’m blaming the Seeker.”

She ignored the immediate, expected response from Cassandra and asked, “what about the red templars?”

“Can’t tell you much. The templars have outposts all through the hills. Our scouts haven’t been able to get through. It probably has something to do with the local stone quarry, though. A lot of workers went missing after the red templars moved in.”

“Well, we’ll do everything we can to help these people out.”

“That’s why we love you.” Eluned blinked in surprise. “The red templars have been mounting frequent attacks. They want Emprise du Lion—bad. Let’s get out there and take it back from them.”

The town was in shambles. If she ignored the sight of a despair demon gliding over the ice beyond, she could have sworn she was standing in the middle of a European-style village that had been caught in the middle of a civil war. The buildings were in various states of destruction; many had holes in the walls or roof, if they even had walls or roofs at all. Most buildings were reduced to trembling shells of themselves, propped up with lengths of wood to prevent them from collapsing further.

The people weren’t in much better shape. There looked to be little less than a quarter of the population for a town of Sahnia’s size. They clustered together in little groups of two or three, huddled under Inquisition requisitioned blankets, in front of fires to try to stave off the bone-chilling cold. Others wandered aimlessly, shifting through the rubble for whatever meager resources they could find within the town walls. They all had the hollow-eyed look of people that had experienced some seriously awful shit.

The town, what was left of it, was backed up against steep rocky hills that seemed to deter everything except the wolves, and the river was patrolled by demons. Fortunately for the townsfolk, the demons appeared to be staying within range of the Fade rift that glimmered close to the opposite shore. It was a small consolation. On the far side of town, opposite where the Inquisition was stationed was a series of crude barriers that looked more appropriate for stopped a charge of cavalry then red templars on foot. One man stood guard in the only opening of the barrier. He scanned their approaching group quickly with a practiced eye, looking for a threat. He stopped on Eluned, “at your service, Your Worship. I saw the Inquisition’s banners from afar. Never expected to see the Herald of Andraste herself.”
Eluned tapped herself on the chest and pointed at the Fade rift.

“Ser Michel du Chevin? The late Empress’ champion?” Cassandra queried, stepping up beside Eluned. “You were disgraced and banished for treachery.”

“Seeker Pentaghast.” He bowed when he recognized her. “There’s much more to it than that, but it ends the same way. What does it matter? I am nobody’s champion. No longer ‘Ser’.”

“Are you here to guard the people?” Eluned gestured and Cassandra translated. The others spread out to keep guard while the three spoke or went back into the speak with the villagers themselves.

“As much as I can, although this was not my original intention. I hunt a demon. This one calls itself ‘Imshael’ and has settled in Suledin Keep, up in the hills.” He indicated over his shoulder to the stone towers that could be seen far on the hill above them. “Imshael is free because I made a mistake. I will see him destroyed.”

“What is Imshael?”

“A desire demon, more cunning than anything I have encountered...and I have played the Game,” he replied. “Imshael has roamed the land for some time. If anything, he will have grown in power with the current state of war and chaos. Why he is here in Emprise du Lion, however, is anyone’s guess. Perhaps he has gained the cooperation of the red templars, or vice versa.”

“Why wait if you know where the demon is?”

“I am but one man. Suledin Keep is guarded by red templars. While I would happily give my life for this, I would not give it in vain.”

“You could serve the Inquisition,” Cassandra said. “We have use for strong arms and stout hearts.”

He shook his head. “No. Not until Imshael is defeated. Now that the Inquisition is here, perhaps the red templars who guard the keep can be routed,” he said hopefully. “All I need is one chance.”

They left the warrior to guard the barricade and headed down to the frozen riverbank to get a look at the area beyond the town. To the distance they could see the jagged outline of broken stonework back lit with an eerie red glow. “A templar camp. They appear to be guarding the path to the quarry and the keep.” Cassandra stated. She turned back, “what do you want to do, Inquisitor?”

The anchor crackled, tugging her in a different direction than the rift they could see on the opposite side of the river. “There’s a second rift close by. Tackle them first. If whatever the templars are doing are causing everything to be frozen, I don’t want to disrupt it and have to deal with another Crestwood when we return.”

“Agreed. Which way?”

Eluned pointed and led the way, skidding down the snowy hill and onto the ice. She gingerly stepped out, listening carefully for sounds of the ice protesting. Her eyes widened in alarm as Bull hopped off a ledge and hit the ice. The ice didn’t so much as creak. He flashed her a cocky grin. The ice was thick, but she gestured for the group to spread out. She didn’t want to press their luck by having everyone clustered together in a tight group.

Sera took a run and slid across the ice, showing off as only as the nimble rogue could. She linked her arm though Eluned’s nearly yanking her off her feet as she skidded past. “You know about the chevaliers, donchya?”
She shook her head, giving the elf a brief look before returning her concentration to the ice below her feet and the tug of the anchor.

“Before they get ‘serred’—knighted—whatever, they have to prove themselves by bloodying their blades.”

She frowned, not understanding where Sera was going with the story.

“They go into the Alienage at night and kill anything with pointed ears out after curfew.”

Horrified, she nearly stumbled if not for Sera’s arm linked through her own. “But he’s protecting these people…Elves and humans.” She felt ill at the implication; armoured men wielding swords, hunting down and slaughtering unarmed elves in the dark and narrow streets of the Alienages like she had seen in Halamshiral and Val Royeaux. It was a terrifying thought.

Sera shrugged, letting go of her arm. “Yeah, maybe. But he’s still a chevalier…to them lot, elves aren’t people.”

There was nothing she could say to refute it. She had seen it herself at the Winter Palace how everyone’s eyes slid past Solas as if he wasn’t standing there right beside her. It wasn’t as bad in Ferelden, but it was blatant and horrible in Orlais.

“Heads up,” Blackwall called out, yanking her from her thoughts, and readying his sword and shield. “Wolves have spotted us.”

Nearly a dozen wolves prowled out of the woods, circling them, looking for the weakest member and the likeliest prey. The wolves occasionally lunged and snapped at them to try to get the group to break apart without success. A large wolf stopped opposite Eluned. It raised its head like it was trying to catch her scent, then abruptly turned away taking the pack with it.

“That was…odd,” Varric said, lowering Bianca.

“Indeed. Like in Crestwood,” Dorian observed.

Vivienne flipped her hand at Eluned, “perhaps they sense the anchor.”

“No, it’s not that,” Cassandra added slowly. She frowned in thought, “they attacked in the Hinterlands.”

“But not since,” Solas said, studying Eluned.

Her brows rose in surprise when she realized what might be the cause; she dug under the collar of her coat and pulled out a pendant to show Solas. “You gave this to me in the Hinterlands after we killed that demon. When the wolves didn’t eat me after the fall of Haven,” she shrugged, “figured it was good luck and have worn it every time we’ve left Skyhold.”

Varric chuckled, “well, we know you’ll be safe from wolves.”

The rift ahead of them crackled as did the mark on her palm, “too bad it doesn’t work on demons. Come on, let’s get this done.”

With the corrupting presence of the templars and red lyrium, not to mention some sort of uber-demon up in the keep, particularly tough demons were drawn to the area and made it through the tear in the Veil. Eluned was terrified that the ice was going to break when the first Pride demon dropped from the rift. She felt the vibration of its arrival through the ice. It didn’t get any better when terror demons
erupted from below. At that point, she was certain that the ice was finally going to give way and they’d all drown when their armour pulled them under. It didn’t break, they didn’t drown, but she couldn’t shake the feeling of dread as they made their way around the shoreline to the second one. She shook out her hand and readied herself for the next go-round.

Eluned hated fighting templars. Ever since encountering her first one in the Hinterlands, she learned to fear them. Unlike the Qun who could only incapacitate her if they got their hands on her, the templars could do it at a distance. Having been Silenced on several occasions by the Inquisition’s own templars, despite their actions being for her own good, didn’t help her fears.

At least there was one positive they had noted regarding the red lyrium corruption of the templars; the more corrupted they became, the less likely they were able to use or even remember how to use their anti-magic magic. No one needed a red templar behemoth or horror that could cancel your magic and pummel you into a smear on the ground.

She and the other mages in the group kept their distance and it worked well for the others, but like the demons, the anchor seemed to attract the templars to her. The anchor drew them to her like a lodestone, then hung her out to dry. It didn’t help to restore her mana when it was ripped away; it was in its own little bubble, insulated and separate, like a key in the palm of her hand. Fortunately, Spellweaver did help in that regard. She had a weapon to keep herself from being defenseless while its intrinsic enchantment let her draw on the Fade to keep herself conscious and on her feet while her own mana recovered from being ripped away. She could draw on the Fade more heavily using the sword but Solas had cautioned her against except as a last resort. The potential for mana imbalance was very real and could kill her easily.

She angled the sword up deflecting the blow from the templar and ducked under his arm opening the templar’s defenses for Bull to finish him off. She could kiss Cullen for his insistence that she learn to spar against a templar to learn their techniques. *Not that she’d kiss him or any other templar any time soon.* She grimaced at the thought. *Now an axe wielding Qunari on the other hand…*

“See something you like?” Bull asked with a leer.

The exertion of the fight already had her flushed, but it didn’t stop her from blushing at getting caught eyeing him. She flashed him a smile which he answered with his own before throwing himself in front of another corrupted templar.

They paused after killing the last templar for Cassandra and Blackwall to use their shields to smash some red lyrium deposits.

“This place gives me a headache.” Eluned looked up at Dorian and nodded in agreement. “It’s interesting, it took being this cold to realise red lyrium gives off heat.”

“I’d rather be cold than touch that stuff,” Varric grumbled.

“What now? Do we go on?”

Cassandra slung her shield onto her back. “We’ve been fighting all day with little rest and we’re losing the daylight. There’s no way to be certain what we’d face in the quarry between us and the keep.”

Blackwall grunted in agreement and looked around with a critical eye, “this location is defensible if we were to rest here for the night.”

Eluned considered their words. *One night isn’t going to make a difference in the templars’
operations,” she replied leaning against a rock, “but it might make a difference to us. I’d rather not face that demon de Chevin warned us about, exhausted.” The others breathed a sign of relief, but it was short lived as they still had to clear the tents furthest away from the red lyrium for their own use.

In one tent that must have belonged to an officer, Eluned sifted through the parchments scattered over a makeshift desk. She’d have to show Cassandra the notes that mentioned the town’s mayor, apparently some sort of deal with the templars to provide labour. It did sound like she was trying to protect the towns people in some messed up way by giving the templars the most vulnerable and weakest members of the population which didn’t make much sense if they needed people to work the quarry. She wasn’t sure what the reference to “seeding” was either, but she had a creeping suspicion that she wasn’t going to like it.

She whirled around in fright when a shadow fell across the desk.

“How does someone your size move so quietly?”

He grabbed the hand and pulled her toward him, “you just weren’t listening.” He threaded his free hand through her hair, “how’s your head? You took a pretty nasty hit on the ice earlier.”

She hissed when his fingers grazed the lump on the back of her head, “fucking terror demons. Hate those things.”

He dropped his hand to her waist holding her in place. “Did Solas take a look? You were pretty dazed back there.”

“Not yet. I will once we have camp settled.”

“Hey, come here,” he said quietly, his hand on her waist urged her closer.

She looked up at him and squeaked in surprise when his lips crashed down over hers. She felt her toes scrape against the ground as Bull pulled her up against himself as he deepened the kiss. Suddenly she found herself standing four feet away from him, gasping for air. The heated flush in her cheeks had nothing to do with the cold or windburn.

“Varric.”

“Tiny.” Varric replied and turned to Eluned. “Songbird, the Seeker is looking for you.”

Eluned nodded her thanks and exited the tent quickly. She kept her head down to hide her flushed complexion, but she knew the dwarf had too sharp an eye.

Varric turned back to Bull after Eluned was out of earshot. “You’ve earned her trust. Don’t screw it up, or Bianca here,” he tipped his head over his shoulder, “will have a couple of bolts with your name on them.” He turned away to leave the tent.

“Understood. Hey Varric?” Varric turned back. “Thanks for saying that it would take a couple of bolts.”

Varric snorted a laugh and shook his head as he walked away.

Early in the morning before the sun rose at their backs, they made their way to the quarry. Sera snuck
ahead and returned ten minutes later. “There’s cages down there with people in ‘em. Some templars patrolling but most are up at that camp on the hill under that big tower.”

Eluned chewed on her bottom lip, “do we think the templars will kill them if we attack?”

“There wouldn’t be much point,” Cassandra said quietly, “if we pick them off quickly, they won’t have time.”

“There’s only one route into the quarry from the camp,” Sera confirmed, “but there’s walkways overhead that’ll give archers an advantage.”

“We need to control those ourselves.”

“Right. Buttercup and I can cover you from above.”

Dorian and Vivienne pairing up with the two archers to control the walkways while Eluned went with the three warriors, Solas, and Cole to draw the templars into the quarry. The prisoners woke up and started calling out to be released from their cages. It was the hardest thing to tell them to hush and wait, but they couldn’t afford to have them alert the templars or run into the path of danger.

It wasn’t noticeable until they descended to the quarry floor and out of the wind that the air was utterly foul with the stench of death and decay. Eluned pressed her nose into her elbow but had no time to succumb to the urge to be ill as templars poured out of the camp funneling through the warren of scaffolding. She jumped every time a body came crashing to the ground from above having cringed more than once to see Sera running across the swinging chains suspended high over the quarry floor.

Once the templars were dead, the piles of red lyrium appeared at first glance to be a mixture of deposits sprouting from the ground like in the Temple of Sacred Ashes or Crestwood and hewn pieces. Upon closer inspection, they were discovered to contain twisted limbs and contorted bodies burst open with shards of the stuff. Eluned clapped her hand over her mouth; it was just like what she and Dorian saw in the dungeons of Redcliffe. The red lyrium kept the bodies warm so they started to decompose despite the cold weather. Horrified, they quickly let the villagers out of the cages and led them back through maze, releasing each group and guiding them back to the beginning of the quarry.

The villagers were weak, malnourished, and ill from their ordeal, more than one required support from others or a little bit of healing from the mages before they could carry on.

A pair of elderly men carried the body of a young man, no more than a teen, out of the last cart and laid him on the ground. A rusty stain covered his side and frothy blood dried around his mouth; it was obvious that he had died from a wound that had penetrated his lung. When one of them noticed Eluned was looking, he said sadly, “this’s Elias, Your Worship. He tried to stop the templars from taking his father last night.”

She remembered her words to Cassandra the previous evening. The night made a difference to Elias and his father. She slumped to the ground at the boy’s side and brushed his hair from his face gently. She dashed away a tear that slid down her cheek. “I’m sorry we were too late,” she gestured to the dead boy. She dropped her head into her hand, covering her eyes. She didn’t want the others to know she was crying but couldn’t stop the telltale shake of her shoulders.

Around her, the villagers murmured with shock that the Inquisitor, the Herald of Andraste, cried for a boy she didn’t know, cried for what they had been through.

She cried, and she became angry. We killed the templars too quickly, she thought. They made their choice to inflict this horror on the innocent. She would show them no quarter; they showed no mercy.
for the people of Sahrnia.

“What will we do now?” someone asked.

“You will go home,” Cassandra told them.

Some of the villagers started to protest. “But our dead. We can’t—”

“I am sorry, but the red lyrium must not leave this area. We will see that their bodies are committed to the flames. The Inquisition will have a Chantry mother come to you for a memorial service.”

“It is not safe for you to remain here. Please go back to the village.” The villagers slowly nodded and turned to go home after Cassandra translated Eluned’s words.

With the villagers sent on their way, they followed the path to the keep. There were very few templars present, most of them having been in the camps and were now dead at the hands of Eluned and her group. The few templars that remained were already dead, scattered around having succumbed to the corruption in their veins before ever facing combat.

Eluned’s eye was drawn to a red templar that sat propped up against a broken stone pillar, his metal armour pierced with ominously pulsing shards of red lyrium. His dark hair, what remained of it, stuck out in freezing damp clumps from his ashen skin. Scabbed sores dotted his skin and glowed from where the lyrium would eventually burst through. Spikes of the red crystal dotted his cheekbone and temple. His left arm was fully encased in red and looked to be fusing to his hip. She winced in spite the anger she felt for the templars; it must have been horribly painful for him before he died.

The templar’s eye opened, startling her. His gaze flickered over the approaching group and stopped on her. He shuddered and threw his sword away from himself, letting his empty hand drop into the snow. “Inquisitor,” he said in a hoarse voice. “Be cautious beyond this point. The others are no longer themselves and there are giants infected with the red as well.”

“Why are you warning us?” Cassandra demanded as she stepped up beside Eluned.

He waved his hand and the red lyrium protruding from his body and let his hand drop again. “It gave me power, but it goes against everything I was taught.” He paused for a moment, his eye losing focus as he spoke, almost to himself. “Sometimes I am swept along with the fervor, but in quiet, I remember what I was, and what I believed. What we have done and are doing is wrong.” He took a ragged breath, “we take orders from Imshael but he’s not of the Order. I don’t know why we defer to him.”

“He’s a demon,” Cassandra spat.

He closed his eye and trembled, “Maker! What have we done?” He opened his eye again and looked at Eluned, “have mercy, Inquisitor. I don’t want this anymore. I just want to be myself again.”

“We cannot cure you.”

“Imshael said he could, but the price…” the templar cringed, shaking his head. “The price…” He struggled one handed and managed to remove his gorget. “I would rather go to the beyond and face the Maker’s judgement than continue to live with this corruption.” With one last beseeching look at Eluned, he closed his eye and lifted his chin. “Please.”

Eluned hesitated. Cole appeared at her side and silently drew one of his blades. “I know. Let me help you,” he said loud enough for only her to hear. He wrapped his hand over her own around the hilt.
The templar’s hand came up and formed a fist over his heart before dropping into his lap for a final time as his life’s blood poured over his breastplate.

Thanks to the templar’s warning, they were no surprises once they got into Suledin Keep, not that it was an easy fight despite the warning. The remaining guards in the keep were the most corrupted version of the red templars that Eluned had seen since Haven. By the time they got to the courtyard where the giant paced, she had had enough and sent fire pouring into the area not unlike she had done at Hargrave Keep in the Fallow Mire. The courtyard was reduced to smoldering ash and burnt bone.

They proceeded into the inner bailey of the keep and found a man standing there waiting for them. Eluned studied him as they approached cautiously; his brown hair fell over his forehead in an untidy mop, his eyes were sharp and the bruised look from lack of sleep was deceiving. He was dressed like a Circle mage with a feathery-topped robe, but he didn’t carry himself like a Circle mage surrounded by templars. He seemed—oddly familiar—to her and it made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Off to the side, two hulking red templar horrors, stood waiting. Constantly shifting and growling like rabid dogs on a leash.

“Ah, the hero arrives, but is it hero? Or murderer? It’s so hard to tell.” He grinned at Eluned like he knew of her discomfort at cutting the templar’s throat. He gave a mocking bow, “it’s good to see you again, Herald. Or should I say Inquisitor.”

“Who are you? What do you mean ‘again’?” Cassandra demanded.

“Oh, your Herald and I had a nice long chat after you abandoned her to her fate when Haven fell. You may call me Imshael.”

“You are the demon de Chevin warned us about.”

Imshael cleared his throat, “Choice. Spirit.”

“Are you working for Corypheus?”

“No. But his corruption of the templars made it so easy for one like me to control them. I’m simply —” he gave a casual flick of his wrist and the one of the horrors moved to the other side of the space to flank them, “taking advantage of the chaos.”

“Maker, give us strength,” Cassandra growled. “What is your interest in the Inquisitor?”

“Like many on either side of the Veil; her power.” He looks at her companions with surprise. “You didn’t think you were the only ones keeping her company? She has many companions on the other side of the Veil. Despair, Hope, but lately…” His eyes hooded in pleasure and he inhaled deeply. “My money is on Fury gaining control.”

Imshael’s form appeared to waver and Eluned suddenly found herself yanked back against a surprisingly solid body. An arm wrapped around her waist like a band of iron trapping her hands against her sides, and an equally hard hand wrapped around her throat. Her companions shouted and immediately moved to defend her, Sera and Varric both had their arrows and bolts readied to take a shot.

He pulled her back with him putting a little distance between them and her companions. “Ah, ah,” he chided them. “Careful.” He tightened his hand on her throat as a warning to the others. “You would be impressed with your little Herald; I offered her love, passion, and the one thing she wanted most—to go home—and she refused me. Even after showing her the worst that is to come.” His fingers
morphed slightly, the nails lengthening into claws that he trailed over her throat to the underside of her chin, forcing her to stretch her neck up to avoid the claws from digging in. The jump in her pulse visible in her neck was the only sign of her distress. "This world isn’t kind to you, is it?"

She froze.

"Oh, they don’t know, do they? Well, that is entertaining. Do you think they’ll forgive you when they find out, or—"

Bull growled and stepped forward. "Take your hands off her before I rip them off."

"Wait. Your friends are very violent. It’s worrying” He studied Bull and lowered his head closer, his breath hot on Eluned’s ear. "I see you have a type. Although this one isn’t nearly as pretty.” He gave her a rough shove sending her stumbling into Bull who kept her on her feet. She whirled around and glared at him. “Yes. I can see why Fury is so interested.” He casually brushed down the feathers on his coat and examined his nails as if there weren’t ten people facing him, every one of them ready to kill him. “True to my name, I will show you that you have a choice. We don’t have to fight; it doesn't always have to end in blood."

“I refused before. Why would I accept now?"

“Because now you know your nightmares are real. What I showed you before was true. One little slip… you’re back in his hands.”

“Not. Going. To Happen.” Bull grasped Eluned’s shoulder and drew her behind as he stepped forward.

“And you think you’re going to stop them? Tal-Vashoth.” He sneered on the last word. “When the Qun flexes their power, you will be little more than chaff ground beneath the wheel. I do love a good conquest.”

Around her, the other shifted and muttered angrily at Imshael’s words. Leather creaked as they adjusted their grips on their weapons.

Imshael’s eyes flickered over the others and halted on Eluned. “Make your choice, Inquisitor.”

“No. I refuse.”

He shrugged. “Disappointing, but not unexpected. We’ll see if you feel that way later.” A powerful gust of wind whipped down into the courtyard whipping up the snow into their hastily guarded faces. When they lowered their hands, they were faced with the red templar horrors which twitched and fell to the ground like marionettes with their strings cut. They were dead.

“Does anyone think that was a little too anti-climactic?” Varric asked uneasily, glancing around.

“No doubt that isn’t the last we’ve seen of him,” Cassandra replied, sheathing her sword. “We’ll double the watch.”

Solas nodded, “I’ll put up extra wards to keep any spirits on this side of the Veil, or the other, away.”

“We’ll have to let Michel know that Imshael escaped, but in the meantime, I’ll run up the flag so Harding can start forwarding our people to hold the place after we leave.”

Bull followed her up through the keep, checking rooms and behind doors, before he let her continue onward. When they reached the top, he leaned against one of the more solid looking merlons and
waited for her to run up the flag. The task done, she wrapped her arms around herself and looked to the north. The wind tugged at clothes and her hair, blowing it across her face. She looked over her shoulder at Bull. “Is he right? Will the Qun come south?”

“They always talk about it.” He shrugged, “as long as Seheron remains as it is, they’ll always be locked in the status quo with Tevinter.” He noticed her tremble at mention of Seheron. He pushed himself off the stonework and urged her to stand on a broken chunk of stone, her head was just under his chin when she leaned back against his chest. “I meant what I said. I won’t let them take you.”

She tipped her head back so he could read her lips, “you’re going to guard me forever?”

“As long as you want me.”

She dropped his gaze as a feeling of guilt washed over her. *Am I leading him on when I'm still looking for a way home?* They found another oculara at the keep; another bunch of shards for a door she still searched for. *Would he still guard me if he knew the truth? Would any of them bother with her once Corypheus was gone?*

As they stood there, a great shadow passed over them as a dragon flew overhead and across the great valley spanned by a shattered bridge. They watched it drop into some ancient buildings that, in the distance, looked like Roman colosseum. She shivered; Bull wrapped his arms around her, mistaking her reaction for the cold.

**Chapter End Notes**

Sorry for the missed week my lovely readers. Work was *insane* last week and completely derailed my writing schedule, sadly. I’m not holding onto this for the extra few hours until Wednesday.

So... Imshael. I get that, in game, we get him as a boss fight. However, from a story perspective, it doesn’t make sense that a demon that powerful and that old would not be smart enough to cut his losses and live to try again. There’s too much opportunity for a desire demon in a world with as much upheaval as Thedas’ current state, don’t you think?

Thank you for your comments, kudos, and subscriptions. Your enthusiasm keeps me going. 😊
Carnage

Chapter Summary

Carnage

*Noun: the slaughter of a great number of people, as in battle; butchery; massacre*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eluned stood back from the edge of the shattered bridge, looking across the valley to the ruins over on the other side. She and Bull had seen a dragon disappear over there a few days earlier with no signs of it since. According to some of the residents of Sahrnia, there had been three distinct dragons spotted over the previous months. She had the creeping suspicion that she would be back in Emprise at some point to deal with them as the people of the area had more than enough on their hands with rebuilding and reclaiming the quarry without having to worry about becoming dragon snacks. She wrapped her arms around her waist and shivered; it wasn’t because of the cold wind.

“Hey Boss. You okay?”

She shook her head and stepped back warily. “*You ever have that feeling like something really bad is going to happen?*”

Bull frowned and looked over the edge of the bridge. “About this bridge? It’s sturdy.”

“No… It’s…” she shrugged helplessly and took another step back, “*I can’t explain it.*”

He studied her for a few minutes. “Come on, let’s head back to camp.” He threw his arm around her shoulders and turned her back toward their camp at the tower. Everyone had been too discomforted with Imshael’s disappearing act that no one wanted to sleep within Suledin Keep itself, but instead set up at the foot of the huge tower the guarded the road to the keep, overlooking both the approach to the quarry and the town itself. “You’ve been casting constantly from sun-up to set to take care of the dead. Maybe things won’t seem so bad after a rest and a good meal. Sera bagged some rabbits out in the hills—” she wrinkled her nose at the thought of Sera cooking, “Blackwall’s wrestled them from her to make stew. Smelled pretty good when I left.”

As if listening to the conversation, her stomach gave a loud growl.

Bull grinned. “Well, that settles it.” He angled his head down and lowered his voice, “and if you happen to retire to the wrong tent later, I’ll be happy to provide you with a distraction from your thoughts.”

*Take off my clothes in this cold? You have to be—*

Before she could finish the statement, Bull whirled her around and picked her up, pinning her between himself and a rough-hewn chunk of granite. His fingers twisted into her hair and held her where he wanted as he kissed her senseless. A nip on her bottom lip had her gasping, he took full advantage and swept his tongue to tangle with her own.

The granite had been covered in ice when he pressed her against it, but all she could feel was the
heat pouring off him. She squirmed against him to free her legs to wrap around his waist, his groan shook her to the core. Her skin tingled with the overload of sensations and her stomach clenched with need; she dug her fingers into his shoulder, pulled on his armour to get him closer to her if it was at all possible.

When he pulled back from the kiss, she whined in protest and followed him, catching his bottom lip with her own teeth. With his eye closed, he rested his forehead against hers as they both panted. “Fuuuuck, you’re a fiery little thing when you get going.”

He lifted his head and was pleased to note of the high spots of colour on her cheeks and the ruddy appearance of her kiss-bruised lips. “Still cold?” She shook her head. “See? I’ll keep you warm.” After that performance, she had no doubt that he would.

“Why don’t you head up,” he said, tipping his chin toward the path to camp, “I’ll follow you in a minute.” She raised a brow in question. “I need a minute to calm down,” he replied with a grin as he adjusted the obvious tent in his pants, “otherwise I’m going to give the others a show.”

“Cassandra would be most impressed.” He threw his head back and roared with laughter. She shot him a little grin and headed up the path making sure to exaggerate the sway of her hips.

They left Sahmnia, after extricating themselves from the grateful villagers, and caught up to the back end of the army a day west of the city of Montsimmard by the shores of Lake Celestine. Ahead of them a long column snaked along the road sending up hazy yellow-brown dust high into the air marking the army’s passage. The town of Val Firmin would have been completely obscured from sight if not for the breeze that blew from the north and pushed the dust away.

The breeze carried with it the wet, briny scent of spindleweed and mud from the lake, and the screech of shore birds squabbling over territory. It gave her a sudden pang of homesickness. Had she been gone from Earth as long as she had been in Thedas? She didn’t have any idea if time passed here at the same rate as it did at home; her years of enslavement had completely messed up her sense of time. Was the day the same length? Did it pass faster or slower than at home? Did her family and friends still look for her? Was she in their thoughts as they were in hers?

“Are you all right, Inquisitor?” She looked up sharply at Cassandra. “You’re crying.”

She dashed the tears from her cheeks. “Just a bit of dust,” she lied.

The other woman pressed her lips together, obviously not believing the lie. “We’ll reach Val Firmin by nightfall. We’ll take rooms at an inn for a proper rest before we catch up to the Commander.”

“I know just the place,” Vivienne chimed in. “The innkeeper and his wife run a spotless place and have the most amazing cook. Leave it to me darlings, I’ll get us there.”

Cassandra nodded absently.

Eluned tapped Cassandra’s vambrace. “When do you think that will be?”

“Hmm? Oh, within a day or two, I expect. No doubt he’ll be riding back and forth through the lines to chivvy along the soldiers and keep an eye on the progress of the trebuchets.”

“The Commander is to be commended for his attention to detail,” Vivienne remarked. “Surprising for someone from such humble Fereldan roots.”

Eluned brightened at mention of the trebuchets. Not for the siege equipment itself but for the people
escorting it. The Valo Kas. She hadn’t seen them since before the disastrous trip to the Storm Coast. Between Leliana and Cullen, the mercenary group had been kept busy which suited them, but she found herself missing them—especially Kaaras and Sata-Kas—badly.

As they rode up to the tail end of the army, the soldiers moved aside for the horses coming up quickly behind them. They were initially watched warily by the soldiers as they rode by until someone realized exactly who the group was. The soldiers cheered and called out greetings as they passed. Most had never really seen Eluned, having trained down in the valley or had joined on the road; troops pledged by nobles and landowners, but they all knew about the green glimmer of magic in her hand that she reluctantly raised to acknowledge their cheers.

Vivienne drew her golden-hued mare alongside Eluned’s mount once more. “It’s good that you are finally embracing your position, my dear.” Eluned grimaced but quickly masked her expression when she caught Vivienne’s eye. Vivienne’s tone softened, “you may not want the power for yourself, but it is imperative to your troops to see you wield it with confidence. We do not know what we will face; your troops need to know that you’re there with them. You inspire them and that could make the difference between victory or defeat. If not for yourself, then do it for them.” She dropped back and left Eluned with her thoughts.

After an admittedly pleasant night at the inn Vivienne had recommended—they really did have a wonderful cook—a hot bath, and a good sleep in a comfortable bed instead of a drafty tent, they headed out on the road at the first glimmer of dawn with full warm stomachs and extra rations of fresh bread and cheese tucked into their packs.

They turned off the Imperial Highway when it started its turn northeast toward Velun and rode out onto the ochre sands of the Western Approach. Here, too, were signs of spring; drought stunted plants bloomed for a single day in shades of white, pink, red, and purple from the brief passage of spring rains lending a reprieve from the Blight-stricken land. The road was a crude rocky path trampled down by the soldiers and carts ahead of them. Fine particles of dust and sand hung in the air creating a haze that lingered over the line of soldiers marching along the road.

Eluned coughed as she inhaled some of the dust, aggravating her already sensitive throat. Twisting in the saddle to dig into her pack, her little mare tossed her head and jigged in annoyance at the constant shifting on her back. Quickly pulling the scarf Kaaras gave her as a replacement for the one Master Gardenigo gave her and was subsequently lost after the fall of Haven, she wrapped the scarf over her hair and around her face, then stroked the mare’s neck in apology. The scarf kept the dust out and kept her face, ears, and neck from burning as the sun beat down upon them. The switch from the abnormal frigid temperatures of Emprise to the scorching temperature of the Western Approach left her feeling a bit lightheaded; she had no idea how the others wearing heavy plate could cope as she had enough problems dealing with the heat in her much lighter armour. She realised suddenly that she knew exactly how they could cope with the heavy armour and heat; she too had dealt with it and the humid heat of Seheron. Freedom has made me soft. The corner of her mouth quirked up at the irony of it.

As they crested a rocky dune, they could see a dark shadow growing along the edge of the horizon in jagged spikes. Sunlight glittering off the metallic spikes that jutted up from the jet-black stone. Smoke rose from within the fortress, no doubt from their cookfires, but the occasional lightning arcing up into the air was far more disconcerting.

“Adamant Fortress,” Blackwall said, almost reverently. Eluned shivered.

“The song still sings, deep where it’s thin. They can hear it. Fears are strong, fueling the nightmare.” Cassandra’s lips thinned at Cole’s statement. “I had hoped the troubles here were finished.”
Eluned raised a brow in question but before Cassandra could elaborate, they were interrupted by a Cullen's arrival. He reined his big Ferelden Forder to the side of the road, Eluned and her group followed to let the army continue marching past.

“Inquisitor, Seeker,” he nodded in greeting to them and the others gathered around. “Your timing is impeccable as usual. Hawke and Stroud have located a suitable location over the ridge and our troops have already started to establish camp. The Valo-Kas are also just ahead with the trebuchets and the ram. They had some difficulties with muddy roads out of Jader but no damage of consequence. How was your mission to Sahrmia?”

“We freed the citizens—what was left of them—from the red templars there, but what we have learned there was most…disturbing.” Cassandra glanced around and noted the soldiers’ eyes on them as the marched past. “Perhaps it would be best to discuss this further once we have made camp.”

“Of course,” he wheeled his horse in along side Eluned’s, effectively pinning her in between himself and Cassandra as they got moving again.

Although she knew that they were allies, and could even be considered friends, she still found herself tensing up between then. Don’t be foolish, they would be the first to defend you, she chided herself. Unless they thought you were possessed, in which case they’d be the first to strike. She shook her head at her pessimistic inner voice. Not helpful.

“Are you all right Inquisitor?”

She was relieved that the scarf around her face hid her flush of embarrassment. “Yes, just working out a kink in my neck,” she gestured and rolled her neck, hoped that Cassandra would buy the excuse. The Seeker had been particularly attentive since Suledin Keep and she wasn’t entirely certain why.

“Here we are,” Cullen commented as they rode through some rocky columns marking the road to the fortress.

Below them, tents were already being laid out in orderly rows with plenty of open ground between the front row of the army and the walls of the fortress. Even at this distance, she could see the shiny glitter of silverite armour flashing with green and red from the demons that had already been called forth. “Have they already started their ritual?” she asked.

Cullen shook his head. “The mages and templars that have already arrived agree that there has been some activity, but nothing significant to indicate they’ve commenced this ritual. The Veil is extremely thin here which confuses matters somewhat, but we’re confident they have not begun. That will undoubtedly change with our presence.” He looked across the camp, “come, they have the command tent set up. Leave your horses with the stablehands and we’ll go discuss our strategy for tomorrow.”

She didn’t comment when Bull fell into step just behind her as Cullen led her and Cassandra through what felt like a maze of tents despite being laid out in precise rows. From the center of the camp, the fortress was clearly visible and close enough that Eluned could make out the blue colour and winged helms of the Grey Wardens that observed them from the walls. They were close enough that she could feel how thin the Veil was, not unlike when she approached a rift. Beyond that, the hair on her arms and the back of her neck stood on end, a feeling of dread filled her.

“Inquisitor?” Cullen asked, holding the tent flap open for her.

She shook off the feeling and entered the tent. A large table was laid out with several large pieces of
parchment that she realized after a moment were crude floorplans of the fortress before them. She nodded to Hawke and Warden Stroud who stood waiting, and took her place at the table.

“Erimond, the Tevinter mage that we met at the ritual tower, is the one guiding the Warden-Commander to complete the blood ritual within the fortress,” Hawke informed them. “He is here.”

“Warden-Commander Clarel is a powerful mage in her own right. She is the one leading the Wardens here,” Stroud continued.

“The Inquisition forces can breach the gate. If the Wardens already have their demons, we’ll need to use the fortress’ choke points—” Cullen pointed out several key locations on the map, “to control the battle. We may not be able to defeat them outright, but if we cut off reinforcements, we can carve a path to Warden-Commander Clarel.”

Eluned chewed on her bottom lip and grimaced at the sand that crunched under her teeth. “Taking this fortress is going to get a lot of good soldiers killed.”

“Our soldiers know the risks, Inquisitor. And they know what they’re fighting for. It will be hard-fought, no way around it. But we’ll get that gate open for you.”

Cassandra frowned, “couldn’t you do what you did at Hargrave?”

Eluned’s brows shot up in surprise. Cassandra had been furious at her for dropping the fire in the keep, and now she asked her to do the same thing again? Adamant was far larger, she wouldn’t be able to get everyone, and she was very afraid that if she did it during the main ritual, Erimond could turn the binding against her. “I would kill everyone and everything if I do.”

“Then we will give them the chance.”

“Thank you, Inquisitor.” Stroud saluted her, then he and Hawke excused themselves as the meeting concluded. Cullen and Cassandra excused themselves sometime after that, but Eluned remained to study the map of the fortress so she wouldn’t get lost the following day.

She didn’t know how long she stayed there memorizing the twists and turns of the fortress when the candles wavered when someone opened the tent flap. “Hey Boss? You planning on staying here all night?”

She straightened up from where she had been leaning on the table on her elbows and dug her knuckles into the small of her back with a groan. “I doubt I’ll be able to sleep. Never could before... well, you know.”

Seheron. Bull did know. “Didn’t think he told you those things.”

“He didn’t, but no one gives a thought to speaking in front of a saarebas.”

He grunted in acknowledgement and tried to tamp down the feeling of guilt at her statement. He had
seen the saarebas kneeling behind arvaarads while orders were given out and had given them no more thought than the axe on his back. “Have you eaten?” he asked even though he already knew the answer she didn’t offer. “You gonna eat any better tomorrow morning?” She grimaced. “That’s what I thought. Come on,” he held out his hand, “let’s get some food into you.”

It was full dark when she followed Bull out of the tent. Disappointingly, it was too late to try to blunder around in the sea of tents to find the Valo-Kas. With some luck, she’d have a chance to see them before heading into the battle.

Bull dropped her hand before they emerged into the light of the campfire and maneuvered her ahead of him. “Hey, look who I found?”

“There you are, Songbird. You’re just in time for Hawke to regale us with one of her many amusing adventures.”

She flashed them a small smile and accepted a bowl of stew and a chunk of bread before sitting down on the opposite side of the fire, as far away as she could get from the glowering elf beside Hawke. She still didn’t feel comfortable with Fenris and his lyrium reminded her far too much of the templars. She only listened with half an ear to Hawke as she picked at her food, shredding the bread into tiny pieces she occasionally ate while stirring the stew aimlessly. Vivienne and Solas excused themselves soon after Hawke’s story became tawdry. She was surprised as she glanced around the fire to find both Blackwall and Stroud missing. Perhaps the two Wardens had Warden things to discuss.

Eluned placed her bowl on the ground and stood up, halting the conversation.

“Inquisitor?”

“Carry on. I’m going to my bedroll.”

“Did she eat anything?” Varric asked quietly, when the tent flap fell behind her.

Bull picked up the bowl and tipped it toward the firelight so he could see inside. “Nope.” He dumped out the cold, congealed stew into the fire with a sizzle and refilled the bowl. With a grunt, he got up and headed to her tent.

Eluned whirled around, magic springing to her fingers, when someone entered her tent. She let go of the flames immediately when she saw who it was. “What do you want?”

His eye narrowed as he read the tension radiating off her body that practically screamed what her voice couldn’t. “I brought you dinner since you didn’t eat the first one.”

“I can’t. I—” she dug her knuckles in just below her sternum. “My stomach hurts and I think I’m going to be sick.”

He put the bowl down on the chest and reached out to touch her face, she jerked back like she used to in the beginning and turned away from him again. “Hey, come on, Boss. What’s going on?” When she didn’t reply, he reached out and turned her around. “Ellie,” he said softly, tipping her head up. “Look at me.” Two silvery tracks shone on her face in the candlelight.

“I can’t do this… I’m fucking terrified, Bull.” He opened his mouth, but she interrupted him with a sharp shake of her head and waved her hand towards the rest of the camp. “They look at me like I’m going to save them, but I don’t know what I’m doing! They’re going to die, and I can’t do anything to stop it.”
He crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s not your purpose.” She flinched at the word. “Cullen is responsible for them, not you. They just need to know that you’re going to do everything you can to stop Clarel. That’s the only thing you need to concentrate on.” He moved the bowl of food over, sat down on the chest and pulled her to stand before him, running his hands up and down her arms as he had done many times before, until he could feel her starting to relax and sway with his strokes. “You’ve taken fortresses before; this isn’t any different.”

She snorted, “the Avvar let us walk in the front door in the Fallowmire, the bandits in Crestwood were little more than a disorganized rabble, and the templars were already dying in Emprise.”

“Maybe. But this time you have the entire Inquisition army to help. You stood up to Corypheus and his dragon on your own; standing up to a Vint and a misguided Warden with all of us at your back will be nothing.” After a few moments, he softened his voice, “now you’re going to eat that stew, and then you’re going to try to get some rest.”

“Will you stay with me tonight?” she asked hopefully.

He curled his hand around the back of her neck to draw her in and rested his forehead against hers. “If that’s what you need, you got it.”

Sweat trickled down the back of her neck as she shifted on her feet as the battering ram slammed into the metal banded doors of the fortress. She winced as overhead, boulders flew and slammed into the stone walls sending chunks of stone flying off in all directions. A ladder went up against the wall and Inquisition soldiers scampered up as quickly as they could. Just as quickly, there were screams as people were cut down or thrown back from the walls by demons, by Grey Wardens, or by the Inquisition forces themselves. She rolled her neck and fussed with the helmet everyone insisted she wear at least until they into the heart of the fortress and away from the flying debris. A heavy hand landed on her shoulder making her jump again.

“Steady, Boss. Cassandra, Blackwall, and Stroud will go ahead of you with their shields and create a wedge. Varric and Sera will pick off any archers, Dorian and Vivienne will keep them covered. When we get the word, we’ll go; you, me, Solas, and Cole,” Bull said in a low, slow voice, repeating the plans that Cullen had gone over with all of them just hours before. He gave her shoulder a squeeze, letting the weight of his hand rest there and provide some reassurance as she trembled under his hand. She nodded sharply and drew a deep breath as the door ahead buckled showing a swath of light of the wood started to collapse. “Let’s go.”

They moved swiftly to the gate and were met by Cullen. “All right, Inquisitor. You have your way in. Best make use of it. We’ll keep the main host of demons occupied for as long as we can. Hawke and Fenris are with our soldiers on the battlements. They’re assisting them until you arrive.” Eluned flinched when a body was flung down beside them, a demon hissing at them from the wall. “There’s too much resistance on the walls. Our men on the ladders can’t get a foothold. If you can clear out the enemies on the battlements, we’ll cover your advance.”

Fighting their way through the fortress was a blur of demons and magic, silverite and blood. At the inner court of the fortress, they came across a large party of warriors but no mages or demons with them. The Wardens immediately shifted into a defensive stance. “Stand down! The Inquisition is here to stop Clarel, not to kill Wardens. If you fall back, you won’t be harmed.”

“About time you got here. Stand down, you nug-licker!” A dwarf with a massive red, braided beard shoved his way through the ranks, barking at another Warden that started to step forward himself.

Eluned stared at him. What was it with Wardens and an excess of facial hair?
He rested a massive battleaxe, that looked more suited for Bull’s hands that the much shorter dwarf, on the stone in front of him. “Name’s Oghren. Warden-Commander sent me to see what this lot…” he gestured over his shoulder with his thumb, “were doin’ after Clarel sent word and demanded the Fereldan branch join her. Warden-Commander refused but wanted to know what they were up to.” Oghren straightened up and puffed up his chest. “Said I’d be the most convincing that I tweren’t happy with that decision an’ disobeyed orders to join the Orlesian order.” He looked over the group before him and his eyes fell on Eluned’s hand that gave a well-timed crackle of the anchor. “So you’re her—the Inquisitor?”

She gave him a sharp nod.

“Don’t say much, do ya?” He turned his head to the side and spat on the ground. Eluned wrinkled her nose in disgust. He leered at her and gave her a thorough looking over. “Cold one, huh? I can work with that. I like the challenge.”

Eluned stiffened. Cassandra jumped in, “will you stand down?”

Oghren nodded. “We want no part of this fight. Deal with Clarel as you must.”

Blackwall sighed with relief, “good to know that they aren’t all caught up in the madness.”

Oghren looked over at Blackwall, “nice start on the beard, son. Keep it up, you’ll get there.”

Sera cackled with glee. “Let’s carry on,” Eluned gestured.

They started to move towards the stairs. “Wait,” Oghren called out, “I can show you a faster way to where they are doing the ritual.”

In a much shorter route than she had memorized from their incompete plans of the fortress, the dwarf led them out into a central courtyard. The mark on her palm crackled to life with an intensity that took her breath away. Cradling her hand into her belly she didn’t initially notice anyone beyond the rift flickering before her.

A wavering female voice caught her attention and made her focus beyond the rift. “I came to save people from the Blight!” It was the young elven woman that had spoken so eagerly with Blackwall back in Crestwood. She stood facing the rift. Behind her stood an older woman in Grey Warden armour that Eluned assumed was Clarel. Behind her, stood Erimond, smiling smugly.

“And so you shall my child,” Clarel said swiftly drawing the blade across the elf’s throat. Below the landing where they stood, the rift shifted and pulsed.

Eluned jerked as if the dagger had been drawn across her own throat. The blood poured down Merilie’s chest—Eluned blinked—no, this was not Kont-arr. I’m not a slave any longer. I can act. She whistled as loudly as she could startling everyone.

“Stop them!” Erimond called out. “We must complete the ritual!”

Eluned gave a nod to Cassandra urging her to speak up as the Wardens readied themselves to fight. “Warden-Commander. You are being deceived! If you complete that ritual, you’re doing exactly what Erimond wants.”

“What, fighting the Blight? Keeping the world save from darkspawn? Who wouldn’t want that? And yes, the ritual requires blood sacrifice. Hate me for that if you must, but do not hate the Wardens for doing their duty,” Erimond argued.
“We make the sacrifice no one else will,” Clarel added. “Our warriors die proudly for a world that will never thank them.”

“And then your Tevinter ally binds the mages to Corypheus!” Stroud informed her.

“Corypheus?” Clarel hesitated, “but he’s dead.”

“These people will say anything to shake your confidence, Clarel,” Erimond cajoled her.

Clarel appeared to struggle with herself and, Eluned thought for a heartbeat or two, that she was going to make the right decision. “Bring it through.” The Warden mages engaged the rift starting to pull it open and Eluned hissed as the mark spasmed in her hand.

“Please!” Hawke arrived in the courtyard and strode forward, “I have seen more that my share of blood magic! It is never worth the cost.”

“I trained half of you myself! Do not make me kill you to stop this madness,” Stroud added.

The rift pulsed with the increasing power being fed into it by the Warden mages. “Be ready with the ritual, Clarel. This demon is truly worthy of your strength,” Erimond prompted her.

“The Grey Wardens have a proud history! We would not stand against you if we did not know you were being misused!” Cassandra called out. The Grey Wardens in the courtyard started to shift uncomfortably. Clarel took a step back.

“Clarel, we have come so far. You’re the only one who can do this,” Erimond argued as Clarel wavered.

“Perhaps we could test the truth of these charges, to avoid more bloodshed.”

“Or perhaps I should bring in a more reliable ally.” Erimond turned from Clarel and tapped his staff against the stone. “My master thought you might come here, Inquisitor! He sent me this to welcome you!” He tapped his staff on the stone twice more before there was an ear-splitting screech and Corypheus’ dragon flew over the ramparts raining its red lyrium breath over everyone below.

The courtyard exploded into chaos. Clarel called out for the Wardens to help the Inquisition but Eluned was only interested in getting to Erimond. She took off running in the direction she saw Clarel disappear after the fleeing Tevinter mage. She could hear some of her companions behind her but didn’t stop to see who had joined her, instead followed the sound of fighting ahead of her.

Clarel advanced on Erimond in a rage. “You! You’ve destroyed the Grey Wardens!” She blasted him with a spell knocking him down and breaking his staff.

“You stupid bitch! You did that to yourself.” Erimond struggled to turn over propping himself up on an elbow, laughing weakly. “All I had to do was dangle a little power before your eyes, and you couldn’t wait to get your hands bloody!” He grunted as the next spell sent him skidding across the stone. “You could have served a new god.”

“I will never serve the Blight,” she answered. She raised her staff to cast again when the dragon appeared over the broken tower snatching her up in its jaws and send the others scrambling for cover.

Eluned found herself out on the ramparts. With the chaos of the dragon’s arrival, she had no idea where any of her companions ended up. She didn’t know where they ended up when the dragon landed heavily between her and the tower. Were they on the other side of the bridge, or behind her?
She heard a muttered curse, “sodding thunderhumper”, and realized that the dwarven Warden, at least, was there. She knew the broken edge of the rampart was behind her and a cold shiver past over her when she remembered what she told Bull when they stood on the shattered bridge in Emprise du Lion.

Her attention was drawn back with the sound of bones snapping as the dragon gave another chomp on Clarel and then dropped her like a dog drops a squeaked-out chew toy and turned its entire focus on her. She took a step back carefully then jumped back as the dragon snaked its neck down and roared at her. She felt the distinctive hair-raising crackle of a lightning; her eyes snapped down below the dragon, to see Clarel feebly move to release her final spell then fall still.

The lightning ripped across the stones and over the dragon causing it to stamp and stagger. The stones vibrated under Eluned’s feet in a nauseating fashion. The dragon thrashed again trying to take off but clipped its wing on one of the stone pillars along the side of the shattered wall causing it to stumble hard to the stones and fall over the side of the rampart taking out a large section of the masonry with it. The stones groaned and large cracks shot across the mortar with sharp puffs of dust and stone fragments. Almost in slow motion, she could feel the stones disappear beneath her feet as she raced toward the intact part of the bridge.

“Sod it!” the dwarf swore.

She turned to give him a hand.

They fell.

Meanwhile…

The boy entered the tent and waited for a break in the discussion before handing the parchment over to the warrior at the head of the table.

Sweat beaded along the edges of the white chalk that decorated the man’s tanned face leaving rivulets of grey in the white mask. His hair was kept back in long braids gathered together with a leather thong at the nape of his neck, and liberally coated in a dried white paste. The man grunted in acknowledgement and unrolled the scrap of paper giving it a quick read.

“News?”

“From the south,” he replied with a nod. “The Qun offered an alliance to the Inquisition. The alliance was rejected. One dreadnought destroyed.”

Someone gave a derisive snort. “That’s the army led by the human woman with saarebas scars?”

“The same. No love lost there,” the leader replied.

The others snickered in response.

“Is there a reply?” the boy asked.

The leader pursed his lips in thought.

“Perhaps we should send the Inquisitor a gift to express our gratitude?” another warrior joked.

The man considered for a moment holding the gaze of a painted, horned warrior across the tent from him, “yes. Perhaps we should.”
Oof, this was quite the chapter to put all the pieces together for the next... Thank you all for your patience, your comments, your support! I adore you all.
Revelation

Chapter Summary

Revelation

*Noun: a surprising and previously unknown fact, especially one that is made known in a dramatic way*

Chapter Notes

There are some flashbacks in this chapter. To try to keep them distinguished from thoughts and non-verbal communication, I've wrapped them between sets of ***. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It wasn’t the falling part that bothered her so much as the sudden stop at the end; gravity always noticed when you were trying to be clever. She cautiously pried open an eye and looked around with out moving too much. She was correct in her assessment that she wasn’t falling, but neither was she physically grounded. She opened her other eye and tried to make sense of what she saw. The ground was…above her? Hovering away just out of arms’ reach. It didn’t make any sense; her body and her eyes were telling her different things than her mind understood and the urge to panic was clawing its way up her throat. She shot her hand out to touch the closest thing to her; the moment her fingertips touched the spiky red plant, reality shifted violently. She came crashing down onto her left shoulder and landed in a heap. Immediately she rolled up onto her hands and knees and vomited as her body and brain rapidly tried to adjust to her new orientation. *Asshole gravity.*

Standing up slowly, she wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and looked around. Everywhere around her was shades of green, black, and disturbingly, red. Lakes and puddles of murky green liquid, hopefully water, spread out all around her creating meandering paths between them. The ground, too, was greenish but mottled with black, and jagged chunks and pillars of black stone jutted out of the ground like something had violently smashing into it sending the bits flying outward. Wisps of greenish mist… *or was it fog?* drifted across the ground obscuring the footing even further. *Why is this familiar?* Disturbingly, viscous red or toxic green liquid flowed down to vanish into murky pools. Against her better judgement, Eluned studied one of these flows and discovered that it wasn’t flowing down, but up. Her eyes reluctantly followed it up and she staggered back, tripping over the uneven ground, when she saw the floating islands of stone and churning green sky above her.

*I can’t be…Have I been here…* She slapped her hand to her forehead and groaned as a searing shock of pain, like the path of one of Varric’s bolts, shot through her skull before she could finish her thought. She reached out and held onto a pillar of stone to steady herself as she wobbled on her feet, disoriented. *Now is not a good time for a migraine. I need to think if I’m going to get out of the Fade. But last time…* Another bolt of pain sent her to her knees. *Memo to self: do not think about the last trip the Fade if you don’t want to experience your head being split open like a ripe cantaloupe.*
She sat back on her heels and looked around, ignoring the damp that was seeping into her breeches around her knees. Wonder if any of the others are here? I reached for Oghren when the stones fell out beneath us, could he be near? There was a female voice shouting: Cassandra or Hawke; did they just yell when they saw us fall or did they fall as well?

An ominous clacking noise, like someone drumming fingernails on a hard surface, made her jump to her feet and spin around to see what was behind her. Something shifted among the rocks before her, but she didn’t want to get any closer to investigate. She started to draw on her mana and immediately stopped; Solas had said that doing magic in the Fade, even when sleeping, drew the attention of spirits and demons to you. She certainly didn’t need to draw any more attention than the Anchor already did. Instead, she carefully drew Spellweaver from its scabbard—thanking whomever was listening that she hadn’t lost it in the fall—and held it at the ready.

She whirled around at the sound of rocks crunching behind her, leveling her sword at Oghren. He looked at her critically, “do you even know how to use that nug sticker?” She raised the tip of the sword at him just like Blackwall and Cullen had taught her. “Huh. Didn’t think I’d see another sparkle-fingers wield a sword.” She held the sword steady, not taking her eyes off him in case he was a demon and attacked. “Really don’t say much do ya?” She tapped her throat and shook her head. “Guess that’s handy when you don’t want to get caught playin’ hide the sausage.”

She wrinkled her nose in disgust but lowered the sword. He was obviously the dwarven Warden and not a demon; no demon would continue to use such ineffective tactics as he did.

“So what now? Are the others here?”

She shrugged. “We look,” she gestured. Since he hadn’t seen anything from where he came, she walked down the path in the opposite direction Oghren had arrived from. Fortunately, this also took her toward the distant rift which was most likely the way to get out.

“Maybe if we called…hrrmm.”

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye and then whistled loudly. After a moment, they heard an answering whistle. She shot Oghren a grin and led the way. After a few minutes, some twists and turns, they found Cassandra, Varric, Solas, and Hawke standing around at the bottom of a hill. “Inquisitor! Thank the Maker, you’re alive.”

“As are we, no doubt thanks to the Inquisitor’s quick thinking.”

“Explain Solas.”

“Where do you think we are, Seeker? This is the Fade. The Inquisitor opened a rift, we came through… and survived.” He looked around in awe. “I never thought I would ever find myself here physically…but an area I would have chosen myself, but…”

“Calm down there, Chuckles. We still have one more to find.” Eluned looked sharply at Varric. “I saw Tiny fall with us.” Solas continued prattling on as if he hadn’t heard Varric at all.

“It’s not how I remember the Fade, either,” Hawke added. “The stories say you walked out of the Fade at Haven. Was it like this, Inquisitor?”

“I don’t know. I…” She closed her eyes, pressed the heel of her palm against her temple, and breathed slowly until the pain passed. “Every time I try to remember, I think my head is going to explode.”

Solas abruptly ended his monologue and hurried over to her. He raised a hand to her head, pausing
for her nod of permission before he started to cast. “I can not detect anything physically wrong. There is no injury.” He let his hand drop reluctantly. “Perhaps it would be better if you do not actively try to recall those memories until we can determine the cause of this pain.”

“Well whatever happened at Haven, we can’t assume that we are safe now,” Hawke said. “That huge demon was right on the other side of that rift Erimond was opening, and there could be more.”

Eluned nodded sharply. “Let’s find Bull and find a way out. I’m not leaving anyone behind.”

They kept quiet as they walked with the hopes of hearing anything that approached, hoping that would be the Iron Bull and not a demon. But such hopes were short lived as they walked through an arch of shattered stone with corpses dangling from it. Demons rose from the swampy ground and attacked. The two warriors immediately taunted the demons, drawing their attention, while Hawke flitted in and out of the battle with her daggers flashing in the ominous green light. When the last demon wailed its last, they could still hear fighting ahead of them. Eluned ran ahead.

“Inquisitor! Wait!” Cassandra called as they hurried to catch up.

Eluned ran down a hill and found herself at a fork in the road. Which way? Come on, Bull. Not hearing anything else, she turned to take the right-hand path.

“Let’s join the Inquisition, Chief.” She heard Bull’s voice raised to mimic Krem’s, she changed direction and hurried toward it. “I don’t know…there might be demons.” Asshole,” he grumbled.

She skidded around the corner and pulled up abruptly as he swung around with his axe leveled at her. He stood tensed, muscles twitching and every breath coming as a huff, ready to swing. He raised his axe in warning; his eye was hard on Eluned as she stepped forward.

“Inquisitor…perhaps that isn’t a good idea,” Cassandra cautioned.

“How do I know it’s really you,” Bull growled.

She cocked her head to the side, raised a brow, and flashed him a hand gesture she had given him many times in their early days. The head of the great axe thunked against the ground as Bull relaxed and pulled her close, pressing his lips to the top of her head. Varric chuckled behind her.

“Wait…Are they…?”

“Not now, Seeker,” Varric hissed, interrupting her.

“I hate to break up your reunion Inquisitor,” Hawke drawled, “but we need to find the way out.”

“I’ll fight whatever you give me, Boss, but nobody said nothing about getting dragged through the ass end of demon town.” She gave Bull’s hand a squeeze and turned to the others.

“The rift in the fortress was close by, can we escape the same way?” Oghren asked.

“It’s our best option.” From their current location, she couldn’t see the rift she saw earlier. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the pull of the Anchor. Opening them again, she pointed in the direction she felt the strongest tug. “This way.” She led them up a crude staircase and halted abruptly at the top when she spotted someone she did not expect.

“By the tits of my ancestors!” Oghren swore. “Is that…I thought she was dead?”

“You think my survival impossible, yet here you stand in the Fade yourselves.”
“Divine Justinia? Most Holy?” The hopeful look on Cassandra’s face made Eluned wince in sympathy, she was afraid the other woman was going to be disappointed.

“Cassandra.”

Eluned looked at the Seeker. “Is it her? You knew her best.”

“I… don’t know. It is said that the souls of the dead pass through the Fade and sometimes linger, but… we know the spirits lie. Be wary, Inquisitor.”

“You do not remember what happened at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, Inquisitor.”

She groaned and pressed her hand to her temple as pain ripped through her head again. *I wish people would stop prompting me to think about it,* she thought. “I don’t know. I can’t remember.”

“The memories you have lost were taken by the demon that serves Corypheus. It is the Nightmare you forget upon waking. It feeds off memories of fear and darkness, growing fat upon the terror.” Justinia looked to Oghren, “the false Calling that terrified the Wardens into making such grave mistakes? Its work.”

“Sod it,” he grumbled. “Whose ass do I have to kick to make this right?”

“You will have your chance, brave Warden. This place of darkness is its lair.”

“Can you help us get out of the Fade, Most Holy?”

Justinia looked fondly at Cassandra, “that is why I found you.” She turned to Eluned, “when you entered the Fade at Haven, the demon took a part of you, your memories. Before you do anything else, you must recover them.”

Wraiths manifested from the sludge intent of preventing their progress, but the group quickly cut them down. Eluned folded over her knees, gripping her head as the memories of the day rushed back into her mind. She remembered hesitating to follow the call for help, she remembered seeing Corypheus and the Wardens attacking the woman before her, she remembered instinctively lunging out to catch the orb that rolled across the floor toward her. Strong hands held her upright as she staggered under the pain of the memories’ return.

“So the mark didn’t come from Andraste. It came from the orb Corypheus carried for his ritual,” Hawke summarized.

“Corypheus intended to rip open the Veil, user the Anchor to enter the Fade, and throw open the doors of the Black City. When you disrupted his plan,” Justinia said looking at Eluned, “the orb bestowed the Anchor upon you instead.”

“I’m a mistake. An accident.”

“If you believe in the Maker, then you believe He made this world and everything in it. And if you do not… then nothing has changed.”

Eluned gave Justinia a wary look. *Did she know?* 

“You can not escape the lair of the Nightmare until you regain all that it took from you. You have recovered some of yourself, but now it knows you are here. You must make haste. I will prepare the way ahead.” With that she vanished.
“Could that really have been the Most Holy?” Eluned gave a sympathetic smile in response to Cassandra’s wistful question.

“We have survived in the Fade physically,” Solas replied. “Perhaps she did as well. Or perhaps a spirit that identifies so strongly with Justinia that it believes to be her. How can we say it is not?”

“That’s great and all, but the Nightmare is the thing currently scaring the shit outta me,” Bull growled.

Eluned pumped her shoulder against him and gave him a lopsided smile, “don’t worry. I’ll protect you.” His tense expression eased into an affectionate smile.

“Stealing people’s memories? That’s low, even for a demon. Which way, Songbird?”

She flexed her left hand, not certain if it was going to lead her now, but it pulsed more strongly when she faced one direction over the others. She waved to the others and moved along a winding path.

A wisp of some kind danced and hovered before what appeared to be a tall mirror that seemed oddly, vaguely familiar. She reached out, compelled, to touch the surface of the mirror that swirled with a green mist. She traced her fingertips over the frame, the moment her fingers touched the glassy surface she was overwhelmed by memories and oblivious to what was going on around her.

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Rain poured down, the drops hitting the broad leaves of the trees with such force, it was deafening like the constant roll of thunder. Her armour provided no protection from the rain, water ran under her mask, making her eyes sting as it mixed with the sweat and remnants of the alchemical fog from earlier in the day. Tipping her head forward was only slightly better as it sent the water in icy rivulets down the back of her neck and under the armour. It felt shockingly cold against her feverish skin; Tal’atkata hadn’t removed her armour in three days. Three days after their antaam had been nearly cut to ribbons by the Fog Warriors and they waited for reinforcements.

She could feel the tug of her skin against one of the antaam-saar’s knots, sticking to her flesh where it rubbed raw two days earlier; the metal armour pressed it into her skin, deformed from a glancing blow of some shrapnel from one of the devious traps. She shifted slightly, careful not to draw her arvaarad’s attention, letting the icy water run over the wound. It probably wasn’t the smartest idea but after the initial shock and sting, it felt soothing as the cold water mixed with the blood running down her arm. Her eyes darted around at the slightest noise heard beyond the rain; terror raced up her spine, would today be the day the Fog Warrior broke through and finished them off? What difference did it make if she died at the end of a rebel’s blade or the oblivion of a fevered wound?

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Eluned reared back with a gasp, stumbling away as the mirror released her from its thrall.

“What was that?” Cassandra asked, sounding decidedly shaken.

“Seheron,” Bull growled.

Eluned clenched her hands into fists, the bite of her nails into her palms forced to her focus on something other than the bad memories. She jerked her head to the others to follow and carried on along the winding path through the Fade toward the rift.

“Ah, we have a visitor.” The deep, disembodied voice echoed off the stones making Eluned falter in her steps. She lifted her chin and kept walking. “A foolish little girl comes to steal the fear I kindly
lifted from her shoulders. You should have thanked me and left your fears where they lay, forgotten. You think that pain will make you stronger? The only one who grows stronger from your fears is me. But you are a guest here in my home, so by all means, let me return what you have forgotten.

Tell me, Inquisitor, did you always have a death wish or did something plant that seed within you?”

A clacking and screeching made the hairs on her body stand on end as Eluned was brought up short by a mass of monstrous spiders falling from the archway of stone and out of holes in the walls obscured by the ever present swirling green mist at their feet.

“What the crap are those supposed to be?” Bull exclaimed slamming his axe into a spider with a sickening squelch.

“Those are little fears,” Solas replied, casting a wall of ice to funnel to prevent the spiders from flanking them. “Tiny manifestations spawned from the Nightmare itself.”

“And they take the form of spiders, something so many fear.”

Bull glanced at Hawke incredulously for a split second before smashing another demon, “you see spiders? Man, spiders would be a massive improvement.” The last spider crunched under a blade.

“Remember, we walk in the Fade. Demons of fear shape their appearance to unnerve each of us.”

“Well now I feel better.”

Cassandra moved ahead of the group and stopped. “Inquisitor. Another mirror.”

Like the first, a wisp hovered and danced before the surface. She reached out with her hand and touched the surface.

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The wound on her arm stung, the stitches Tal’at kata just put in pulled at the raw edges of flesh made from cutting out an errant arrow that had made it through the ranks; redirected by a shield or piece of armour seeing how it hadn’t had enough energy to pass through her arm after it hit her. No time to slap a poultice on it before they were called back to duty, the flies buzzed around it as she crouched in the grass waiting for the next command. The steady presence at her side helped her stay calm and focused, she just wished that she could lean into or touch him but Tal’at kata would notice and do everything possible to keep them apart, if only to torture her further.

An anguished cry rang out and behind her, Tal’at kata hissed for her to stand and ready herself to cast. She carefully gained her feet as quickly as she could to not anger her arva arad while not making herself an obvious target on the field. She trembled as the fog rolled out of the trees; she had overheard the others talking about the fog but hadn’t seen it before. But she knew what it meant. The Fog Warriors were close. There was a strange whirring sound and suddenly she found herself flat on the ground gasping for air through her stitched lips. A masked face swum into view, fleeting fingertips traced her jaw as a word was muttered, then it disappeared as she was dragged away, fighting and clawing at the ground to go back.

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Eluned stumbled back from the mirror and sat down hard on the ground. She wrapped an arm around her knees and the other over her head as she rocked back and forth and sobbed loudly, not caring what anyone thought or if it attracted more demons to them.
"Inquisitor," Cassandra said softly, crouching in front of her. "Eluned."

"He died. Then I was alone," she gestured without lifting her head.

"I know. I am sorry." Cassandra’s hands were gentle as she drew the arm from over her head and rubbed the arm gripping her knees. "But you aren’t alone any longer. We are with you. We need you to be strong and fight. Don’t let this demon win."

She sniffled and nodded, then accepted Cassandra’s hand to help her up. Varric gave her shoulder a light squeeze, "you got this, Songbird." She avoided looking at Bull as she didn’t want to see the disappointment on his face. She brushed herself off and concentrated on the Anchor then pointed out the direction to follow next.

The disembodied voice taunted them again. “Your Inquisitor is a fraud, Cassandra. Yet more evidence there is no Maker. That all your ‘faith’ has been for naught.”


“Perhaps I should be afraid, facing the most powerful members of the Inquistion.” The demon laughed, but it’s next statement chilled Eluned to the bone. “The Qunari will make a lovely host for one of my minions. Or maybe I will ride his body myself.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Bull growled.

Eluned shot a look over her shoulder at him but if he knew she looked at him, he didn’t make eye contact with her. She turned back and swallowed the lump that rose in her throat and willed the ache in her chest to stop.

“So many people have tried to help you, haven’t they Inquisitor. Yet, they’re always the ones paying the price, and you’ve gotten away with a slap on the wrist.”

The third mirror stood before them with a wisp hovering in front of it just like the others. Gritting her teeth for what she was sure was going to be an unpleasant memory, she touched the surface and was pulled under with a torrent of memories of all the people that had died helping her. When she pulled her hand away, she could still hear the ring of the hammer on the anvil in her ears, and the taste of blood in her mouth. She wiped her chin and her hand came away bloody; she had nearly bitten through her lip. She staggered away from the mirror and pushed herself to keep going down the path that the Anchor directed her.

“I did not need to see that.”

“Ah, Warden Oghren. Always such a disappointment to those whose lives you cross. A drunken husband, an absent father; do you think your child will think fondly of you or be relieved that you are gone?”

“Keep talking and I’ll show you your insides.”

“Speaking of parents, Inquisitor…do you care that their hearts shattered? That they buried their hope in an empty coffin?”

Eluned reeled and caught herself on pillar of rock to keep on her feet. I’m dead. I’ve been gone for too long; they’ve accepted that I am dead, but they’re wrong! I could go back!

“Do you think they’d be relieved to know you’re alive or would it destroy them all over again to know what you have been through?” The demon paused and then said slyly, “this world has been so
cruel to you, hasn’t it?”

She closed her eyes, not daring to look at the others, and breathed slowly to center herself. The
demon was right, wasn’t it? How can I go back and make my parents, my friends, relive the pain of
my disappearance? Was it right to revisit that upon them; the scars on my face and body, my lack of
voice, the knowledge that I had been enslaved and tortured for years. They’ve healed and moved on.
Wasn’t it better for them that I stayed dead?

Justinia appeared before them again, her form shifted to one of golden energy, not dissimilar to the
spirit of Command that they met in Crestwood. “The Nightmare is closer now. It knows you seek to
escape. With each moment, it grows stronger.”

“It was you,” Cassandra said. “We all thought it was Andraste that sent the Herald from the Fade,
but it was the Divine behind her. And then you… she died.”

“Yes. I am sorry if I disappoint you.” Not-Justinia said.

“Whatever you are, you’ve helped us so far,” Eluned gestured. Behind her, the others started to argue
about the Wardens’ roll in the death of the Divine, descending into personal accusations and barbs.
Half arguing that the Wardens were crazed and power hungry and the other half arguing for leniency
for the only people that knew how to stop a Blight.

Eluned spun around when the spirit vanished, stomped into the middle of the group, and shoved her
way between Oghren and Hawke. “For fuck’s sake, knock it off. You can argue about it when we
get out of here.” No one translated for her, everyone got the gist of what she was saying.

She turned away from them all and closed her eyes for a moment. She was exhausted to the point
that she felt drunk; the fighting, the interaction with the mirrors were taking a heavy toll both
physically, emotionally, and magically. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could go on, but she
had to get them to the end. Not-Justinia said that they were close.

She gave a low whistle and headed up a rough stone ramp and paused when she got to the top.

“Shit, that’s big!” Bull said, stepping up beside her.

She knew he was talking about the two Pride demons, but her eyes were drawn to the mirror that
stood there. It wasn’t like the others; this one looked older, like it had been hewn right out of the
rock, or a millenia of mineral deposits tried to return it to the stone. It was much bigger than the one
in the cave she stumbled across years ago, but the similarity was uncanny. Could this be the way
home?

The others rushed past her and fought with renewed energy. They too knew that the end was near
and fastened to bring down the demons so she could claim the last remnant of herself and they could
make their escape. She lent her help blasting away with thin gouts of fire to take out the lesser
demons that popped up erratically to flank the others; she was too tired, too sluggish with her reflexes
to try to use her sword, her mana was getting dangerously low and she didn’t know what they had
yet to face.

When the last demon crashed to the ground and dissolved into bits to float away into the Fade, she
approached the mirror. She reached out only to pull away, pressing her closed fist against her lips,
before taking a deep breath and reaching out again. The mirror pulled her under; unlike the previous
ones, she experienced the memories as if she was a spectator to her own life.

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As a child with pigtails tied up with ribbons and a silly colourful hat on her head, surrounded by friends, and blowing out candles on a pretty cake.

As a teenager dressed in a tank top, ripped shorts, and flip-flops laying on the back of a grazing horse. Giggling and daydreaming with similarly dressed girls.

Then in her first apartment; a house-warming party with her friends with the glittering lights of the city sparkling in the distance.

Next, dressed up in party clothes and kissing her boyfriend, arms wrapped around his neck, as the clock struck midnight at a New Year’s party.

Finally, stepping out of an airplane with her backpack slung over her shoulder and a big smile on her face when she spotted her parents awaiting her arrival.

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The mirror released her and she opened her eyes. She came face to face with herself; she recognized the cave she was exploring behind as her other self reached forward, her unmarked left hand rested against the surface. Her hair was hastily pulled back into a messy ponytail, a backpack hung on one shoulder, she wore simple modern clothing, and a pair of sturdy trail runners. No scars marked her other self’s face; no lingering signs of malnourishment, stress, or terror to leave dark rings under her eyes and hollows in her cheeks. Her other self’s face was vibrant and full, with a healthy rosy glow. She raised her hand to the surface of the mirror to match her other self’s—and the mirror went dark. She stared at the dark surface, stunned. No. She slapped her palm against it willing to to come back to life. No! Her open hands turned to fists as she beat on the surface. No, no, no!

Hands, she didn’t know who they belonged to nor did she care, tried to pull her away from the mirror. She whipped her elbow back, bouncing off some hard armour. She whipped up her foot and her heel, too, made contact. They released her. She threw herself back and the mirror and clawed at it, screaming soundlessly, oblivious to the pain of some nails tearing loose. She slid down to her knees, her hands and forehead resting against the surface as she gasped for air, choking on the tears, exhausted. It wasn’t fair. She should never have ended up here. Why show her this if there is no going back?

The disembodied voice of the Nightmare chuckled.

“Do not let it win, Inquisitor,” Not-Justinia said softly. An incorporeal hand stroked Eluned’s hair, tucking bits that had fallen loose, back over her ear. She took a shuddered breath and raised her head to look at the spirit. It smiled kindly. “If you would, please tell Leliana, ‘I am sorry. I failed you, too’.”

She struggled to her feet and followed the direction the spirit took. She refrained from looking at any of her companions. She didn’t know what they thought of her now that they knew the truth, now that they knew she was truly alien to their world. She didn’t want to see their looks of pity, their looks of loathing and anger…or fear.

“The rift! We’re almost there!” Hawke called.

“Great, Hawke. Why not just dare the Old Gods to try and stop you?” Varric cursed as a monstrous demon moved into their path, a lesser demon like a spidery arcane horror floated before it.

Not-Justinia hovered before them, “you must get through the rift. Get through and then slam it closed with all your strength. That will banish the army of demons… and exile this cursed creature to the
farthest reaches of the Fade.” She turned and flew at a lesser demon, the collision destroyed herself and it, and knocked back the bigger demon.

Cassandra and Bull charged ahead letting Solas and Varric slip past them and through the rift. They made it all the way to the rift and turned to wait for the other when the demon regained its footing and moved to cut Eluned off from the rift.

“Inquisitor!” Cassandra called.

Eluned stared up at the sickly green demon; it was bigger than a house. Hundreds of eyes stared back at her, acidic drool poured from its clacking mandibles to hiss on the stone below it, as it shifted on its many legs.

Oghren and Hawke stood on either side of her staring at the demon as well. “Sod it! We need to clear a path!”

“Go, I’ll cover you,” Hawke said as she drew her blades, spinning them in her hands.

“No. You were right. The Grey Wardens caused this. A Warden must—”

“A Warden must help them rebuild! That’s your job!” Hawke retorted. “Corypheus is mine.”

While the two were busy arguing, Eluned built the fire in her hands, pulling directly from the Fade to supplement and exceed her own mana. Hawke had faced and defeated Corypheus before, she could again. Between the templars and mages, they could close the remaining rifts. She had stopped Orlais from falling to chaos; the last thing remaining was the stop the demon army, and that was her job.

Eluned rushed toward the demon, loosing her fire at its underside. She scored a direct hit to the creature’s mandibles and a couple of its far legs causing it to thrash around. The demon screeched, drowning out the shouts of protest from both parties trapped on either side of the demon. She drew on her mana again, ignoring the trickle of blood from her nose and pain in her head, preparing to attack again when the demon lurched away from the path as the burnt legs buckled. It flailed and caught her in the side with one of its legs sending her crashing to the ground between Oghren and Hawke.

“Hawke!”

“Hurry!” Cassandra called. “Grab the Inquisitor and let’s go!”

Eluned was vaguely aware of a hand under each armpit as her toes dragged and bounced along the ground. Cassandra grabbed her right arm over her own shoulder and wrapped her arm around her waist as they jumped through the rift. Her head spun as Cassandra turned them around to face the rift. With a grunt of effort, she raised her left hand and used what remaining strength she had to slam the rift shut just as the spirit had told her.

“Inquisitor, you did it!” Cullen came running over, looking haggard but relieved. “Erimond is in custody. The Wardens have been rounded up awaiting your decision on their fate. If exiled—”

She shook her head and immediately regretted it, “no. They stay and fix their mess.”

Cullen saluted, “as you command, Inquisitor. Inquisitor?”

“Inquisitor!” Cassandra exclaimed as Eluned slid out of her grip and fell to the stone unconscious.
Thank you, thank you, thank you as always for your continued support and enthusiasm! Not sure if I'll be on time with my post next Wednesday (June 19th) as I will be travelling (yay, holidays) but I have some big plans for the next chapter which will be appropriately titled "Repercussions". Dun dun dun...
Cullen dropped the stack of new reports on the war table and looked at the three women standing around the table. “Did Solas have an explanation for what you saw?”

Cassandra shook her head. “He said that he’s never seen anything like it in all his exploration of the Fade. The spirits are not inventive, they can only reflect what they have seen. What we saw in that final vision… there can be no other explanation except that the Inquisitor lived it.”

“How could she be from another world?” Josephine asked.

“How? An eluvian, according to Solas. No one knows were all the Elven portals go. They could go to other worlds.”

“Morrigan said as much,” Leliana said. They looked at her in surprise. She gave them a little nonchalant shrug.

Cullen sighed, “has the Inquisitor responded to anything?”

“No. She cooperates with the healers but doesn’t interact. The wounds she took in the Fade have healed.”

“Her maid was happy to report that the Inquisitor eats if simple finger foods are placed next to her,” Josephine reported. “The kitchen has started to make tiny tarts and bits of stuffed breads to put on her tray.”

“What of her mind? Is she… Tranquil?”
They all avoided looking at each other, afraid to see their worst fears confirmed on each other’s faces.

“Cole says no, but she’s buried everything until she feels nothing…”

“We’ve all had losses—"

“None of us have ever lost our entire world, Commander,” Leliana retorted.

“When that mirror went dark, it was like something broke inside her.” Cassandra shuddered. “Kaaras and Dorian go to visit her daily, but she doesn’t even respond to Kaaras and we all know how close she is to him. The others have been up to see her at least once since we’ve returned to Skyhold.”

“What about the Iron Bull? Has he been to see her?” Leliana asked.

Cassandra frowned thoughtfully. “No. Not yet.”

Cullen picked up the stack of reports, “well then. Until there is a change—or not—we’ll carry on. The Inquisitor has bought us a breather, it won’t do to lose the momentum she gained us.”


“He’ll continue to be dosed with magebane and held under templar guard to await the Inquisitor’s pleasure.”

At the conclusion of the meeting, Cassandra headed to Eluned’s quarters. She knocked on the door at the bottom of the stairs but just like the previous days since their return to Skyhold, there was no whistle of acknowledgement or other greeting. With a sigh, she pushed the door open and headed up the stairs to find that Eluned wasn’t alone.

Cole carefully drew the hairbrush over her hair in a long slow stroke. Without looking up, he said, “she likes it. It reminds her of when her grandmother used to do it.” He started a new stroke of the brush. “She’s closer today. The walls are thin. The right words will break it.” Cassandra looked at Eluned thoughtfully. Cole tipped his head up, “yes, those would work.” He drifted out from behind the chair, placing the hairbrush in Cassandra’s hand before vanishing.

She looked at the hairbrush in her hand and frowned. She placed it on the table and took a seat opposite Eluned. Cole had said that she wasn’t Tranquil; looking at the still woman before her compared to the lively person they had seen in the mirror in the Fade, it wasn’t an unreasonable thing to think. There was no expression on her face, no sparkle to her eyes; it was more severe but wasn’t dissimilar to the state she was in after meeting Iron Bull. She understood suddenly that it was a learned mechanism to protect herself. Varric had pondered how she was even sane after everything that she had experienced and had been done to her, and she realized that this was how. The Inquisitor withdrew until she was barely aware of what was going on around her or even to her.

“I just came from… your advisors are…” Cassandra huffed. She wasn’t good at this. Cole said her words would help, but he didn’t mean those ones, did he? She huffed again. “I don’t speak of it often, mostly because I don’t want anyone’s pity… not that you are pitiable… urgh, I am terrible at this.

"I was four when my parents were executed for treason. I don’t really remember them. Only my uncle telling Anth…my brother, Anthony and I, that we would be coming to live with him. My uncle didn’t have much time for two children busy as he was working his way up in the ranks of the Mortalitasi. Anthony and I cleaved to each other; we were inseparable.
"Anthony died when I was twelve. Blood mages beheaded him right in front of me because he refused to kill a dragon for their ritual. I blamed all mages for what happened to Anthony and wanted to become a templar to make sure that mages could never hurt anyone again. My uncle sent me to the Seekers instead.

"My mentor, Byron, became the father figure I never had growing up. Blood mages killed him for interfering with their plans to overthrow Divine Beatrix. I met a mage, Regalyan, who was working with Byron. I... He... We became very close over the years. I dare say that I cared for him a great deal... He died at the Conclave."

She twisted her hands in her lap, “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this. It really doesn’t compare to losing your whole world, but... I just want you to know that I understand. And you should know that you are not alone. Not anymore. There are people that care about you. Not you as the Inquisitor or the Herald, but you, as Ellie. We care about you and want you to come back.” Cassandra pressed her lips together, feeling thoroughly ridiculous for pouring her heart out and let her gaze fall to her hands in her lap.

She sat like that for a few minutes before sighing and looking at Eluned. There was no change that she could see. Cole was wrong, her words made no difference. She made a disgusted noise at herself; she felt foolish for speaking of such things that were better off to remain private. She stood up and with a final glance at the still woman. She had a sparring session with the Iron Bull planned, perhaps she could knock sense into him. It was obvious that the two had begun to form a close bond but the qunari had yet to visit. A visit from him might make a difference.

Varric concentrated on the scratch of his quill along the parchments before him oblivious to the constant chatter and noise of the great hall. He studiously ignored the huge stack of letters from his editors and the Merchant Guild in favour of jotting down notes while he could still remember all the details of their journey through the Fade. He shuddered as he recalled Eluned’s reaction to the final visions. He shook his head to clear the dark thoughts; if the Maker or Andraste had brought Ellie to them, they exacted a high price of their Herald. He pulled the quill from the parchment, tapping the feathered end against his chin when he became aware that the great hall had fallen silent. He looked up to find everyone had stopped everything they were doing and had turned to face the throne end of the hall.

The sun shone through the stained glass illuminating the figure of Andraste and the sun burst above her. And before the stained glass, stood Eluned who looked ready to retreat back to her quarters and away from the attention of all those that stared at her presently.

He jumped out of his chair and hurried the length of the hall. “Songbird? Come and have a drink with me.” He held his hand out to her and held his breath when she grasped it. He took a half turn and tucked her hand into his elbow and led her through the nobles and hangers-on that remained silent, watchful, to his table. He settled her in one of the chairs and poured her a mug of the ale that sat on his table. He knew full well that she didn’t particularly like ale, but it was all he had at present and he didn’t dare leave her in case she disappeared once again.

“You gave us quite the scare,” he said pushing the mug into her hand.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

He sat down hard into his chair and let out an explosive sigh of relief. “I know you didn’t. You were pushed to the limits and no one could have prepared for that.”

“What happened?”
“You mean after you single-handedly saved Thedas from the demon army?” She rolled her head to dismiss his grandious declaration. “Stroud went to Weisshaupt to notify the Grey Wardens of what had occurred. Oghren has returned to Vigil’s Keep to do the same with the Fereldan Wardens. And Hawke…”

Eluned tensed up.

“Hawke is making herself at home much to Curly’s chagrin.”

She let out her own held breath. “Everyone made it out of the Fade.”

“Yeah, thanks to you.” He fell silent for a moment to find the right words for his next question. “About what we saw in the Fade…everyone has questions. Do you feel up to answering them?”

She avoided his eyes and tipped up the mug, wrinkling her nose in distaste at the bitterness of the drink, to spare herself from seeing the accusations and loathing in his eyes. I lied to them all. I’m an alien freak; they’re going to imprison me or keep me under guard again.

“Songbird…” He reached out, made her put down the mug and gentle clasped her hand. “Ellie.” She reluctantly looked at him. “No one is upset with you; everyone that knows the truth, understands why you never told us about yourself. We just want to know the real you and how you came to be here.” He gave her hand a little shake. “Can I make a suggestion? Write it down. What you remember of how you got here, anything you want to share about your life; write it down and I’ll read it to the others when we inevitably get together—”

The large doors to the hall were flung open startling some Orlesians that lingered just out of earshot hoping to catch her attention when she finished with Varric. They scattered like a flock of frightened birds as Kaaras hurriedly scanned the room and headed to the table when he spotted her. He enveloped her into a hug the moment she stood up. “Please don’t do that again Ellie. I can’t bear the thought of you being gone,” he mumbled into her hair as he clung to her.

She was so squished in his embrace that she could barely move, barely breathe. She tapped at his ribs to get his attention. “I think you’re smothering her, Kaaras.” She was immediately released to Kaaras’ mumbled apology. Dorian smiled at her, but she could see the concern lurking in his eyes. She reached out and gave his hand a squeeze. “No,” he said, tugging her hand, “a handshake will not suffice. Not this time.” He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a gentler hug. “I’m glad you’re back on your feet. The South would not be the same without you, amata.” He released her, “well I don’t know about you, but I could use a drink. Come. Join us.”

Kaaras and Dorian did their best to distract her and wordlessly herded her toward the tavern. People stopped to watch Eluned as she walked through the bailey. Like her reappearance after Haven, the people regarded her with heightened sense of awe. She had walked physically in the Fade, again, and brought everyone out safely with her. Cullen’s voice carried over the field, barking orders to the men to continue their drills as their attention wandered and weapons lowered as they watched her pass. He saluted to her from across the field; they would speak later when her advisors called their next war table session. At the edge of the tavern, she halted when she heard a meaty thwack.

“Again!” Bull growled with annoyance. “This is why the Qun doesn’t like women fighting! I should have asked Cullen.”

She hurried over, barely acknowledging Kaaras’ and Dorian’s repeated request for her to join them, when Cassandra wound up and hit Bull so hard that she laid him out on the ground. She tapped the woman on the shoulder.
Cassandra whirled around and immediately pulled her into a hug. Just as quickly, the stoic woman released her with a blush staining her cheeks from her uncharacteristic outburst. “Inquisitor…”

“I’m sorry for all the losses you have suffered.”

Cassandra opened and shut her mouth a couple of times in disbelief, then finally shook her head, “you really were sent by the Maker. Are you going to be all right?”

Eluned rolled her head and then finally nodded.

“Good.” She glanced over her shoulder and pushed the stick into Eluned’s hands. “Perhaps you will have better luck knocking some sense into him.”

She was familiar with the exercise having seen the Qunari engage in the practice during their downtime in Seheron. She adjusted her grip on the stick and looked up at Bull. His expression hadn’t changed from the glare he had levelled at the Seeker, only now it was trained on her. She swallowed her trepidation and took a stance like she was going to swing a baseball bat, only she was hitting the flesh of someone she cared about instead of a ball. The blow vibrated up the stick and stung her hands; Bull merely grunted and shifted his stance to wait for the next strike.

She propped the stick against her shoulder and gestured, “are you angry with me for not trusting you with the truth about myself?”

“No.” He shook his head and snorted; from his expression Eluned couldn’t tell if it was a snort of disgust or anger. “Disappointed, but I understand why you wouldn’t speak of it. Hit me.”

She reluctantly retook her stance and swung again. She shook out her hands. “That’s not all.”

He closed his eye and breathed deeply becoming as unyielding as a granite statue. She wouldn’t hit him with the stick when he wasn’t watching so instead tugged on his shoulder to get him to open his eye. “Behaving like a qalaba won’t help. If I have to climb you like a tree to get you to pay attention, then I will.”

He jerked the stick out of her hands nearly making her stumble and snapped the heavy stick across his knee. “You nearly destroyed yourself! I—” He growled in frustration, threw the pieces to the ground and stormed off.

Eluned stood there, blinking her eyes rapidly, stunned and self-conscious in the aftermath of his outburst. Never had his anger been directed at her.

“Twisting and pounding in my chest. One word; not the same as before. Is this how the madness starts? It can’t end like that again…just let her open her eyes.” She turned to Cole. “He’s not angry at you. He’s scared.” She turned to follow Bull, but Cole’s hand stopped her. “No, that won’t help. He’s not ready.”

She sighed. At a loss of what to do about Bull, and no longer in the mood to join Kaaras and Dorian, she headed back to her quarters. Perhaps Varric’s suggestion to write would help calm my own mind.

Eschewing the desk, Eluned curled up on one of the chaise chairs before the roaring fire with one of Josephine’s spare writing tablets—minus the candle—set on her lap serving dual purposes as a writing surface and a means to pin the blanket draped over her knees in place. Scribbled out parchments lay crumbled on the floor in a trail toward the fire, those that didn’t make it that far, and a few lay in a tidy pile on the seat beside her. She transferred the pen into her left hand and flexed the
right to release the crampled muscles. *What I wouldn’t give for a cheap ballpoint pen at this moment.* Writing with a sharpened goose quill pen was more difficult than she cared for and despised that Varric would be able to decipher her horrid penmanship.

She tugged the wool shawl over her shoulder when the door below crashed open. It wouldn’t have been Dehari as she had already come and gone with her dinner nearly an hour and a half earlier. The half-eaten meal—half eaten due to the sheer quantity the maid had joyously piled onto the tray—sat on the side table after she had told Dehari to leave it until the morning. She hastily capped the ink, splattering ink from the pen across the page, and placed the lap desk on the floor as the heavy tread took the steps two at a time.

She tugged the shawl around her shoulders again. *“Bull.”*

He paced across the room and spun around. *“When you started casting against the Nightmare demon, I knew you were in dangerous territory. I could read it in the way you moved and fought; you were tapped out. That spell exhausts you at the best of times…”* He shuddered and ran his hand down his face. *“But when I saw our mages panic when you went down, shaking and trembling uncontrollably with the blood streaming out your nose, I thought, ‘this is it, I’m going to lose you in some shitty ass fortress covered in demon guts in the end of fucking Orlais’.”* Eluned’s eyes widened.

*“I was so relieved that you survived. But it all came crashing down again because you were not responding to anything. Kaaras was beside himself, Solas said you weren’t Tranquil but couldn’t find you, Cole was… Cole, and fuck! I think I’m losing my mind!”* He stopped pacing right in front of her and closed his eye for a moment to calm himself and steady his breathing. When he opened it again, he looked down at her, *“I don’t know if I want to pick a fight with you or fuck you into the mattress until the bed breaks.”*

*“Do I get a say in this?”*

His expression immediately softened. *“Of course you do.”*

Eluned grabbed the footstool and dragged it back in front of Bull. Stepping up on it, she caught the twitch of amusement as she stood on the stool to bring herself eye to eye with him. Letting the shawl drop from her shoulders, she rested her hands against his chest. *“I’ll get Josie to buy me a new bed.”* Bull’s hands were immediately in her hair and at the small of her back, pulling her into him as he plundered her mouth. He wrapped his hand into her hair and tugged on it steadily, making her back bow and baring her throat to him. It also caused her to press her hips against him making her very aware of his aroused state and size.

She was awash in sensation; the heat and hard mass of muscle at her front, and the coolness of the air that crept up her legs as Bull slowly bunched up the silken fabric of her nightgown in his fist at her back. She plucked at the buckle of his harness, smiling as he grunted in surprise as the harness dropped to the floor with a heavy thud.

He scraped the stubble of his jaw against her skin, kissing and sucking from edge of her jaw to her clavicle and repeating it on the other side until she was squirming and writhing against him. He set his teeth against the cord of her neck and sucked hard earning himself a breathless squeal as she plastered herself against him. He smiled into her neck, *that would leave a mark.* *“It will hurt,”* he warned her, grinding himself against the juncture of her thighs and twisting her hair around his wrist to make his point. *“I’m bigger than my fingers.”* He pulled back and watched her
closely.

“Don’t care. I want it to hurt.” She stared at him, daring him to contradict her. “I’ve been numb for so long; I want to feel something.”

He loosened his grip on her hair as a self-satisfied smile crept onto his face and she suddenly realized why. He told her that she’d want that one day and she’d ask for it. She swatted her hand against his chest. “Don’t be smug.”

He gripped her nightgown at both hips. “You remember the watch word?” She nodded. “Hands over your head.” The moment she lifted her hands, the silky fabric was yanked up and went sailing somewhere behind Bull. He scooped her up and with a few strides, crossed the room to toss her onto the bed.

She giggled and brushed the hair out of her eyes as he worked his belt loose, dropping it to the floor. It was quickly followed by his ankle brace and boots, but not his pants to her disappointment. She sat up as he crawled onto the bed, pushing her legs open, even as she reached for the knot at his waist.

He tsked and captured her hands in his, he raised them over her head and bore her down onto the bed, letting his weight press her down into the mattress. “Remember the rules: if you want something you ask.”

“Please.” She tugged at his grip ineffectually, then tried to shift her hips but found herself completely immobile, pinned down by his size and weight. It should have frightened her, but it was Bull, she trusted him completely. A flush of heat rolled through her and her belly clenched in need. He shifted his hips slightly, rubbing his still clothed cock against her folds. Her eyes fluttered at the fleeting bit of friction. “Please,” she gasped. “I want to touch you.”

“Hmm, that’s nice, but you still haven’t asked.” She tried again the tug her hands free, he held them effortlessly with a single hand, shifting himself to run the free hand down her body in broad strokes. With a little warning squeeze on her hands, he let them go. “Keep them there unless you want me to stop.”

Pausing only long enough for her to nod in agreement, Bull started working his way down her body. His hands busy; feather light touches along her collarbones and down the swell of her breasts before cupping them, the rough pad of his thumbs teasing her nipples to stiff peaks. His mouth followed the same path; the wet glide of his tongue, the scrape of stubble, and the edge of teeth. He knows her body, what she likes, and what she responds best to that he has her shifting restlessly in no time as he lifted her legs over his horns.

Eluned startled at the hard texture of Bull’s horns behind her knees and tensed. It was something new and unexpected, but she quickly relaxed as he stroked her hip. Any concerns she had quickly flew out of her mind as his mouth descended to her flesh and the first finger slid into her wet heat easily. There’s a tension in him that hasn’t been there before as he builds her up and sends her crashing over into her first orgasm.

The bed shifted under Eluned as Bull moved from between her legs. She lay trembling and utterly rung out from the number of times he’d made her come already. She turned her head and stared at Bull who sat on the edge of the bed, his face hidden in shadows, but she knew his eye was trained on her, her legs spread wantonly where he lowered them from his horns. She felt the heat of a blush but she didn’t have the energy to shift and close them.

“Do you still want me?”
She knew he meant but it was like there was a second meaning beneath it. She lifted her hand and trailed it down his arm. “Yes, I want you. I need you,” she whispered. She wasn’t sure if he had heard her when he stood up and she crawled across the bed on shaky limbs after him. Bull turned, his hands tugged loose the knot holding his pants letting them drop to the floor. She reached out and withdrew her hand slightly, “can I touch you?”

“Yeah.”

Eluned wrapped her hand around his shaft, startled to realize that she couldn’t close her fingers around his entire girth. She brushed her thumb across the wet head and popped her thumb into her mouth to taste him. Bull groaned pulling her thumb from her mouth and kissed her deeply, chasing the taste of himself. He picked up her hand again and poured some oil into her palm, then wrapped her fingers under his own around his cock guiding her to what he liked.

The scent of herbs, the same therapeutic herbs as when he gave her that first massage, tickled her nose. There’s probably a terrible joke there if I had the presence of mind to chase it.

He tucked his face into her neck and groaned again. “Stop,” he said hoarsely, covering her hand with his own to stop her strokes. He lifted her hand from him and used it to push her back onto bed, crawling over her as she shifted to give him space. He pushed her legs apart and grasped her hip to keep her open and positioned as he wanted as he spread more of the oil in her with his fingers. Satisfied, he looked up at her. “Ready?” When she nodded, he grasped himself and guided himself to her core.

She gasped, letting her eyes fall shut, as he slowly pressed into her. It hurt even with the careful preparation and oil, but not nearly as much as when Tal’atkata…

Bull stopped, pulling back slightly and stroked a hand down her sternum, from the base of her throat to her belly, “come on, Ellie. Stay with me.” He gently grasped her jaw giving it a little shake; once, twice, pulling her back to the surface from drowning in her memories. She opened her eyes. “Keep your eyes open Ellie.” She makes a little sound of protest. “Keep you eyes open or we stop right now. I want you to know that you’re with me.”

She ran her hand along his jaw and wrapped it around his neck, keeping eye contact with him.

Bull was about to pull her hand away to place it back on the bed where he wanted when he realized she needed to touch him. She needed this to be different. She needed the freedom to touch him and be an active participant instead of having it happen to her. He resumed moving, his eye never leaving her face watching every reaction as she adjusted to his size and began to enjoy herself as the tension in her body slipped away. Only then, as she started to wordlessly beg, did he start to make good on his promise to fuck her into the mattress.

His lips quirked into a satisfied smile as the bed made the first ominous creak of protest.

Eluned woke up with a gasp. I’m in Skyhold; it was just a nightmare. Beside her, the bed was empty. She looked around the dark room and saw Bull sitting hunched on the end of the chaise before the fire. She could hear the very quiet rustle of parchment. He’s reading about my life. She slipped out of the bed and padded silently across the room, grabbing the shawl that had been discarded earlier in the evening from the floor. She pulled the shawl around her shoulders and back, and sat down behind Bull, wrapping her arms and legs around his waist and resting her head between his shoulder blades. He spread his legs a bit as she wiggled her feet between his thighs, but didn’t put down the parchment he was reading. She could feel the vibration of his voice just as well as hear it, “nightmare?”
She nodded against his back. She let her eyes slip shut as she listened to the heavy beat of his heart, letting it drive away the unpleasant remnants of her nightmare; no doubt brought on by the lingering ache from their earlier activities, pleasant as it might be.

After a few minutes, his voice rumbled under her ear. “What are you doing?”

She spread her hand apart then mimed scooping something out of her palm with two fingers before returning them to where they rested on his belly.

“Big… spoon?”

She nodded against his back.

“So that makes me?” She gestured again. He snorted a brief laugh, then fell silent.

After a few more minutes of silence in which she could feel he hadn’t relaxed, she gestured again: she chopped one hand between the middle and ring fingers of the other hand before pointing a finger at Bull.

“No, it doesn’t bother me, Kadan. You can be big spoon whenever you want.” He felt it the moment she went still against his back. He twisted himself to get a hold of her and pull her around until she straddled his lap. She kept her eyes down, focused on his chest. The irony of that… “You’ve heard the word before,” he said, matter-of-factly. He tipped her chin up until he could look her in the eyes. “It’s what he said before he died. Kadan. It means ‘my heart’.” His thumbs brushed away the tears that traced their way down both of her cheeks. “And you are. And it scares the shit out of me more than that Nightmare demon.”

She cocked her head to the side in question.

“When Vasaad died in that shitty village on Seheron, I went berserk and then turned myself into the re-educators. He was Kadan, but in the Qun way. You are…you are more, and I don’t know what I’d do if…”

She pressed her fingers to his lips, stopping his words. “Don’t. I don’t want to think about not being with you.”

“But if you can go home…”

“I can’t. And if I could…I won’t leave you.” She read the scepticism in his face. Stroking her thumbs across his scarred cheeks, she locked her eyes on his, “you are Kadan, too.”

He lifted his hands that had thus far been laying idly on her hips and yanked her against his chest. “Kadan. My heart,” he said pressing his lips to her temple.

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